

## Chapter 11

# Workshopping Lives

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*My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,  
Or else my heart, concealing it, will break;  
And rather than it shall, I will be free  
Even to the uttermost, as I please, in words.*

Katherina, *The Taming of the Shrew*,  
William Shakespeare

An automobile accident, in April 2000, resulted in the deaths of four promising first-year female students on our campus. The deep grief that descended on Middlebury College led me to design a course in 'Writing to Heal'. The roots of this course began in the '4 Divas Writing Project,' a series of writing workshops that students and I organized to help cope with campus shock and grief. The project culminated in the publication of a commemorative booklet honoring the four students who had died and other losses our group had suffered. We presented our booklet to the families and to the college community at the one-year anniversary of the girls' death. Students who helped create the booklet thought it not only a wonderful tribute to the young women we had lost but a rewarding endeavor on its own. Students who participated in the Divas Project experienced relief both from writing their own narratives and in reading those of others. Reading others' narratives helped students locate their own experience in a larger pattern of grief and recovery. Writing their own narratives helped participants heal the pain of losing friends and lessened, as one student told me, 'the hole in my heart'.

Seeing the benefits of connection, closure and solace to students who participated in the '4 Divas Project,' I envisioned teaching a 'Writing to Heal' course with a writing workshop component. Before I could design and teach such a course, I faced the dilemma of how I might conduct a writing workshop when the subject matter of the writing would be the

raw material of students' lives. Although the workshop experience had become central to my writing pedagogy, I knew that even the best student writers could feel threatened by insecurity and rejection when sharing their writing in a conventional workshop model. How would students endure criticism of their writing when its content was their own sorrow and grief? How would students respond to other students' criticism of papers describing *their* sister's anorexia, *their* mother's breast cancer, *their* father's abandonment of the family, *their* own sexual abuse?

My greatest challenge in integrating the writing workshop in the 'Writing to Heal' course was not to violate students in any manner – not in their words, their losses, or their lives. I needed to find a way to protect my students and still find a place for the workshop, a primary pedagogy in all my writing classes. Instead of abandoning the workshop in the 'Writing to Heal' course, I rethought the entire course structure and the part the workshop played within it. The workable solution to my dilemma came from this insight: students needed time to trust one another, and they needed a familiar discourse for discussing loss; therefore, as part of my course design, I intentionally postponed the writing and the subsequent workshopping of the personal essay that addressed students' losses until the second half of the course. Instead, I created a tiered approach to writing and reading through shared in-class writing prompts, selected readings that dealt with loss in literary works and memoirs, and readings of theorists such as Gabrielle Rico and James Pennebaker. Finally, I added sequenced writing assignments and strategically-placed writing workshops. The combined elements of this pedagogical scaffolding created the trust and discourse that enabled participants of the writing workshop to respond to each other with intelligence, grace, and compassion.

## Shared Writing

Pennebaker (1995: 9) describes the harmful physical and psychological effects of inhibiting 'thoughts and feelings' associated with traumatic events, and he points out the positive value of 'talk[ing] a great deal in a group'. Following Pennebaker's theory, we read our informal writing aloud or talk through our feelings about our writing to the class. Students write for 15 minutes to a prompt that often stems from a passage we have read. Prompts move students from safe topics, such as 'describe a metaphor for healing,' to riskier ones, such as, 'I fear ...' After writing, students choose one of three options: read what they had written, describe what they had written, or tell a joke. In this way, students have to risk

something, but choose their own degree of risk. The joke option works as a compromise between opposing values of risk and trust. If I allow students to 'pass' after the prompt, they might never open themselves to the class, but students still have an 'out' if their writing feels too close to the bone. Some may question whether telling a joke in this setting takes a certain degree of risk, but some students find it more threatening to tell a joke than to discuss their personal lives; furthermore, jokes can provide a welcomed release when student writing exposes painful memories and revelations.

