## Contents

**Acknowledgments**  
**Foreword**  
**Introduction**  

**PART I: Toward Writing Studies Classrooms**  
- Chapter 1: The Joys (and Torments) of Teaching and Writing  
- Chapter 2: Testing Despair and Teaching Hope  

**PART II: Key Concepts for Teaching and Writing**  
- Chapter 3: Reflection in Teaching and Writing  
- Chapter 4: Rhetorical Awareness in Teaching and Writing  
- Chapter 5: Community in Teaching and Writing  

**PART III: Toolboxes**  
- Chapter 6: Project Toolbox 1: Writing With Experience  
- Chapter 7: Project Toolbox 2: Writing With Texts  
- Chapter 8: Project Toolbox 3: Writing With Research  
- Chapter 9: A Writer’s Process Toolbox  
- Chapter 10: A Teacher’s Toolbox  

**References**  
**Index**
Chapter 1

The Joys (and Torments) of Teaching and Writing

*Learning to write is hard, and it takes a long time.*

—Steve North

In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard (1989) complains that too many writers fail to cover their tracks—fail, as she puts it, to “tie off the umbilical cord.” She asks, “Is it pertinent, is it courteous, for us to learn what it cost the writer personally?” (p. 7).

Maybe not. And yet, as writers, and even more so as writing teachers, we know what a powerful and instructive gift it is to be invited into another’s creative process, to understand—as Dillard herself helps us to understand in her book—how writing comes to be.

And so we begin—perhaps impertinently, discourteously—by uncovering our tracks, refusing to tie off the umbilical cord. We begin by telling you this: learning to write this book was hard, and it took a long time.

Of course, we should have known this; learning to write *anything* has always been hard work for us, and we regularly counsel our students to develop the patience and discipline this fickle art of writing requires. And yet, when it comes to writing, we are like the baby who is surprised *every time* that loved one reappears from behind her own hands.

Who knew that we would have to learn to write this book by . . . writing this book?

Among all the insights we share with our students about writing, this one seems particularly crucial: writing teaches writers how to write—and how not to write.
We think of ourselves as proficient writers. Certainly we have had lots of experience—and some success: each of us has published books and articles. And yet, with this project, we made nearly endless mistakes and false starts. We also had what seemed like more than our share of tough days, when the writing just wouldn’t come or when it felt like we were writing in circles.

In this way, writing is a lot like teaching. We’ve had plenty of tough teaching days, too. Some days seem like torture. We slog through our lessons, sure that nothing is sticking, certain that we’re not the teachers we could be—or half the teacher that hot-shot next door is on a bad day.

Just as our young writers need to learn patience with themselves, so too do we need to be patient with our teaching selves. And just as writers learn to write only by writing and reflecting on that writing, teachers learn to teach only by teaching and reflecting on that teaching. In both cases, there are no secret formulas or foolproof plans that will help us “arrive”; we are always becoming writers and teachers.

On bad days, this all seems awfully dispiriting; who would knowingly subject themselves to this kind of pain? But we get through the tough days because we know that if we keep working, keep thinking, the good days will come. We know that bad teaching and bad writing—when well reflected on—can lead to good teaching and good writing. And when those good days do come, they can be pure exhilaration. The victories might be small and infrequent, but they are joyful.

Joy is not a word we hear often these days to describe either writing or teaching. No one doubts the importance of these activities; we hear all the time that “highly qualified teachers” are the most important factor in helping children learn and that writing is a “gateway for success in academia, the new workplace, and the global economy, as well as for our collective success as a participatory democracy” (Nagin, 2003, p. 1; see also Graham & Perin’s Carnegie report Writing Next [2006] and the National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006). But despite widespread agreement that we must get better at writing and teaching writing, we don’t hear much about the
exquisite joys and torments they hold. In fact, few people talk about what it’s like to write and teach—how we experience these activities, how they feel.

This, we will argue, is a huge problem. Perhaps because ours is a get-it-done-yesterday culture, we seem to have lost touch with writing and teaching as verbs; instead, we focus all our energy on their noun forms. As a result, too few young people feel empowered to claim writing as an important part of their lives, particularly in school, and too few teachers feel empowered to claim teaching as their professional prerogative. There seems to be no room, and no time, to write and teach in ways that really matter.

