



**Side By Side:
The Story of What Happens When Teachers Write
With Their Students**

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Abstract

Throughout their lives students are required to write but are rarely taught how to accomplish this goal. Even more troubling, the teachers who make these writing assignments seldom, if ever, sit down and put themselves through the same writing process. Jane S. Hancock's paper argues that the best way to solve both of these academic issues is to have teachers write side by side with their students. Hancock weaves her own experiences with the UCLA Writing Project and its affiliated teacher workshops with other instructors' and literary coaches' anecdotal accounts in order to push the idea that taking the time to write side by side with students improves teachers' understandings of the writing process and allows them to gain greater insights into the methodology of teaching writing. The paper concludes that writing instruction should be a dialogue where ideas are shared and refined and where teachers and students learn to be better writers via a communal experience.

Side by Side: The Story of What Happens When Teachers Write With Their Students

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I have to admit that when I left home to go to college, I wasn't sure if I knew how to write. In high school we had the weekly theme, due every Monday morning. Being a procrastinator, I usually left the writing until Sunday evening. I'd get so tired that I couldn't finish. In the morning, it would be done. The little cobbler of fairy tales had his elves. I had my mother.

No place in college did I get any writing instruction—just assignments to write. No place in graduate school did I get any writing instruction—just assignments to write. I must have done well because my grades were high. Since I was doing well, I didn't need to reflect on my own process—until I became a teacher.

In 1981 I became a fellow of the UCLA Writing Project. Each summer at Writing Project sites across the nation, teachers who have had some success at the teaching of writing come together to share ideas, approaches, strategies; to read what the experts say; and to write themselves. It was here I learned that there is a writing process and that although writers go through a process, it's not as simple as that. It was here I learned the recursiveness of the process, the elusiveness of the process, and the individualism of the process. It was here I learned to reflect on my own writing as well as the writing of others. It was here I learned that writing can be taught but not prescribed. It was here I

learned that teachers need to write in order to be teachers of writing. And it wasn't long after that when I figured out that teachers need to write with their students, alongside their students, side by side.

When teacher writes with students

The tension mounts

Energy sputters and sparks

The focus squeezes tighter

Eyes squint

As pens push across paper

Worlds flow into the words

Breath catches as

A hush swells filling the room

Portentous

Students gasp

Cheer, applaud

Tension releases

We are one in the moment.

—Pat Abrams, teacher

So what does happen when teachers write with their students? I have been working with a large group of teachers from Local District 3 in the Los Angeles Unified School District for over ten years now. Each month they write with me in a workshop

setting, go back to their classrooms, write with their students, and return the next month with samples. Five years ago we decided to publish an anthology of student and teacher work. Teacher writing paired with student writing. Teacher ode, student ode. Teacher pantoum, student pantoum. Teacher narrative, student narrative. This is the outcome of that journey.

When I arrive at the UCLA Faculty Center on that Thursday evening in June, people are already there to receive their copy of *Call of Words* and to read from that anthology. Over 200 students, parents, and teachers crowd into the room. Another surprise. I don't think that many students or their teachers will want to go to that open microphone and read in front of such a large crowd, but they do. They line up and wait their turns.

The day I sat down to write with my students changed everything. They stared. They asked, "What are you doing?" I replied. "I thought I'd write with you and later share too!" The room was silent. I asked, "Is that okay?"

—Emily Biggers, teacher

Diego, seven years old, reads his thirty-two line poem (thirty-two lines!) about the rain forest as do others from his class. Their teacher, Marilyn Simon from Open Charter, says, "I was absolutely blown away by the writing of the kids in my class." Robert from Fairfax High reads his essay that begins, satirically, with "Don't you just love TV?" and then goes on about its negativity. Kate Kausch's and Carrie Usui's students read pantoums about history and literature, showing how important it is to use poetry to assess

knowledge. Carrie comments about writing with her students: “It’s like being a part of a secret society.” Roxanne Correa brings second grade students who read poems that make us hungry—poems about pizza, pomegranates, and cinnabuns. Anne Saxon’s students present “I Am From” poems as a Readers Theater. Breanna, a student from Marina Del Rey Middle School reads her letter to Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*. Breanna says, “Your book brought out a light in me that my loving mother . . . has tried to elicit for so long. You made a difference in my life.” Susan Strauss, literacy coach says, “Writing teachers who write with their students learn more about the process of writing and teaching writing than any other methodology could offer.”

When I write with my students, I feel more of a bond . . . It sends them the message that whatever I make them do, I am willing to do it myself.