As we share our writing responses, we open ourselves and learn about each other: whose father has died, whose friend is bipolar, whose brother is on drugs, who is in remission, who has been rejected by a lover, whose sister has run away, who dreads moving out of a childhood home. During class, I write and share my own response to the writing prompts with my students. Sharing our stories binds us to each other in empathy and experience and prepares us for the more intense workshop moments. Students begin to face demons, some more slowly than others. My student Paul, for one, was so traumatized by an event that he came into my class unable to talk about what he referred to as 'It'. His in-class writings described the way he walked down the stairs the day 'It' happened, but he could not (or would not) name his trauma. When Paul and I discussed a topic for his memoir, I reassured him that he did not have to write about 'It'. I advised him to write about a different loss – a lacrosse game, a room key, anything. But he said, 'Nothing else bothers me.' Paul was caught in the paradox that Gabriele Rico (1991: 110) describes as '[T]he more you try to avoid painful feelings, the more signals you send to your brain that they are important; because they have the power to scare you, the pain becomes worse'. Paul finally found something to write about and writing that paper opened him up a crack more.

Pennebaker (1995: 102) suggests that repeated writing benefits people like Paul because when they understand events that have weighed upon them, 'they no longer need to inhibit their talking.' Repeated writing propelled Paul forward to face his trauma. Rico (1991: 167) sees potential for recovery from writing about trauma because 'naming' pain can create 'a private key' that 'unlock[s] a door to new options'. Paul's pain over 'It' did not completely disappear, but framing, or contextualizing his trauma, helped him change. By the end of the semester, Paul not only named 'It,' but could write and speak about healthy ways of coping with the pain of his parents' divorce. Rico suggests using techniques such as 'naming' and 'framing' a trauma to transform painful, chaotic feelings into ones

'formed, framed, thus, manageable' (p. 9). Paul's initial inability to refer to his parents' divorce as anything but 'It,' may seem anti-climatic to an outsider, but the framing of his trauma through repeated written and oral work allowed Paul to change, so that his whole identity no longer centered on feelings of abandonment.

### Shared Intellectual Dialogue

Although many creative workshop models discourage the writer from speaking, I encourage student writers to participate in their own workshops – first by reading their papers aloud, second by engaging in a discussion of the paper, and third, by requesting specific help and advice from the workshop participants. Vu, one of my international students, workshopped an essay about his girlfriend in Cambodia whose parents convinced her to marry an older, richer man. When Vu finished reading, he looked up and saw tears on my face.

'I'm sorry I made you cry', he said.

'Don't be', I told him. 'You succeeded. You moved your readers.'

The students in the workshop nodded, and Vu smiled. We had listened, and his misery was lightened. In his paper, Vu transferred the experience of his loss to his readers. He succeeded because his readers keenly felt that loss in their own hearts. In the workshop, we talked for a while about his ex-girlfriend, and then we discussed the structure of his paper. One student noted her confusion about when a particular event had taken place. 'Did this happen this past summer or when you first went away?' she asked. 'Oh, I can fix that.' Vu said, and he made a note to clarify the times for his second draft. Not only had Vu succeeded in his writing, but readers of his paper succeeded as workshop partners when they helped him craft a memoir that was clearer and more technically sound. Vu used the suggestions from the workshop when he wrote a revised draft of his memoir.

Preparing Vu and his classmates to successfully workshop their personal essays takes a full seven weeks and involves both emotional and intellectual trust. Before the workshop can take place, Vu and the other students needed to share intellectual dialogue. While repeated, shared writing provides the first layer in my scaffolding pedagogy, our texts create the second important step: shared intellectual dialogue. Readings move students through a balance of risk and comfort, so trust and critical thinking (such that is in line with Pennebaker's theories) follow. Online and in class discussions of texts allow the class to develop a shared language to examine loss. Stanley Fish (1980: 318) describes this familiar