There are reasons for this sad state of affairs, and we believe most of them have little to do with choices teachers and students make, despite the familiar rhetoric of “low expectations” in schools. We believe it is important to confront these reasons, and that is one of the aims of this book. But our ultimate aim—the one that kept us going through our toughest writing days—is to help you teach, and help your students write, in ways that matter.

**Having Something to Say**

What do we mean when we talk about teaching or writing that matters? More than a hundred years ago, John Dewey penned a line that we believe should be taped above every writer’s—and every teacher’s—desk: “There is all the difference in the world between having something to say and having to say something” (1956/1900, p. 67). Mattering in teaching and writing is all about having something to say—even if we do have to say something.

This was the all-important lesson that we had to relearn with this very project. There was a moment, on the long and winding road to this book, when we almost lost our way. We were initially working with a different editor and publisher

“There is all the difference in the world between having something to say and having to say something.”
— John Dewey
who were, understandably, extremely concerned about the “marketability” of the book. We felt pressure to “dumb down” the book, given the publisher’s disappointing assumptions about and estimation of teachers (our target audience) and what “they” want. We had been granted a contract based on our proposal for a book that tried new things—a more personal writing voice, an innovative structure, edgy writing assignments. So we were confused later when this seemed to be the opposite of what our editor wanted: a more conventional, more “mainstream” book.

As we fumbled our way toward a new version of the project—that is, as the project drifted further from our own vision of it—we noticed something at once interesting and terrifying: our writing became worse and worse. Those writing days truly were torture. We generated garbled sentences and grotesque paragraphs. Our arguments became tangled, our logic warped. Sometimes, our writing didn’t make sense even to us.

We liken this experience to situations we’ve faced as teachers when our expertise and commitment were neither valued nor welcome—situations, for example, where “outcomes” were handed to us without our input. When we do not have a stake in our own teaching, when our hard-won professional judgment is not honored, our teaching suffers. We lack confidence, we go through the motions, we become defensive, and in general, we behave in ways that violate our sense of our own professionalism. (Studies of teaching under high-stakes standardized testing bear this out; see, for example, McNeil, 2000).

Fortunately, our story has a happy ending. Though it took us longer than it should have, we finally realized that we could not write well if we did not believe in our project and if we did not believe that someone on the other side of the page actually wanted to hear what we had to say. We could not write well when we had to say something because we were under contract and not because we had something to say. Eventually, we found a new editor and a new publisher who shared our vision for the book. When this happened, we were able to recapture our initial excitement for this project. In turn, our writing improved—became more purposeful, meaningful, forceful, and clear.

Our experience bears out writing teacher Linda Brodkey’s reminders that “writing is not a spectator sport” and that “learning how to write follows from wanting to write”
(1996, p. 51, emphasis hers). And we would say the same about teaching. Effective teachers want to be in the classroom and believe they and their students have important things to say to one another and to others.

**Having to Say Something**

Unfortunately, in schools, teachers and students often feel stifled, as if they do not have a voice. Teachers are handed instructional scripts to read and told to “cover” curriculum at a predetermined pace. Students are told to produce writing on demand for the purpose of evaluation; they write, sure, but only as students, never as writers.

It’s true, of course, that we must grade and otherwise evaluate student writing. But the problem occurs when we place so much emphasis on this extrinsic reward (or punishment) and lose sight of the fact that we humans do our most creative and effective work when we are driven by an intrinsic motivation: a human need to investigate, to wonder, to imagine, to share, to teach, to persuade, to learn.

And it’s a serious problem, too, because as our own story of writing this book shows, extrinsic motivations often get in the way of intrinsic ones. In our case, an editor with an agenda and a looming contract deadline interfered with our ability to sustain our commitment to a project to which we had already given years of thought and care. It’s not hard to see, then, how our students might find it difficult to sustain interest in and commitment to their school work in the face of teachers’ and others’ agendas and grading systems.

The trick, it seems to us, is to create environments in which we nurture intrinsic motivation, even if all we have direct access to are extrinsic ones (we can’t