—Heather Ellman, teacher

As each teacher and each student went to the microphone and read, I thought back over the program and events that had brought us to that day, that day five years ago, that day which turned out to be the first of the yearly anthologies and Open Mic nights. As Co-Director of the UCLA Writing Project I had been working with the district Language Arts Cadre for many years. It began as a monthly all-day workshop for about thirty teachers, but as the district grew, we added teachers, and we also added Literacy and Leadership Partners, swelling our ranks to about 80. My job, and it’s one I love, is to encourage teachers to become writers themselves, to go back to their classrooms and write with their students, and to bring that writing back to share.

Writing with my students blurs the line between “expert” and “novice.”

—Judith Davidson, teacher

Each month we explored and tried different genres of writing and different strategies, different approaches to writing. Out of that came the anthology, *Call of Words*, a 325-page tribute to the work of the Language Arts Cadre in the local district. Out of that came teachers who saw the value of writing when their students write. Doug Cost said, “It makes me a better writer.” David Doty said, “We are a band of writers.” Lynn Novatt said, “Sitting down among my students, writing while they are writing, has dramatically changed the landscape of my classroom.” Sarah Fowler says, “When I write with students, they write with me.”

Writing teachers who write with their students learn more about the process of writing and teaching writing than any other methodology could offer. Sharon Creech’s Young Adult Novel Walk Two Moons advises, “Don’t judge someone until you walk two moons in their moccasins.” Just so, how dare writing teachers assign and assess written work unless we commit to the process ourselves? How better to model the “writing process” than to practice what we preach? How better to teach show, don’t tell than to do exactly that? Plus, at the end of the day, writing teachers have furthered not only the talents of their students but their own. And along the way they made the leaps of faith necessary to all good writing—they shared their work.

—Susan Strauss, literacy coach

So what is the Local District 3 Language Arts Cadre? What makes it unique in the realm of professional development? This group of K through 12 teachers and coaches who come from a range of schools, from high performing to program improvement, from year-round to traditional, from alternative to magnet, meet the first Thursday of the month, seven times a year. They actually meet on a school day, allowing substitutes to take over their classes. Some of the participants have been a part of the group for eleven years; they won't give up their places. Other schools send a different teacher every year. Their charge, their commitment, is to write, to learn, to bring that writing, that knowledge back to their school sites, to share it with their students and to share it with other teachers, to write when their students write. They tell their students in advance, "I'm going to a writing class tomorrow and when I come back, I will read to you what I have written and we'll see if you can do this kind of writing too." They figure out how to adapt any lesson to their grade levels, their student populations, their subject matters, their District initiatives. They are excited. They want to be there.

And why does the District continue to support the Language Arts Cadre year after year? Because the test scores for student writing have shown steady increases, particularly in the English learner population in this district where 83 different languages are spoken.

My foot hardly crosses the doorstep when Amer bounds out of his seat and stops me. "Have you read Ms. Sal's story? It is so scary. We are writing scary stories and Ms. Sal said we could use her story as a model. We can even use some of her images if we want. Do you want to read Jose's story?" Ms. Sal teaches a third

grade ELL classroom. Most of her students only arrived in the U.S. in the last two years. The change in her student's attitude toward writing is amazing. Had I entered her room three months earlier, my eyes would have caught students sitting quietly, struggling to put words on paper. Not today, not since Ms. Sal began to write with her students.

Cynthia Headrick, literacy coach

Over the years the teachers and coaches have written in every possible genre; tried out every possible strategy that we know, shared their writing in pairs, small groups, and whole groups; they have studied and reflected on their own writing, their own process; they have laughed together, cried together, struggled together; they have built a community of writers—not only within the Cadre but in their own classrooms. And they never forget to write, side by side, with their students.

Alfee Enciso says, “I sit down next to Tyrone, the class clown, and scribble furiously. He picks up on the vibe and with this new focus, he bows down, transforms himself into class scribe, and starts the paper.” And Phil Brimble adds, “During our quiet writing time, I pick up my stool and shift, each day, to a different student table. Then I write. This lets me model concentrated work; I don’t want to talk, I just want to write. I try not to write a lot, but since students watch me as I write, I consciously try to cross out, change, rewrite, add bits in margins. If there’s time to share, I let students go before me, but if I really like something I’ve done, I show that pleasure when I read. Writing with students also works in the opposite direction. It models for me what students are trying

to accomplish. This never-ending dialectic of teaching and learning and my changing part in it always amazes me.”

This last June we published our fifth anthology, held our fifth Open Mic night at UCLA. Fewer people came this year and that’s a good thing! Because the teachers in the separate schools—elementary, middle, high, even alternative schools—are publishing their own anthologies, holding their own Open Mic nights in their own school libraries and auditoriums. They are building their own communities of writers.

But we still had a good crowd. And I sat in the front row, beaming with pride as each student, each teacher stepped up to the microphone to read from the anthology.

This is their story, the story of literacy coaches, teachers, and students who write with each other, who write side by side.

And this is my story too. I write with them, side by side, and they make me a better writer.