

Eliciting Meaningful Writing

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Authentic relationships are built on genuine communication. In one-on-one literacy tutoring, it is precisely a sense of genuine self-expression that will nourish a learner's capacity to write. Too many years – in too many dehumanizing learning situations – too long trying to write to please others or to “do it right” have eroded self-esteem for many of us, and especially for adult learners.

Genuine communication is predicated on truthfulness, but this honesty need not involve levels of disclosure or confession that make anyone uncomfortable. Of course the best writing comes from a place near the boundaries of our comfort levels, but being pushed there unwillingly, or being tricked to go there, will never have healthy results.

The honesty required here is not a matter of *how much* is revealed, nor *in how great detail* it is revealed, but is rather a matter of someone speaking in a voice that is truly theirs and no-one else's speaking for their own reasons and on their own terms. This voice can only arise out of a body that is grounded and certain it is in a safe environment.

What follows are a few suggestions to help the learner you are working with get there.

Eliciting genuine, meaningful writing is part of the more general, relational practice of being curious about the lived reality of the learner you are working with. This isn't to imply a prying or a voyeuristic tone; you don't want to “get” their narrative the same way a reporter “gets” a story, or to violate their privacy. Curiosity is simply the genuine attention you (ideally) invest in all the relationships you consciously nurture. It is possible that a learner doesn't have a great deal of experience with others being all that interested in his or her life. Being open enough to articulate why and on what terms you are interested is a great starting place.

There is a terrific, very simple method that can be used at any literacy level (besides beginner/alphabetisation):

Ask the learner about their day – what they did, saw, felt; troubles and delights, worries and triumphs; it doesn't matter how mundane. As they are speaking, *you* are writing: just headings, words, catchphrases to trigger their memory (e.g. Saw dog with three legs, fight at bank machine). Write them anywhere on the paper (unlined is best).

After the narrative, show them what's on the page. Make sure every word is recognized, and that the content is accurate. With the learner, draw bubbles or boxes around the words and phrases, and then have them make connections by drawing lines to “map out” how the bubbles are related (e.g. this one reminds me of that one, or, first this one happened and caused that one).

As this process is happening, write the connecting ideas along the lines (e.g. If I hadn't gone to the bank machine I wouldn't have seen my son's teacher; I hate the smell in that

shop, *that's* what gave me a headache!) Then, turn the whole page – which by now should look like a very messy web – over to the learner, inviting them to write it all out (or any part that interests them) on a lined piece of paper in a linear or chronological format. The ideas are all there, and so is the “right” spelling, just, kill the web. And a short story is born!

Imagine now, the same exercise based not on daily activities, but on a more abstract question, such as “What does it mean to be a man?” Stay with the process of writing it out – you’ll need to be on hand to do work around sentence structure, etc. But this is a nice way of helping people to write without that gruelling “trying to think of what to say”. They already said it.

There are myriad methods to unblock a block. Linear narrative in complete sentences is only one (awfully overrated) form. Instead, maybe you could make a list – of anything – together. Do any kind of poetry – acrostic poems are easiest: each letter in a word or name starts another word or phrase that is, in whatever way, associated with the word (e.g. for President George W’s surname, one might come up with Boastful Useless Sociopath Help us all). It can also be great fun to have a silent lesson, where the two of you write a conversation: one piece of paper, you write only your lines and pass it back and forth. This one’s clearly for higher literacy levels (in that they write unassisted – or maybe you can think of a way to modify it such that you are assisting..?)

But I am being too sunny, I realise; I’m making it sound too simple. Often the block to genuine self-expression (to feeling safe) goes a great deal deeper than not being able to think of stuff to say. Part of the way I create safety (in all my relationships) is to disclose, myself.

I tend to share a lot with my students (tellingly, especially when teaching large groups), and I tend to intone it with quite a bit of intimacy and vulnerability. This may not be your style. Allowing oneself to cry in public is not a requirement for authenticity. But you must – you must – be a whole human being. And human beings have worries and misgivings, we have grief and anger; at the very least, we have inconveniences and irritants. I don’t think any relation can thrive if one half of it considers “professional distance” to be identical to “infallible, unchanging perfection”. Be honest in your own style, at your own level of disclosure, but respect the tutoring dynamic enough to be honest. Actually show up, the way you’d show up with any other adult.

Let’s take as an example a writing contest whose challenge is to write on the theme of “I’m going to be nicer to me” – when I find it hard to learn, how can I not beat myself up and freak out; how can I feel better and let my mistakes go? The contest is going to be adjudicated by a “panel of published authors”. The learner with whom you’re working wants to enter, but she has no idea what to write about. She is blocked.

I might start by telling her about my own experiences around that theme (I do have tonnes of stuff about that, even though I am a tutor!). I would disclose only to my comfort level; this is not therapy for me – *this moment is not about me and my stuff* – I

am simply setting a tone, and perhaps sparking some ideas. I would also be aware that this whole enterprise may make me feel wobbly (“I didn’t realise I was still hurting about my grade four classroom – ugh!”), and I may have to step back, or breathe, or go get a coffee. In any event I will deal with whatever arises elsewhere; I do bring my whole self to the tutoring dynamic, but not so the learner can look after my needs.

But she is still blocked. Try to decipher what’s going on. Have you noticed what happens with her when she finds it hard to learn? Be aware of the nature and flavour of her response to the “panel of published authors”. Is the block about impressing them? Is there anything going on about her wanting somehow to please you? If the answers to those questions leave both of you still committed to entering the contest, then you can be certain she’s got something to say on this theme. Elicit just one thing. Write it down. Put a bubble around it. Smile and repeat – you two will get there.

A last caveat about meaningful/personal writing. Do the work when things are well. Don’t try to write through the freakout. If either of you is on overload, hitting a peak of overwhelm, and all the vertigo and surprise of unprocessed pain, take that time to talk a bit. Write in a little while. In the same way that you don’t talk to your partner about “Where We’re Going as a Couple” when you’re already in an ugly fight, don’t try to make the lemonade at the same time the lemons are actually being crushed. A little sugar, a little stirring, a little later; it’ll be great.