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Growing Writers, Readers and Listeners
by Angifi Dladla

As writing teachers we cannot ignore the fact that learning starts from home and the community, that the student comes from a culture and tradition, and most importantly, comes with inbuilt resources. And we definitely know that a child is naturally daring. We have seen an infant taking a risk on his own, getting a sound lesson from a candle flame. We have heard a toddler asking: "What is this? What is this?"

My grandson is poetic, he calls a dog a "hhom-hhom" and a motor car a "vrum-vrum". Every day children entertain us with stories about their experiences at the crèche. Recently a friend of mine told me about his four-year-old daughter he took on a visit somewhere. Back at home, the child told her mother: "Dad was with the auntie. They kissed each other. I love the auntie, she gave me sweets, cakes and ice cream. She called me 'Little Angel'. I love the auntie, she smells nice." Yes, children have stories to tell, and to teach us, even about the fairies.

As teachers in Femba Writing Project (FWP) we align ourselves with our students' backgrounds. In African communities, for example, we all know that a poem or a story is performance. The power of performing a story is described by Smith and Dale in Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature In Africa*: "It would need a combination of phonograph and kinematograph to produce a tale as it is told…every muscle of face and body spoke, a swift gesture often supplying the place of a whole sentence. The animals spoke each in its own tone: the deep rumbling voice of Momba, the ground hornbill, for example, contrasting vividly with the piping accents of Sulwe, the hare." This is drama at its finest!

It is worth noting that true storytellers do not bombard us, as happens at school, with theories and dogmas about characterisation, point of view, plot, flashback. They let us imbibe, by osmosis and imitation, the story, the craft and the unique way of seeing the world. Our main mission, therefore, is to create a balance between the page and performance.

Portrait of our Students

• Students are not potatoes in a bag, but individuals with unique personalities, unique life experiences, and therefore unique needs that cry for individual attention, real growth and development. Say, for example, a student has been influenced by the Zionist church, that is, an African independent church, where the bishop performs a sermon and excels in using the technique of repetition. The teacher may suggest to the student to imitate that sermon and add variation by using different wordings or synonyms.

• Each individual is an authority on his or her own story, but they are not aware of what they know, or they have forgotten it, or they just take it for granted that the reader knows. Our teacher, therefore, asks the student a relevant and practical question to release what is hidden deep within – even dramatic utterances. Say, for example, the student is my old professor. His story is about his childhood in Johannesburg.
He writes: "I ran and hollered and waved, but the bus left."
The teacher asks him, "What type of a bus? A minibus?"
"No, no, no," the professor protests, "there were no minibuses in those days. We used trams."

Portrait of our Writing Teachers

• An FWP teacher is a facilitator, mentor, guide and coach. I know some people are not comfortable with the word "coach". They picture a frustrated man at the stadium. I'm putting the word where it started from. The word "coach" was first used in the 19th century by university students in Britain to describe some academics who mentored them after class.

• An FWP teacher is not superior to his apprentices. He acts as an elder brother, with brotherly love, understanding and empathy – someone who has been wrestling for a long time with the literary art, and is still writing and learning through teaching.

• He builds on the inborn qualities of the students, especially curiosity, honesty, spontaneity and risk-taking as we have seen above with the little children.

• An FWP teacher is not rigid, dour and intimidating, he is funny and accessible, sometimes making himself vulnerable through his own stories.

• He listens attentively to the students telling their stories, also listening to their body language, and he reads their stories. He interprets exactly what the students want and need: each student subtly cries out for relevant, meaningful and useful interventions to apply on the spot, and learn for good, rather than nonsensical canons and their jargons. We are not alone with this pedagogy of sensitivity. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, captures this cogently: "Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your creative individuality alone must decide." Thus our teacher comes to the classroom without a textbook, without notes or a lesson plan.

