



Write Like Crazy and Personal Growth: What's the Difference?

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Write Like Crazy and Personal Growth: What's the Difference?

by Susan Strauss

"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is."

~ Albert Einstein

Sometime in my second year as a literacy coach, I heard coaches referred to as "agents of change." Joan of Arc, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Marion Wright Edelman more than deserve the title, but does a literacy coach? In comparison, my work facilitating academic progress at a Los Angeles middle school seemed quite modest, my successes often intangible, like measuring rays of light or placing a yardstick on hope.

Or so I thought.

Consider these recent moments in my role as a UCLA Literacy Coach:

- When I asked my Writing Workshop students to write a portfolio reflection on the quality of improvement in their writing during our class, Charles, an English language learner, wrote, "The best way to improve writing is to write like crazy."
- New sixth-grade ELA, ESL, and history teacher, Martin, anxious to impart his love of writing to his students, gives daily assignments. As the first grading period approaches, he flags me down on campus and confesses, "I love teaching writing but how can I possibly read and respond to 842 writing assignments?"
- Longtime ELA teacher, Sally, wonders why she needs to assign writing to her five classes full of wall-to-wall students, 171 total. "Writing isn't even tested on the CST. Besides, the district is not paying me enough for me to read 171 writing assignments a week. Or even a month."

If Charles' formula for success—99% practice, 1% talent—states a creative credo then what kind of writing environment would support his belief in the power of effort?

Would new teacher Martin's dedication to writing assignments offer students like Charles the daily practice essential to cultivating a writing culture? Perhaps. But will merely "assigning" writing opportunities improve the quality of student writing? What steps might Martin take in order to offer a meaningful response to student writing, one that includes specific praise but also addresses at least one challenge and sets a writing goal?

And what about Martin himself? If he continues to promote an avalanche of assignments, what are the chances he'll find himself

constantly buried in paperwork and either flee the profession or end up sharing Sally's pragmatic point-of-view?

What might happen if Charles found himself a student in Sally's class? Would she be able to accommodate his need to "write like crazy" in order to improve? Or would it be too much to expect of an already overextended teacher?

For Martin as a coach, what might be the best approach for supporting his enthusiasm for assigning writing, yet also help him find an efficient way to advance his students' writing skills? When the first-year teacher expressed concern about his inability to keep up with the volume of his students' writing, I paused and, choosing my next words carefully, said, "So you're feeling overwhelmed by the volume of your students' writing assignments. You want to find an effective yet efficient approach to teaching writing and you're looking for a way to make it happen."

Yes, he nodded. Yes, yes, Please.

Working for the UCLA Writing Project, my methods for responding to student writing continue to develop and improve. I no longer write responses on student papers but offer feedback—specific praise and questions—with Post-its and letters, saving more formal assessment for portfolio assignments. Writing Project Directors Faye Peitzman and Jane Hancock ask the UCLA Young Writers' Workshop teachers to focus our written responses to the student's writing on positive changes noted in the student's writing during the course of the workshop and to cite specific evidence of that change in our written response.

As it happened, this year's professional development at my school site, Marina del Rey Middle School, endorsed the psychology of the "growth mindset," a psychological guide to success developed by Stanford University's Dr. Carol Dweck. Her book, *Mindset*, promotes effort and encourages a focus on the learning process rather than just the results. With that in mind, I considered how the methods advocated by the Writing Project aligned with the growth mindset, advocating teachers respond to student writing by noting specific changes in the student's work and indicating how to continue on the path of continuous improvement.

Responding to student writing takes an investment of time, and all teachers want that investment to inspire higher levels of student achievement. So, if we want our responses to motivate students to learn from mistakes, engage in the craft of revision, yet maintain a lifelong love of writing, what might be the best methods for running such a creative yet efficient writing classroom? How might coaches, especially those who do not have their own class of students during the school year, develop student talent and skill and affect positive change in student writing? And how might teachers observe and

transfer the Writing Project methods to overpopulated classrooms, yet enjoy life both in and outside the classroom?

