

The Real Me

A Student's Perspective on Becoming a Better Writer

ANGEL CONTRERA

I am a young man in search of himself.

I am the hopes and dreams of my family and my community.

I am the rice and beans that my mother prepares for me.

I am a tidal wave in a sea of unidentified individuals.

I am the hands that fan the fire that fuels me to achieve my goals.

I am the strength of those around me that are not valiant enough to speak for what they want.

I am me.

THE “I AM” EXERCISE is one of the first I remember doing with David Stoler, a writer from the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, as a junior at the Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem. At first, the program seemed more of a hindrance to my education than a help, since it was taking away time from class. I was already juggling AP courses, extracurricular activities, and preparing for the SATs, and receiving more work seemed like

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the last thing I wanted. But I quickly realized how valuable these fifty minutes a week were, as each session forced me to confront the topic that I dreaded the most—myself. I feared writing about myself because I was uncomfortable with exposing anything that did not seem “academic” or “proper”. But, these sessions—with David, in my junior year, and Janice Lowe, another Teachers & Writers teaching artist, in my senior year—really helped me open up.

I began to look at this experience not as another interruption to our class but as an opportunity to understand the process of writing from a different standpoint. Neither David nor Ms. Lowe came with lessons about grammar, spelling, or sentence structure—instead they brought us lessons about creativity, ideas, and fluidity. Their time with my classes really cemented the material that we learned throughout the year, as it forced us to think about both the aesthetics [and the content (?)] of a piece. A personal statement became more than just another essay—it became a reflection of me, a representation of my individuality.

Until this point, I had always written my essays in an academic style. I understood that writing was much more than writing compositions and term papers, but it was so easy to fall into this robotic, repetitive format that seemed to work with everything. But working with David quickly made me understand that I needed to say goodbye to that robotic monotone and open myself up to finding my voice. Over the two years I’ve worked with T&W writers, I have been able to step out of my comfort

zone and put my personality and my unique perspective into everything I write, no matter how boring or senseless the topic once might have seemed to me.

Other students at FDA also benefitted from T&W's work to improve our writing and communication skills. Stephanie Cade, a graduating senior, said that the classes helped her learn how to structure her essays in an organized manner, something she knows will help her when she gets to college. Vicky Rodriguez, an English teacher at the Academy, enthusiastically said that her T&W writer was an "invaluable" resource to students, and that she has seen a vast improvement in her students' writing, especially those who have worked with T&W writers throughout their junior and senior years.

Personally, I found David's dedication remarkable; I could e-mail him my essays and get a response with some notes about what could be improved the same day, no matter what day of the week. His indefatigable desire for us to learn the rules of writing helped me understand the conventions and details that make up the English language. During my senior year, I worked with Janice Lowe, who would come every week to our AP English class and make us free-write about different scenarios. These short five-to-ten-minute writing blocks would help me search within myself for a greater meaning and sense of self. Linda Kugblenu, a graduating senior who worked with Ms. Lowe, said that Ms. Lowe "helped me search for and find a side of me that I never knew was there," and that her weekly exercises helped Linda build her confidence as a writer.

The writing instruction given by the T&W teaching artists could not have come at a better time. At FDA, we follow a schedule that says we must have completed our four college essays by the end of junior year. And although I had completed the essays required for school, I did not feel they were statements I would want to represent me before a group of admissions officers deciding the next four years of my life.

The college process is extremely difficult to man-

age—especially writing the essays. This aspect of the application is the most meaningful to the student because it allows us to show a more creative and personal side to colleges. I remember how nervous I was every time I thought about writing my personal statement; I wanted it to be a true representation of who I was.

Sitting down with Ms. Lowe to work on my essays was a tough experience. It was difficult for me to write something personal about myself and then have to share it with others, especially since I knew it would eventually go to a committee of admissions officers who would

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judge me based on what I said.

Ms. Lowe gave me the type of advice that I truly required. She always told me that I needed to be more specific, that my reader understood I could see the big picture but that I needed to show them that I could zoom in to a specific moment.

It was tough to discuss certain moments because I realized that I did not want to share personal anecdotes in my personal statement. I realized how insane that was, but it was hard to overcome my fear of letting people see the real me—a first-generation American whose family has struggled with many of the problems, from financial to legal, associated with being minorities living and growing in one of the roughest neighborhoods of New York City. But with the support of Ms. Lowe, I soon realized I had to get over my fears—admissions officers wanted to know the real me, and in fact I, too, needed to learn to be proud of my background and what I've made of my life.

And I'm certainly not alone in feeling that the aid provided by T&W teaching artists made the difference in my college admission. For example, Joel Marte, one of

the students who worked with David in the Spring of 2008, said, “While my teachers focused on grammatical errors and structure, David focused on the presentation of my ideas and the construction of my argument, which made my essay stronger.” Joel will attend Skidmore College in the fall.

David stressed that writing the personal statement was about presenting a picture of yourself to the reader.

Every time I write a paper or an academic piece I think of the process for writing an essay . . . and I always question whether or not this is really what I want to say—all things I learned from working with my teaching artists.

If you are writing about an experience, you want to begin the essay with a specific moment, and by placing the reader at the center of it all, you are able to hook them. Once you’ve got them hooked, you can provide the reader with the context of the situation, and then tell them why you feel this has helped you grow or why it has made

you see things differently.

Jesse Wilson, a graduating senior, said that David’s format for an essay really helped him because he had “many ideas but didn’t know how to put them down.” Also, “having an entire class period devoted to writing my personal essay stopped me from procrastinating.” Wilson is heading to Syracuse University this September.

The Teachers & Writers Collaborative Program at

FDA has had a significant impact on my writing skills. Every time I write a paper or an academic piece I think of the process for writing an essay. I think about the importance of secondary and tertiary details and I always question whether or not this is really what I want to say—all things I learned from working

with my teaching artists. Now as I look back, I’m grateful that I invested my time in learning from the T&W writers, even if I was initially reluctant. They had a lot to give. Their knowledge and passion for writing truly is inspirational and ignited within me a desire to expand my own creativity through the writing process. 🗨️