Inspiring our Students to be Writers, Readers and Listeners

Our teacher is not a spectator and a dictator, he is seen in action – writing too. By the end of a three-hour lesson, they should all have written, including the teacher, three or four pieces each. He also encourages them to write often, even at home, rewriting what they wrote in class, and produce new work, about anything. In their diaries they should always record anything they have observed, heard, dreamed about, and not wait for the teacher's next writing lesson. This we learned when we taught in prison. Prisoners have ample time to write, so they write a lot, and consequently they develop faster – their grammar, spelling and punctuation improve tremendously, and they discover on their own that the best way to learn to write is through writing.

The teacher also advises them that after they have written a piece, they should reflect on their writing process. He provides them questions to guide them: "What prompted you to write the piece? That is, how did you discover the story idea? How did you gather the facts to write the piece with such confidence? Did you rehearse the piece in your head, that is, plan it mentally? What is the focus of the piece? Were you happy with your first draft? Problems you encountered in editing? Emotions you wanted to induce, your expectations? Do you feel you succeeded? Did you discover something you were not aware you know?" All this helps the teacher to get a handle on their writing and thinking processes.

He discusses with them a book he is reading, the books that have empowered him and the books he will buy. Once a month he teaches them at the public library and exposes them to different genres. For example, in the first month he prescribes samples of oral literature in their languages and asks them to translate from their languages into other African languages they know. They soon find it

easy to perform the traditional songs, poems and stories because our languages share linguistic characteristics, culture and philosophy.

Then the teacher gets them to read aloud and translate an English rhyme. They translate it word for word but fail to perform it, because they do not know the culture that produced the song:

> My dame is sick and gonne to bed
> and I'll go mould my cockle bread
> up with my heels and down with my head
> and this is the way to mould cockle bread.

In the following months the teacher introduces them to the best poems and short stories in their own languages; then South African poems and short stories in English, later on, poems and stories from across Africa, then Afro-American and Caribbean literature, then Latin America and so on. When they visit him at his place, they see him in action at his study – they see his library. They always ask: "Did you read all these?" This will somehow affect them to read, to think and act like writers!

It is natural and human to want to share your story. We have seen this above with the little kids. So from the first day in class, we don't plunge the learner into writing. We perform oral narratives: each tells a story! They see a teacher who listens attentively, even with his alert body. This gives them confidence and a sense of self-worth. As Black lives matter, so do students' stories. Eventually they all become active listeners themselves. Then we look at how to turn our oral narratives into written narratives. After we have written a piece, including the teacher, we all read it aloud and make comments. The teacher's reading is inspirational. They discover on their own that a piece designed to be written and read silently is boring when read aloud or performed. We find that they replace instinctively, there and then, a word or a sentence when reading a piece aloud, to bring more coherence, clarity, rhythm, musicality, immediacy. All this, including our constructive criticism, helps the student to rework his piece to suit both the page and the stage.

The teacher, as the elder brother, visits them around the room as they write, and asks questions like, "How is it going? Could you say in one sentence what is the story all about? Could you read the piece for me?" For example, if the student has used in her oral story a "swift gesture" such as that mentioned by Smith and Dale she could now turn it into description by writing something like:

> After Jerrie's buttock was quickly
> and severely bitten by a vicious animal,
> he staggered and fell.

"Suppose," the teacher would ask, "someone wants to turn your story into a film, how would you slow down the biting and the falling for the audience to experience that moment on the screen?"
"What do you mean? Slow motion is not for a writer, but for a film-maker."
"I mean, show it, dramatise that experience in detail, let the reader feel, see, hear."
After many trials or drafts the student will come up with something like:

> Deep into Jerrie's right buttock
> canines sank and twisted.
> Poor man, screaming, did a hilarious pirouette
> before wobbling drunkenly like a spent top,
> and on his gut he flopped as toys do.

The visit does not take even a minute. The teacher can now go to another student and introduce another device according to the need of the student: active voice, foreshadowing, and so on. Remember, our mission is to create a balance between the page and orality.

