NO MORE MASTERPIECES: A CASE OF PEER MODELLING IN *WRITING HISTORY*

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We reach the bench and sit. . . .

"You know that all flowers grow differently, and sometimes it is not wise to grow different flowers in the same garden." Dadi stares at a duck in the lake as she speaks. "Sometimes, two flowers are just so beautiful that one garden cannot quite take their combined beauty, and so it is best to separate them."

"But gardens with a lot of different flowers look prettier. Don't they, Dadi?"

"Yes, they do." She smiles at me. "But my story is about flowers that couldn't grow together, that wouldn't grow together. . . . Many, many years ago, Pakistan and India were one big country with an array of different people, but this story is not about that big country. This story is about the day that a line was drawn on that land." Dadi traces her finger on the bench and draws an imaginary line. "This is the story of 1947." (Moniz, 2013, Chapter 15)

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And so ends the first story in a collection of historical narratives about one woman's life during the partition of British India. A former student, Hira Hayee, wrote this collection in the upper-level "History and Writing" course I taught at the University of Toronto. In this piece, Hayee introduces us to her grandmother ("Dadi" in Urdu). Through a series of Dadi's letters, Hayee propels us back to 1947 to witness life during the Partition. Her collection embodies a commitment to good writing, solid research and honest storytelling.

Hayee's project appears in the third edition of the book *Writing History: A Collection by New Writers* alongside other models of research-based historical narratives. Each piece began as an assignment in "History and Writing" where students design a research and writing project and produce a portfolio of six original historical narratives built around a central historical theme of their choice. To research, students relied on primary sources and on methods such as interviews, oral history, observation and archival research. To write, students learned and applied principles of classic rhetoric as well as techniques to blend narrative and exposition.

To compile and edit *Writing History*, I engaged four senior undergraduate students who completed the course. Life Rattle Press, a non-profit, published the book in 2013, and it now serves as a teaching tool in the course. Inside its pages, 21 writers tell 52 stories about topics as diverse as women's golf, Residential Schools in Canada, cod fisheries in Newfoundland and Vincent van Gogh. The writing is focused, engaging, professional and powerful. Together, the stories demonstrate how writing turns information into history and new writers into historians.

And this leads to my teaching tip: *Use student writing to teach students to write.*

Why?

Since peer models are "collections of writing by other writers at their level," students can connect with and see their own potential within these models (Allen, 2008a, p. 91). Students see the theories, methods and techniques discussed in class come alive in the writing of peers who once sat in their same seats. In essence: It seems possible to write like *that*.

Jillian Lim, a former student in the "History and Writing" course (where I used a peer model-based text), notes: "I prefer reading and analyzing peer models because they always infuse my learning experience with more immediate relevance and more motivation than classic texts. The past work of students like myself seems to assure me: 'Here's everything [they] did, and everything [I] can do, too.' That assurance or guidance can feel incredibly comforting" (personal communication, May 7, 2015).

Writing intimidates, especially when we offer as primary models the "masterpieces" of revered classic or contemporary writers—the kind of elegant essays found in a classic nonfiction collection like the *Norton Reader* written by the likes of George Orwell, Mark Twain, Joan Didion and Martin Luther King Jr. (Allen, 2008a, p. 66; Peterson, Brereton, Bizup, Fernald, & Goldthwaite, 2011). For students, the "masterpieces" become the "real writing," which they then view as "unlike" their own writing (Allen, 2008a, p. 66). This results in student writing that "lack(s) authenticity" and a "sense of style that express(s) their personalities and experience" (Allen, 2008a, p. 66). As French Playwright, actor and theorist Antonin Artaud wrote:

> Past masterpieces are good for the past. They are not good for us. We have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a style that belongs to us, reacting in a direct, immediate way to present-day feelings everybody can understand. . . . Our adulation of what has already been done, however beautiful and valuable, paralyses us and keeps us from connecting with the underlying power in us. . . . (as in Allen, 2008a, p. 3)

In teaching writing, we need to create an environment that encourages students to uncover their "voice." Peer models demonstrate "originality, craft, a range of different voices and experiences, and freedom," and they enable students to learn within a community of writers (Allen, 2008a, p. 69). Guy Allen (2008a) observed the following about using peer models in his writing classes over time: "The more I put good models in front of my classes, the more quality writing I received" (p. 69).

Lim agrees. "Peer models set a standard for creativity," she says. "They inspire you to think outside the box, and they also challenge you in the best way possible. They are also much more fun and exciting to learn from because they feel closest to my own experience as a student writer, making it almost feel as if you're learning from a friend" (personal communication, May 7, 2015).

Other genres of writing can benefit from peer models. For example, *Make It New: Creative Nonfiction by New Writers for New Writers* gathers 72 short prose pieces by students who did not have substantial experience with prose (Allen, 2008b). Using peer models themselves, these new authors learned in an introductory Expressive Writing course, where they composed their stories, to write with economy, directness, detail and voice. Another text, *Magic Mushrooms, Redback Spiders and Lobotomies: Communicating Science*, collects 43 articles about scientific subjects by 18 new writers in the upper-level "Science and Writing" course where students learn to produce clear and engaging, research-based scientific writing (Allen, 2012). Like *Writing History,* both texts are now teaching tools in the respective writing courses they evolved from, and both serve as examples from past students to future students of what new writers can achieve.

And new writers can achieve a lot. So let's look to students—and not just "masterpieces"—as teachers too.

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