

Writing Works

In Their Own Words: Fables of First Year Composition

By Beth Edelstein T-C '02, sbeth428@aol.com



First year composition students face new places, new people and new ideas. Their high school worldview needs retooling, a process that fills them with fear, despair, and excitement. They want the courage to develop the skills needed to flourish in this new place and beyond. Using classroom dialogue and Aesop's fables as a starting point, we explored ways to edge toward bravery, to examine the academic environment and to step closer to the adult world.

The students in the "Writing for a Liberal Education" class sat silently on the first day. Faces unsmiling, eyes focused on their desks, pencils still, iPods removed. No sound at all. I gulped, breathed deeply, introduced myself and asked, "What do you want to get out of this class?"

Apparently no one had asked them that question. A curious, shaky voice inquired, "Are you serious? Do you really want an answer?"

"Yes and yes."

I waited. The answer came with a shout, "An A!"

There wasn't another answer, was there? Ah, the beginning of a conversation.

"How do you get an A?"

With one voice, they answered, "Come to class and participate."

"What does participation involve?"

"Talking in class and writing well."

Had they been members of the same chorus? Such harmony, such timing.

"And what does it mean to write well?" "Writing well," Samantha carefully explained, "means no one says 'What?' after reading your piece."

In one short clear statement, she addressed the important issues of writing: style, content, genre, focus, content, presentation, and audience.

Then we explored their writing processes—How do you write? What helps you write and keeps you from writing? Again they knew.

Jimmy made his way of writing visible when he explained, "In my writings I sacrifice my grammer [sic] and spelling sometimes, but I do it to keep ideas flowing from my brian [sic] to the paper."

We saw the ideas tumbling from his brain onto the paper without a stop at spelling. His coherent message, however, struck a connective note with other students.

Aung shared his story, "Being hindered in terms of language (as an ESL student) during my adolescent years has left literature somewhat bitter for me. My writing tends to etch out in all different directions without any real restriction. Sometime I am blind to the things which are right in front of my eyes."

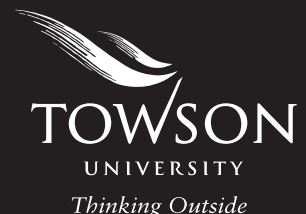
Ariel began, "Often times my writing discourages me because I can never interpret my exact thoughts onto paper. Just because I have never seen myself as a writer does not mean I have never wanted to be one. I can see myself eventually as a writer because of my strong

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desire to share my views and experiences with others. Although I do not see myself as a writer right now, it is my desire to learn how to write effectively so that I can see myself as a writer in the future.”

The students hunted ways to tell their writing adventures. Words, the material of writing, failed to capture their thoughts. They halted, tried again, and sometimes despaired. “That’s not what I meant to say.” They wanted their initial ideas and thoughts to be perfect. No such luck. Writing and thinking requires starting, revising, discarding, and continuing. Alteration is almost always needed. How can I help these first-year writers appreciate their present skills even as they endeavor to improve them?

Susan declared, “I want to be more brave in my writing.”

Oh yes, the entire class wanted to write bravely. Since we didn’t have Superman’s cape or Luke Skywalker’s Force, we needed other resources, but didn’t have a requisition for bravery. Of course this fertile discussion occurred at the very end of class.

“Let’s think about this until next time.” What else could I do since the next class would not wait until we finished our conversation?

I pondered bravery in writing. A valuable, but unfocused, concept. If I wanted to edge the students toward bravery, I had to be at least a little brave myself. Nope, being brave had too many risks. I wanted comfort, not wild adventures. I was definitely not brave and yet I heard the Little Engine’s refrain, “I think I can; I think I can.” Bravery and tenacity seemed to be connected. Perhaps childhood stories could offer suggestions for the bravery quest. I recalled the Aesop’s fables my family read, discussed and acted out. You do remember those

fables, don’t you? Sure you do, even though you may not call them by that name. “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” “Town Mouse and Country Mouse,” “Belling the Cat,” and “The Fox and Sour Grapes” are all Aesop’s fables and each carries a moral, a lesson to encourage the listener to think and possibly change his behavior. I pounced from my writing chair and captured that idea before it could escape. Hmmm, I may be on to something.

In “Belling the Cat,” the mice held a meeting to figure out a way to outwit their enemy, the cat. One mouse suggested putting a bell around the cat’s neck so they could escape when they heard her approach. What a good idea. Who would slip the bell around the cat’s neck? No takers. Dead silence. Finally a wise old mouse declared, “It is easier to propose a remedy than to implement it.”

Although Aesop doesn’t tell us what happened next, I realized that belling the cat required cunning, ingenuity, and, yes, bravery. That fable would be my contribution for our next classroom discussion.

“So, where are we in our thinking about bravery?” I asked.

No answer, just like the mice in the story.

My prodding revealed that life had interfered with thinking about bravery. Schoolwork, families, friends, and work cried for attention; the students simply had no brain power or energy left to consider bravery.

“How about if I tell you what I’ve been thinking about and we can see where we go from there?”

If I talked, their scrambled brains might settle into writing mode.

Stalking cat, scared mice, impossible solutions.

“What,” they asked, “does this have to do with writing?”

“You tell me.”

And they did. In voices increasingly confident, they wondered at the new cat and mouse story.

“Belling the cat,” they mused, “is a dramatic idea that is almost impossible to carry out. The mice could be killed.”

When Jonah wondered, “How is that connected to this class?” Anya suggested, “OK, we don’t get killed because of our writing, but sometimes I feel like something is chasing me so I have to escape and I can’t write when I run.”

“Maybe,” Moses started, “we can do something besides running away or risking our lives. The mice could distract the cat and maybe the cat would get tired of chasing us.”

The third, yet undefined, choice appealed. What was the cat in their writing? Procrastination, fear of imperfection, ridicule, failure.

Throughout the semester they distracted the evil cat as they defined their writing topics, allowed themselves to make mistakes, and began to trust their own voices. They didn’t die and, in fact, giggled as they told of fooling the cat once again. With perfection not possible and ridicule unlikely, failure and revision were no longer synonyms.

At the semester’s end, I again asked, “What does good writing mean?”

“Distracting the cat,” we decided.

Anxiety and excitement fill first-year students as they step toward adulthood. Childhood stories can give a comfortable framework from which they can learn about their bravery in confronting the cat. Aesop belongs in the composition classroom.