Going to the Unknown

Perhaps our visionary schoolteachers in the 60s and 70s were correct in giving us essay topics and titles like: "The Dutch East India Company was a Boon for the Africans", "The Day I Conquered Mt. Everest", "Die Stem van Suid Afrika", "An Hourglass", "I Am the Survivor of the Worst Avalanche in Europe" to stretch our creative muscles. This time we really take risks. We are going to write about what we do not know. Don't we have resources: television, libraries, internet? Don't we access information from our mobiles? That is when our imagination is being activated and the student will discover that the best writing teacher is no one else but himself or herself.

But still after he has written something stunning, he must not say, "I don't know how I wrote this, I suspect the gods have done me a favour." Nothing like that, because the teacher is going to ask them to trace their thinking and writing processes. That is how the professionals do things.

I once watched a jazz musician on a TV documentary. As he was playing a saxophone, he discovered a new note. He wanted to get how he discovered it. He kept on practising, and at a particular juncture found that after playing a certain note, there is this hidden note. So he kept on playing, retrieving it at will so that he could play it anytime he wanted. The same happened with Bruce Lee who was practising kung-fu kicks. He discovered a new kick. He did the same as the jazz musician. There is no magic or miracle about discovery. It is the outcome of perseverance, hard work, conviction and sticking to your goal. Writing about the unknown unleashes the full might of the mind even in sleep, and the universe will open doors.

Weeks ago a student writer from Thokoza challenged us to write a story or a poem about Boko Haram. Some of the questions asked were: "What is Boko Haram? What methods does it use to further its objectives? Why did they kidnap innocent girls?" As we were supposed to write stories and poems, not articles, tackling a topic of this magnitude, the teacher persuaded the students to take Richard Price's advice to Ralph Fletcher: "The bigger the issue, the smaller you write". We brainstormed small things we could write about: praise song of a Boko Haram's machine gun, the vest and the girl, ashes at the market, the making of a suicide bomber, a grump who died of grief.

The teacher asked everyone to co-write a story on this topic. They started by improvising a play. The teacher took the part of a girl. Others chose to be kidnappers, indoctrinators, the Nigerian president, parents of the girls, and so on. Suddenly, the teacher left the class. He came back carrying a doll wrapped with a towel on his back, another doll in his arms; the neighbours whom he got the props from, followed him, laughing. He, or rather she, kissed an imaginary Boko Haram man, and said: "Bye my love, till we meet again." Slowly she left him, but kept on looking back, sobbing. The idea was to introduce Stockholm Syndrome – loving your kidnapper deeply. That dictated the way the story should go. They gave themselves a task to read a lot about Boko Haram, and interview Nigerians in our area to get more information about Nigerian life and the Boko Haram. When they met again, they brainstormed the kidnapping, the life in the Sambisa forest, obstacles the girls faced if they tried to escape, and so on. Each writer thought hard so that his or her part should resonate with "loving your kidnapper deeply". They started to write. Then they pieced the story together the way chain writing is done. Later they brought coherence, and had to do a lot of massacring as the story was overpopulated. It ended with four characters – the girl's name became Chibok, and the title became "Till We Meet Again". The narrator was Chibok. Then they all wrote their individual stories and poems.

Going Public

Our programme is integrated into the community. This is also obvious in the way that the neighbours got involved in the improvisation. We organise the World Book Day in our community, perform at jazz clubs, at events such as Aids Awareness Day, Sharpeville Day, June 16, and Women's Month. Once a month we have a public reading attended by students, teachers, principals, friends, relatives, professional imbongis and storytellers, and other members of our community. We let our former students give talks on how the writing skills have helped them with their university studies. Those who are journalists give talks on how they inject in their stories a poetic buoyancy and immediacy to let a reader experience the story. This makes the parents understand that writing is not what they did at school, this is a life skill. Our first public reading was in Spruitview under garden umbrellas and trees. We had compiled our work, printed it and bound the A4 copies at a printing shop. Since then the community knows that at the end of each month on Saturday there is a public reading.

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