First, we need to establish long-term goals, such as:

1. Creating and maintaining a Writers' Notebook, one where students develop a well of ideas and take chances, ready to expand one of their ideas at any time, writing side-by-side with their teacher, whose Writers' Notebook models the process.
2. Maintaining student portfolios, personalized folders that allow students to store their written drafts, selecting from assignments or personal writing pieces they might choose to take through the writing process and prepare for publication.
3. Introducing the importance of making our writing public, such as sharing writing in a writing conference, posting work on public bulletin boards or on the web, and creating a class or school anthology.

Establishing these big-picture goals offers a culminating activity as a catalyst for backwards planning. Determining the critical steps toward realizing these goals involves a change in thinking and behavior, in other words, a shift in methodology. In working with teachers and students, establishing the criteria for success was essential. But developing a form of written response, congruent with district expectations but which also helped develop self-directed learners and eased the teacher's paper load, remained a significant challenge.

Directors of the Writing Project requested Young Writers' Workshop teachers not give grades for student writing assignments but, instead, write personal letters, noting positive changes the students made in their writing, citing specific evidence in each student's portfolio of self-selected writing.

By writing our own responses to literature, in this case student writing, we cited examples of change evident in student drafts, revisions, peer and teacher conferences, editing, and presentation. Students also wrote portfolio reflections analyzing their collection of writing, noting progress in terms of perseverance, creativity, pride, and improvement. Consider this excerpt from my final letter to Charles:

"In 'The Greater the Effort, the Greater the Glory', you expanded a noble thesis by examining the moral character of a political leader as well as a fictional character in a well-known novel. After mapping out a universal theme, you polished your writing with more exact word choice and well-crafted sentences, demonstrating your own position statement many times over."

Another sample of my responses to student writing included this one to Jane:

"As you reflected on your writing this summer, you chose to analyze your progress on 'A Father's Love for His Child.' What a complex and ambitious story you created. The challenges inherent in making such a tragedy credible relied heavily on your ability to develop both the plot and the characters. The manner in which you embraced those challenges indicates an innate understanding of the craft of storytelling."

Both those students continued to email me long after the class ended, sharing their writing triumphs as well as concerns. More importantly, they focused on change.

How might a written response from a teacher inspire a positive change in student writing? What kind of response would have an impact on our own writing for the better? A personal letter citing successes and suggesting goals for improvement or a response noting spelling, grammar, and organizational errors along the margins of our paper? Which type of response would encourage a struggling writer to focus on growth, on big ideas rather than just mechanics, on process rather than just results? Which response will more likely demonstrate respect for the writer, build the foundation of trust essential to a healthy writing community, and create students who embrace the craft of writing?

Marty agreed to introduce a Writers' Notebook and to consider student portfolios. He favors the idea of writing a letter response to student writing that addressed achievement in the form of verifiable change but requested a coach model of the process. Since crisis usually prompts change, Marty's overwhelming paper load rendered him open to trying Writing Workshop, hoping to find a productive and efficient method for responding to student writing.

However, given the alarming data regarding student performance on CST items that cover written strategies, can we afford to maintain our current approach to pedagogy? When we consider the level of student work that might result from a teacher response dedicated to noting positive change, why hesitate to at least give it a try? How many student writers transformed their writing simply by transferring editing changes to the next draft? (If your answer is a very quiet, sobering "none," please join the line.) If that method has not produced evidence that indicates success, why perpetuate it? Why not try another approach, one that focuses on growth, one endorsed by the National Writing Project?

If we are truly a student-centered culture, let's look at Charles, a language learner whose parents want him to study at a major university and pursue a career as a computer programmer. What if, the same young man who wrote, "the best way to improve writing is to write like crazy" applied his growth mindset about writing to computer programming? Or, better yet, what if Charles changed career plans and became a writing teacher? Which kind of response to student writing would he choose to perpetuate? What lessons might he have for all of us?

Being an agent of change is humbling, but as we unite with other agents of change, whether coaches, students, administrators, or teachers, somehow hope becomes visible and can be measured by the quality of our writing.

About the Author:

A literacy coach at University High School in Los Angeles, Susan Strauss enjoys "writing like crazy."