

## Some of What I Learned about College Writing I Learned in the First Grade (and Vice Versa)

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I walked into Ms. W.'s first-grade classroom, waved to my granddaughter Millie, and carefully lowered myself into a tiny kid-chair. Because Millie had recently transferred to a new school and could benefit, I figured, from my familiar face to help her make the transition, I was volunteering in her class once a week.

Ms. W. was wrapping up a discussion of a biography the class was reading about author Tomás Rivera's childhood—how his migrant-worker grandfather introduced him to the library and to stories. Wow, I thought, multicultural literature is sure an improvement over Dick, Jane, and Spot.

"Today, Carol, I'd like you to help Eddie write his problem-solution story," Ms. W. said, assigning me my morning mission. "He didn't get a chance to do his when the class did. He wants to write about Mario and Luigi. Eddie, why don't you take Carol to the library where it's quieter?" Then, hiding her mouth with a cupped hand, she whispered to me, "Eddie can be a real challenge. He is a reluctant writer."

"No problem," I whispered back. "In my writing center, we work with reluctant writers all the time." But having never played video games or paid them much attention when my sons were kids, I knew nothing about Mario and Luigi. I would indeed be an "ignorant" tutor. Plus, I had forgotten where the school library was, my sons having graduated from that same school over 25 years before. At least I was familiar, albeit at the college level, with Eddie's assignment—a problem-solution narrative. And because I had already played a sight-word Chutes and Ladders-type board game with Eddie, I knew he had a mind of his own (e.g., he "cheated" by moving his piece extra squares to land on a ladder) and a body that was extra squirmy and fidgety, probably the reason he couldn't focus on his story during class time. I

remembered him sprawling his torso across the game table, wiggling his lower legs and feet against his chair.

Eddie took me via the scenic route to the library. Eventually we arrived at a room that wasn't a library (i.e., no books) but coincidentally looked more like a writing center. Two other children were working with grown-ups, both pairs hunched over materials. Although I vetoed Eddie's choice of seats, an office chair that swiveled and moved up and down, he ignored me, proceeding to use the lever and wheels to diversify his squirming while I tried to direct his attention to his problem-solution story. I was eager to adjust my best questioning strategies to a seven-year old.

"So what is Mario's problem, Eddie?"

"He has to um, uh...rescue the princess."

"Why? Is the princess in trouble? Has she been captured by the bad guys?" I asked, pretending to know what I was talking about.

"Ah, I don't remember. Mmmm... I don't wanna to write about Mario. I wanna write about Luigi." Eddie erased "MARIO," ripping the top of his paper in the process and scratched "LUIGI" in its place.

"Oh, OK, so what is Luigi's problem?"

"He captured some ghosts."

"So how is that a problem? Are the ghosts bothering him? Does he want to let them go?" I asked, aware that I was suggesting both a problem and a solution. I didn't want to be too directive, but I did not want to return to Ms. W's classroom without a story either. We needed to get some words down on paper ASAP.

"I don't know. I forget. I have to ask Joe. He plays Mario Brothers, too." Joe was Eddie's classmate, another charming but squirmy kid who played video games at home and had "cheated" at that board game.

"But Joe isn't here right now. Hey, I've got an idea. How about we come up with a problem that YOU had and that YOU solved? For eeexaaam...ple," I drew it out before I actually had an example on hand; I was realizing that first-grade brainstorming might have to be less open-ended and more specific than it is in my writing center. "Have you ever lost anything?"

“No, never,” Eddie said firmly. He grabbed the lever and moved himself up and down as he swiveled left and right.

“Never? Are you sure? How about clothing that you left at school? Gloves? A hat? And please keep your hands off that chair handle.”

“I lost my raincoat.”

“Great! I mean not great that you lost your raincoat, but great that we have something to write about,” I exclaimed, conscious of using supportive “we” language recommended in college tutoring manuals. “Write that down.”

“Write what down?”

“That you lost your raincoat. Where did you lose it?”

“On the playground, on the cement.”

Painstakingly, letter by letter, as I reminded him to leave spaces between the words, Eddie managed to carve out: “I Last MY RancOt on the Plagrnd on the SaMent.” Writing is a slow process for adults, but with first graders, it proceeds at a glacial pace. Fortunately, Ms. W. accepts invented spelling, or her students would never put pencil to paper.

But as Eddie was eking out those words, the bell rang. The two other children got up and dashed out of the center, and Eddie sprung out of his chair after them. It was 10:00—time for the younger grades to go to recess. He did not want to be left behind.

“But Eddie, you can’t go yet. We need to write the solution. We only have the problem. Come back here!” I knew I sounded bossy, but darn it, we were going to finish that story. Eddie returned and reluctantly sat back down. “So what’s the solution? How did you find your raincoat?”

“I didn’t. It’s still lost.”

“You’re kidding! You never found it?” I was really panicking now. How would we solve this problem of no solution? Why hadn’t I asked him in the first place whether he had found his raincoat? What a tutoring gaffe—and after over 25 years directing and tutoring in a college writing center! Why did I not know by now how to ask the right kinds of questions at the right time? “So how did you solve the problem of getting wet in the rain? Did you use an umbrella?” I persisted.

“No, no umbrella.”

“A big hat to protect you from the rain?”

“No, no big hat.”

“Couldn’t we just pretend that you used an umbrella or big rain hat?”

“No, no, because it didn’t happen that way.”

I guess this kid is into telling the absolute truth in his non-fiction, I thought, ashamed of what was going to be my next desperate suggestion—to pretend that he found his raincoat in the lost and found.

I had no choice but to be totally directive. Time was running out. “How about you just end the story saying you decided it was OK to get wet? Then you can join your class for recess.”

“I Disayd It waZ OK to be WET,” Eddie slowly notched onto his page that was by now a wrinkled, ripped, barely readable mess.

“Good, Eddie! You got your problem and your solution. Let’s go put your story on Ms. W’s desk, and I’ll take you to the playground.” Mission accomplished.

Over the rest of the spring semester, as the first-graders slowly developed their motor skills, I improved as a tutor and avoided over-suggesting and putting words and ideas in the children’s mouths. I tutored two other writers, one who was responding to the prompt “What are you most proud of?” (running fast and riding a bicycle without training wheels) and another to “What makes you a good friend?” (helping other friends get up when they fall down on the playground and comforting them when they are sad).

Tutoring first-graders made me appreciate how far college writers have come in their writing (and how little they squirm). Working with Eddie and his classmates taught me about the miracle and hard work of writing development—on the part of the writers themselves and their teachers. In fact, Ms. W. is my hero for working five hours a day, five days a week teaching 22 first graders to read, write, and problem-solve. College writers also struggle to interpret assignments, adjust their writing to different disciplines and instructors, and like Eddie, choose and develop topics. Yet most college writing is relatively fluent, considering that all college writers began like Eddie, slowly eking out words to their stories in the first grade, their less developed motor skills making it laborious to record all the thoughts and words their quick and

able minds are generating.

Tutoring emergent writers just starting to express their thoughts on paper moved me in ways that working with college writers does not. Part of my reaction was connected to how the first-graders expressed their gratitude; when I received 22 different painstakingly handwritten thank-you notes from six- and seven-year olds, including Eddie, telling me why they enjoyed working with me, I was really eager to tutor writing again in the second grade.