

# **The Writing Environment**

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The environment my learners write in shapes the type of writing they do. The learners notice that the novels we read as a group and the writing from their peers that really pulls them in and touches them is the work that is intimate. Through exposure, they feel the difference between factual writing and that which comes from the heart. They learn from authors in books and the writers in their own classroom. Because we create an accepting environment, the women choose to take risks within the group. They share very personal moments and feelings in their lives. The feedback from their audiences encourages them to keep their writing intimate. Seeing peers win contests is also a strong motivator.

## **Getting Started**

Often we have thought showers (previously known as brainstorming) of possibilities of where to go with a topic; usually we take a few minutes to do this individually and then share as a group to feed off each other. Learners are encouraged to pick the ideas that are of interest to them. Learning that they don't need to write about everything is important to the process.

We review what makes a solid piece of writing: our group uses the metaphor of a hamburger (see below).

Each writer considers what audience she will write for. Learners know from the beginning that they will not be forced to share their work with the group. I believe this gives them more freedom in their writing, which often leads to touching, personal pieces; however, it is rare for a learner to decide to not share her work when given the choice.

We consider possible goals of the piece, for example, to educate, entertain, share feelings, or be descriptive, mysterious, romantic, etc. I reinforce the idea that it's fine for each of them to have a different goal and desired audience for her piece.

## **The Hamburger**

We use the hamburger as a metaphor for a solid piece of writing. The top bun is the introduction, where we let the audience know what is coming without giving any juicy details, and we try to get the reader interested.

The burger itself is where the meat is. Learners put their key points here; they know that real substance is needed to satisfy, and it should be in proportion to the size of the bun they are using. As their writing develops, they have fun with the idea of adding spices

and personal touches to their homemade burger. They know that it is possible to have too many spices/details in a piece of writing, and they seek the right balance of juiciness.

The bottom bun is the conclusion that supports the burger, holding everything together without any new surprises; it may reinforce or restate the feelings and beliefs demonstrated in the meat. Learners joke that, if the conclusion was effective, the reader shouldn't be looking for another page of writing.

Learners are encouraged to go right to the "meat," and make their bun later if that is where their interest lies. The burger metaphor has been a great way for most learners to get the concept of how to set up traditional pieces of writing; they can choose to change their style as their writing progresses.

### **Joining the Process**

Sometimes I will write with the learners and share my piece, which provides an opportunity to model so many things: first, they see me take the risk of sharing; second, my work provides a possibility of what could be done with a topic; finally, I can demonstrate my process by sharing how I edit by changing phrases, adding pieces, cutting parts out, and considering synonyms from the group and a classroom thesaurus.

### **Constructive Feedback**

I model how to give specific feedback after hearing a piece, commenting on such things as the growth I see in the writer's work, what "worked" for me, and what might be useful to add to a piece. Learners also give feedback, for example, if they are working on descriptive writing, they might share with each other how many adjectives they heard in a piece.

After learners have been in the group for some time, feedback may be stronger. For example if the group, including myself, believes a learner has rushed a piece of writing or not put her heart into a piece, we let her know that we would like to see and hear her best work. (This feedback would not be given to a new member of the group.) Sometimes the learner will accept the challenge and put more into the piece, but sometimes the learner may share that the topic just doesn't grab her. This useful information sometimes leads the writer to choose a different topic, and the discussion certainly reinforces the importance of being hooked as a writer in order to create a moving piece.

We review each writer's audience and goal, particularly to consider what worked well and why something may not have worked, for example, the language was not suitable for children, or the writer went off topic

## **Ongoing Support**

Our writing groups also read novels together, which allows us to focus our attention on what other writers have done well and not so well; we critique books for things like pulling us in to the story or boring us with too many details. Throughout this process, learners become clearer on what they like and what they don't. I encourage them to steal a style that impresses them. Once in a while, it has been great fun for the group to openly steal ideas from each other after sharing drafts—as we know, there really is no greater compliment!

Regularly I emphasize the need to let go of the need to spell correctly for a first draft. Whenever I see it getting in the way of their flow, I remind them to just underline a word and come back to it later with a dictionary or the assistance of a tutor.

Sharing multiple drafts with classmates and tutors for editing ideas is modelled again and again in the program. We find it really useful to take a paragraph and develop it as a group to learn more about the process of being a writer.

Calling the learners “writers” has been a wonderful way to reinforce that I see them as talented artists.

An ongoing goal of the program is to provide a safe space for learners to be themselves. As new learners come to realize that they do not need to hide from the group, I find that their writing becomes more personal; they admire the intimacy of the pieces they hear from each other and take the risk of exposing parts of themselves in their writing. As they note what works in the writing of their peers and in the writing of authors they enjoy, they often choose to make their writing personal rather than without heart.

## **Celebrating the Work**

Learners are encouraged to share their finished products, often by standing to read to tutors and classmates, which is often a very touching process that we do not rush. I believe it is important for each learner to feel seen, be given space to share how they feel after presenting, and to hear from their audience.

We sometimes publish writing in booklets with authors' names listed on the cover, if they wish. Tutors recognize the significance of being published and let the learners know how delighted they are to have their work to keep. We make a big deal about entering and winning contests; winners of past contests are noted and their published work is shown to new participants. I believe learners see themselves as writers when they realize that other people view them as such. The contests have been wonderful for their self esteem and have definitely inspired greater time commitments to writing.