Establishing a Writing Workshop

In the old Hollywood movies, Mickey Rooney would turn to Judy Garland and exclaim, "Let's find an empty barn and put on a play!" In the spring of 1989, a communications director at St. Petersburg Junior College (SPJC) said, "Let's find an empty classroom and do some writing!" She found that empty classroom and put forth the call at SPJC to all writers and to all who were interested in writing.

The classroom did not remain empty for long; the response from faculty and staff was immediate and enthusiastic, and in March, 1989, the St. Petersburg Junior College Writers Group held its first meeting. Cake, cookies, and coffee helped dissipate the inevitable initial group awkwardness; soon would-be writers shyly revealed their literary ambitions.

Some faculty members saw the group as an ideal opportunity to critique papers before publication or group presentation. Some shared their poetic aspirations, while others confessed to dreams of completing gothic romance novels. A few, such as this writer, simply yearned to come out of the literary closet and actually present a finished product for either acceptance or rejection.

The monthly meetings that followed proved both exciting and challenging. The diversity of material was impressive. There were inspiring poetic readings; stimulating philosophical dissertations; excerpts from novels, operas, and plays in progress; and a memorable, poignant short story. Our theatre director held us spellbound with excerpts from his opera on the life of Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. A humanities instructor intrigued us with her novel, a fascinating tale of a private battle involving a mysterious malady and chemical "warfare." A young communications instructor not only presented his current play, but further enhanced the experience by inviting each member to select a character's part to read aloud. Another communications instructor touched us deeply, sharing her poems of personal struggles and triumphs as a young black woman. Our social and behavioral science director enabled us to flex our intellectual muscles with his philosophical paper, "The Intelligibility of 'Personal Extinction.'"

Occasionally, a guest speaker would attend, such as the published writer of two books, with a third in progress. A former St. Petersburg Junior College student, he provided valuable insights into the world of agents and publishing. He offered writing tips, such as a wonderful handout, "Twenty Rules for Good Writing," and motivated us with his story of frustration and despair—until his ultimate acceptance by a publisher. Currently negotiating to sell the film rights to his third novel, he and his success story elated and encouraged us.

As the months passed, it became evident that the group was strengthening itself as a unit, becoming more cohesive. It also became clear that the members were not only less timid in baring their literary souls but were, indeed, enriching and sustaining each other. Each had come to respect the other's literary genre: "serious" novelists no longer scoffed at gothic romance writers, and some discovered that poetry and philosophy were not that far apart. The group became more a sharing than a critical experience. And bonding us all was the unanimous acknowledgment that, whatever its form, *writing was work!*

Word spread, and soon the little literary group of faculty and staff was slowly enriched by students who also wished to write, share, and participate. The open door of the Writers Group welcomed all and grew in number and spirit.

As the literary and rhetorical attempts improved, so did the culinary efforts. Quiches replaced cookies, homemade tarts replaced store-bought pies, and crabmeat salad replaced tuna. Each month, faculty, staff, and students eagerly anticipated the next meeting, both for the food for the soul and the food for the body. In fact, the club has stimulated as much cooking talent as it has literary talent—as much literary companionship as literary criticism.

Suddenly, it was time for the last meeting of the school year—a surprise retirement party for a beloved faculty member. There were skits, recitations, and shared memories. We were now comfortable enough with each other to risk ridicule by performing such outrageous acts as the old vaudeville tune, "Mention

My Name in Sheboygan" (complete with straw hat and cane). Or, we could dare to be moved to tears, as with a loving story about boyhood memories of a beloved grandparent. We could also be surprised, as when our beautiful and professional French instructor delighted us with a whimsical poem dedicated to our retiree. We could also be comforted with memories from a faculty member who recalled her first tentative attempts at creativity. There was warmth and joy and sadness. There was friendship. And suddenly, there was also the realization of how important the meetings had become, of how much they enriched and sustained each of us through the personal and academic stresses of the year.

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It has been said that the function of an educational facility is not only to impart knowledge, but also to inspire, cultivate, and empower, so that individuals can go forth in the world and alter it for the better. It often appears, however, in the midst of papers and deadlines and bureaucratic mandates that the burdens placed upon educators are not only unrealistic but unreasonable, and that imagination and childlike dreams must be abandoned.

Not so at St. Petersburg Junior College. The Writers Group has provided an opportunity for all—faculty, staff, and students—to share their memories, their dreams, and their visions. The empty classroom has been filled with fellowship and writing talent.

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