discourse as a 'structure of assumptions.' In the first group of texts the class reads, the literature of loss establishes themes and problems in a safe zone. We read and examine loss in Susan Minot's (1986) *Monkeys*, Jane Austen's (1818) *Persuasion*, Arthur Miller's (1947) *All My Sons*, and in the poetry of Auden, Bishop, Dickinson, and Wordsworth. The texts explore illness, death, alcoholism, parental neglect, depression, infidelity, loss of status, criminal culpability, and poverty, among other issues of loss. At first, the class discusses how these losses affect characters in the texts. However, as we continue to discuss the literature, students gradually begin to share similar situations from their own lives. Young men, in particular, respond to the father and son dynamic in *All My Sons*. For example, two young men in class vigorously debated the importance of family loyalty versus obligation to society. The debate could occur because these students felt comfortable by first talking about the assigned texts in the class. The young man who argued that society was more important than family eventually wrote a personal essay honoring sacrifices his own father had made for their family. Subsequently, students *become* the texts we read by the end of the semester.

In an effort to ground students in writing to heal theory, we read Pennebaker's (1995) *Opening Up* and Rico's (1991) *Pain and Possibility*. These texts introduce students to some of the best research in the field. Memoirs such as Frank McCourt's (1996) *Angela's Ashes*, C.S. Lewis's (1961) *On Grief* and Joan Didion's (2005) *The Year of Magical Thinking* offer models that help beginning memoir writers better use creative non-fiction techniques when they write and workshop their personal essays.

### Hybrid Assignments Leading to the Memoir

Leading to the memoir workshop, the third pedagogical scaffold involves writing assignments that ready students for the personal essay. Hybrid assignments that fuse genres encourage students to integrate personal narrative with discussions of texts. For example, students might compare the coping methods of characters in Susan Minot's *Monkeys* to their own ways of coping with loss. Students often respond to the alcoholism alluded to in Susan Minot's *Monkeys* by exploring a family member's alcohol abuse. Once students have made these comparisons, they become more comfortable sharing personal problems with addiction.

When students thread personal experiences into literary analyses of texts, they become more confident workshopping papers and more comfortable sharing sensitive material. Sarah explored the role of letters in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and in her own life. When Sarah's mother was

diagnosed with breast cancer, Sarah received a letter from her then third grade teacher. As Sarah wrote and workshopped her paper, she realized the hope that letter had brought her. Literature opened a well of feelings that made Sarah remember the fear of losing her mother and the comfort of her teacher's letter. Writing about this letter made Sarah aware of the impact her teacher had had on her life. Sarah concluded she 'must have been a whole different person back then' before she had identified the source of her courage. Hybrid papers such as these ease students into writing about their personal lives in a small, safe way. Moreover, sound strategies in early workshops build the trust needed to workshop personal essays later in the semester.

When students finally receive the memoir assignment, they long to write their own stories. Students write a three to five-page essay in which they react to a loss or a difficulty in their own lives. This may be the loss of a person, a relationship, an opportunity, a competition, a job, a health issue, an object, a place, a memory, a dream, anything real or imagined that they miss or mourn. The loss may be large and vitally important or small and passing. They have waited weeks to write not just a slice, but a whole story. My student Sachini liked this delay because it took that long for students in the class to 'open' to each other. She believed her peers 'were all in a state of being ready,' as 'everything was more personal,' just not on 'a scary level.' I warn students not to overextend themselves if writing this essay becomes painful, and they learn all the campus resources (counselor, deans, chaplains) available to them if writing brings up issues that bother them deeply. Even though writing about these traumas can be painful, Pennebaker suggests several benefits. First, the work of inhibiting ourselves from discussing or writing about traumatic events is exhausting, depleting, and harmful to our health. Second, if we do not resolve the 'upsetting experience[s]', we continue to live with them (p. 103). For Sachini, writing her personal essay was the first step toward analysis. It was for her a venue to situate 'thoughts in another place and allow [these thoughts] to sit and be analyzed rather than brewing up in an already jumbled-up mind.' This statement is in line with Pennebaker's theory of writing about the trauma. Once the students have written their personal narratives, the workshop will allow them to start the process of resolution.

