



The Point

On Teaching, Writing, and Feeling the Heat

SARAH DOHRMANN

THERE ARE HOUR-AND-A-HALF commutes that begin before dawn. Construction guys are walking in the dark with insulated totes dangling from their worker mitts. My backpack is loaded down: 90–120 kid poems from last week’s teaching lesson (every one of which I’ve read and marked up), plus whatever book I’m currently reading, plus my laptop so I can go to the public library after my teaching day to work on my own book, plus a hundred copies of the writing piece I plan to teach, plus a back-up plan or two (a hundred copies each) in case my first plan bombs, which is not uncommon. Inside my bag are creature comforts, too: a sandwich, water, lip balm, hand sanitizer, Ibuprofen. There are backaches. There is the G to the B44, the L to the 5 to the X55, the L to the J to the A to the Q84. There are good ideas that come while riding the bus, written in a jagged scrawl. Wherever I emerge, dogs are barking from backyards. I follow my map of unfamiliar terrain. I cross streets while sniffing out morning coffee.

Sarah Dohrmann is a 2009 New York Foundation of the Arts (NYFA) Fellow in Nonfiction Literature and was a 2007–2008 Fulbright Fellow of Arts in Morocco. She has been a writer-in-residence with Teachers & Writers Collaborative since 2001 and has taught in Sarah Lawrence College’s Special Programs since 2003.

My biggest complaint about my kind of teaching is the isolation and the loneliness. Those hours on the train or bus, the brief combustion in the classroom, then the hours back to familiar terrain. But then, as a writer, I concede that I am naturally inclined toward both: isolating myself so as to work, indulging that isolation, stretching it into the realm of loneliness. I read a piece recently saying that Flaubert could not go out into the real world to witness real life for fear it would impinge upon the fictive one he had gushing in his head—it startled me that I could relate to Flaubert. I know loneliness is not an ineluctable outcome of being alone, which is to say I know that I allow my isolation to lead to loneliness. But my problem is I don’t know how to be a writer without indulging this state of being so as to tap the heart of it.

Can you tell us a little bit about your life as a teaching writer? Twice I’ve been invited to talk to MFA students. It is like a career counseling session, only the last time I did it I felt gaunt and hollow-eyed, surrounded by the plump MFAers. They were working on theses, they could quote Charles Baxter, they were reading each other, drinking together, falling in love. Six years after my MFA I feel something like a cautionary tale, a zombie returning from the front. While I have received a couple of grants, I still can’t get a literary journal to take one of my stories. Still, each day

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begins this way: the commute, the backpack, the signing in at the school, the stashing my coat and backpack in an assistant principal's office, me in front of a classroom, turning to Amir, saying, "Amir, your poem about Paris was incredible. *Magnifique!*" Amir turns pink, doodles a star on his notebook.

I have been a teaching artist since 2001. That was the year I quit my development job at an independent film company to wait tables so I could write. That first year of teaching I schlepped up to Harlem every day to teach grade-school students who at that time were termed SIE VII, who later would be termed ED ("emotionally disabled"), who now, if I've got this right, are termed 12:1:1. In 2001, I applied to eleven graduate schools for writing. I was rejected by nine and wait-listed at two. I barraged the one closest to New York City with phone calls and e-mails. I remember I faxed a new short story I'd written to the graduate studies office in the hopes that I could prove that I was a writer, a real writer, which is to say, a person who writes.

This is what I try not to think about: that after all these years I am invited to talk to MFA students not about the making of literature, but instead about the life of a teaching artist. It was not what I intended. I did not intend to be this kind of expert. All this time I've had it in my head that I teach to keep my writing afloat, but anyone who works in schools knows that there are no predictions when it comes to teaching. One day you're a regular person walking through the world with your psyche neatly glued inside your perfectly capable body, and the next you're in front of a team of children who with one huff, one puff... render you a dumb ass.

And yet, believe it or not, this is something to

love. Believe it or not this is something that will keep you alive, it will keep you coming back, it will inform your own writing. Because connections, human or literary, are made only after these trial periods

pass. Because like good teaching, good writing requires you to have zero pretensions. No matter how many times you've done it, no matter how many times you've suffered, no matter how many rejections you've endured, you must keep going. You must keep walking into the dark room to feel your way for the light. You write a scene. It is a not-so-bad scene, it's doing something you didn't expect. You pad further into the dark, listen closely to the sound of your own breathing. The further you go, the less fearful you become of ridicule.

After all these years, I think it's cute when established writers complain about their teaching jobs. I couldn't agree more that it's a shame that writers cannot live on their book sales alone, that our society does not value literary writing like it does, say, Nike ads. But in my small world I dream of my own roundtable of students who are eager to talk tone, intention, who know the word "paradigm" and can spell "their," "they're," and "there" correctly. A lot of my teaching work is in exercising discipline over my students, in striking a fine balance between entertainer and tough guy. Add to this that I am white and my students are usually not, that I come from a middle-class background and my students do not, that I grew up a country mouse and my students have not—and if you think these factors should have nothing to do with connecting with other human beings, then in deference to this publication I will call you, merely, naïve. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that if you are a white person who goes into this line of work so as to live out your own distorted *Dangerous Minds* fantasy, then you're far worse than naïve. The point here is my students and I have vastly different perspectives—our age difference yet another—and that often my students take one look at me and are not shy to express the total

and complete affront my very existence is to their own: “*I don’t care who you are.*” The funny thing is, I don’t care who they are, either. Whoever it is, I am willing to bet my life that who they are is no more than the idea they’ve fashioned themselves to be—what Joan Didion would call the story of themselves. I know this because I am no different in this regard, and neither are you. With these students it helps to bring in the team of no-bullshitters: James Baldwin, Jamaica Kincaid, Ross Gay, ZZ Packer, Junot Díaz, Philip Levine, Cornelius Eady, the plaintive Marie Howe.