### Resolution in the Workshop

Where writing relieves, analysis resolves, and analysis begins in the writing workshop. The workshop helped my student, Pat, confront

aspects of his loss that he had not faced in writing. He said the workshop process helped him 'to not only read but thoroughly discuss the traumatic event.' Workshopping also positioned him 'to face the event for what it was, while [understanding] it better.' Pat's workshop allowed him to start the process of resolution. Through earlier workshops of their literature papers, students had seen the benefits of the workshop process. Initially, some questioned whether or not their peers knew enough about writing to provide helpful feedback. This concern was legitimate. Some students may be perceptive readers, and some may have experience as writers, but all must learn how to become effective, knowledgeable, and courteous workshop partners.

To help my students reap the full benefit of each specific writing workshop, I teach them how to be perceptive readers by focusing on the craft each genre requires. For the personal essay, we concentrate on techniques students have discussed in fiction, poetry, and drama. For example, we discuss how the writer orients the reader in time and space, in what ways the beginning of the piece grabs our interest, and if and how the writer use concrete details effectively. All the staging for the 'Writing to Heal' course has led us to this workshop, and still the workshop sharing is difficult. One student, Will, told me that after workshopping his essay he 'almost came to tears' because his writing had affected him, and still did 'so deeply'. In the workshop, students see how their stories affect readers sitting right in front of them (as Vu's story did). Writers need to have confidence emotionally and intellectually in the workshop process and in their workshop partners. When they do, workshop participants can help writers mold their stories into forms that honor the losses described.

In any writing course, but most especially in 'Writing to Heal' self-awareness, reflection, and intentionality prove key both to improvement in writing and, in this case, in recovery from trauma. For Sarah, the entire workshop and draft process allowed her time between each draft 'to let it sit'. She was then able to re-envision the piece. Her experience of slowing down and reflecting coincides with Pennebaker's observations that repeated writings help us organize our thoughts by slowing down our thinking. When all process occurs in the head, writers jump from thought to thought without following one idea through to its conclusion. Pennebaker suggests that as 'emotional responses become less extreme' the ability to think clearly may improve (p. 95). Situated within a three-draft writing process (review, revise, revisit), the writing workshop begins the slowing down of thought that contributes to higher-level analytical thinking and, in the case of personal essays, a quicker recovery from grief.

Even with careful preparation for the workshop, many students become nervous workshopping their personal essays. Jessie certainly found it 'difficult'. In class, she would agonize over letting others read her work. However, the newly-acquired skill of her workshop partners and their 'compassion' helped, she said, in 'building me up'. Just as in Vu's case, once Jessie felt that her group valued the narrative of her trauma, she could accept the group's suggestions about improving her paper. The writing workshop works best when it functions as part of an orchestrated continuum to improve writing. After reading her paper a second time, Jessie could emotionally detach from the subject and revisit the topic with less pain. This emotional detachment, as part of the continuum to improve writing, has its basis in Pennebaker's theory of repeated writing (p. 95). Very occasionally, a student has material so raw that he or she is reluctant to bring that work to workshop. In that case, I offer to let the student hand-pick the other students in the group, or, I offer to have the student workshop an incomplete piece that leaves out the most difficult parts of the story. A more drastic option is for a student to workshop one piece and share a different piece with me privately. Only one student to date has exercised this option.

The human impulse drives us to narrative, compels us to tell our stories, like Coleridge's (1919) 'Ancient Mariner,' who holds the wedding guest 'with his glittering eye' (line 3). We create narrative because we want to understand. Pennebaker suggests, 'the mind torments itself thinking about unresolved and confusing issues,' and repeated writing can act as 'a powerful tool to discover meaning' (p. 93). In my 'Writing to Heal' course, I prepare for and situate the writing workshop to provide a safe, disciplined space in which students can seek meaning and tell the stories that must be heard. In doing so, the writing workshop lives, flourishes, and plays a vital role in the learning and healing that students experience by the end of the course.

As I completed this article, my campus lived in a suspended state of anticipatory grief. One of our students had been missing for three months. As we walked the campus that winter, we scanned the snow banks in dread. Experts searched nearby rivers. We were not ready to write this story. It was too close, too raw, too unresolved, and all semester we felt the weight of this unfinished story pressing upon us all. Someday, it will be a story that some among us will need to write and share.

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