Because we are human beings here, and it is my students’ humanity I hope to appeal to. This is made more difficult when I have upwards of 120 students per residency. Plus, I teach anywhere from two to five residencies at once, which makes not only for a lot of name memorization but an obscene amount of reading, especially if I’m teaching prose. I am committed to reading every single word my students have written while in my class because it is what I have longed for most in my own writing: for someone to read it.

It is the communication I seek, the reach for another to understand. It is the solution to the equation that established writers get to enjoy, and that those of us who are still wallowing in the “emerging” writer field do not: their hours of writing in isolation result in eyes upon their work, thus a sense of being understood, thus community.

In some cases, I meet with my students individually, where I must pick and choose my battles: I forgo the “they’re,” “there,” and “their” issue (which to many people’s surprise, really does bother me), and instead lead my student into where his or her work is doing something mysterious, where the paragraphs have what a former teacher of mine, Mary La Chapelle, calls “heat.” “There’s *heat* here,” she’d say. Even that

sensory recognition helped me to get closer to honest writing, to how it felt to connect. After some time, I learned to write toward that heat. “Can you feel it?” I ask one of my students of his own composition. Even the ones who don’t, nod “yes”—basking in the glow of what I’ve felt in their sentences. I used to want so badly for every single one of my students to understand how what he or she created is important. Now, I see that my job is not to make children into believers. It is to bring in whatever teaching lesson I can to start a fire that may or may not bring heat.

Heat does not come by bringing in the same old lessons, teaching them the same old way. For me it comes by bringing in a poem that moves yet confounds me. I like the poems that I can’t see until a classroom teacher or a student helps to peel back its layers, revealing its tender under-flesh to me. Sometimes I bring in a new poem I don’t quite get with one of my old standbys because there’s some way they clash that creates something I like but don’t yet understand. Classroom teachers often help me to see why or how the col-

lision works—they point to the shards of glass, the glints I’ve missed. Heat comes by working in conjunction with classroom teachers, reading the books their students are reading, composing writing exercises that key into the author’s process. Here is the point: in both teaching and in writing, mystery does not come if you have not resigned yourself beforehand, if you are not willing to not know. It is a strange intersection. After all the years of practice, after arming yourself with every tool you think you’ve thus far mastered, you still, after all this time, must keep moving forward into the unknown.

Sometimes I don’t get home until very late. I will have taught at the far-away school until afternoon and then I will have gone to the Teachers & Writers offices

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in Manhattan's Garment District to eat my sandwich, to plan for my coming week's lessons, to return e-mails, to photocopy the coming days' prose excerpts and poems. I load up my backpack with more of these materials, then wend my way through a complex web of men pushing carts piled high with fabrics, others steering dollies stacked with boxes of buttons. I walk to the New York Public Library's Schwarzman Reading Room—because one of the benefits of writing there is that when you're stuck, you can lean back to stare at a ceiling of clouds. It sometimes takes me an hour or more to shed my day's work at the school in order to move into my own writing, the world that never goes away, the water system running deep beneath my daily hustle. Some days I tap no more than one measly droplet—others, there are merciful streams.

Once home, I check my mail before ascending the building's stairs: advertising mostly—and then a returned SASE. When I open the envelope, a piece of paper flutters out, falling to the floor. When I bend over to pick it up, my backpack lurches, its contents pitching me forward, almost back down the stairs head-first. Still, I manage to grab the paper so as to read it: *We thank you for submitting your manuscript for our consideration. We regret that we are unable to accept it for publication.*

They have not even addressed the letter to me. They have not even had the decency of addressing me

“Dear Writer.” When I walk into my apartment I immediately measure the slip against a whole sheet of paper. My rejection is exactly one-eighth of a page.

Moments. Me padding around in a dark room, me seeking heat, me tapping with my same old tools hoping for fresh water. My lord, just about anybody could look in at my life and wonder what exactly it is I think I am doing with it. Someone once told me that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. But the kind of people who look in on my life don't know. They're the grown-up version of some of my kids, the ones who nod “yes” without understanding, who are too disconnected from themselves to feel their own heat.

My heat? Still, after all this time, if I've created just one sentence with it I stay warm for days.

I suppose these tiny satisfactions are what make me a good teacher. For I know only too well how sorely one needs others to read one's work, to respond to it, to ask questions of it—to feel it.

Moments. Just last week I helped a student with writing his poem. He struggles in a lot of ways, the least of which is writing. When he finished, he looked at me and said, “Thank you, Ms. Dohrmann.” I couldn't remember the last time a student looked at me and said, simply, “Thank you, Ms. Dohrmann.”

“Oh you're welcome,” I said, a delighted old lady hovering above him. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” he said. He was smiling. He was already rereading it to himself. ☺