

RECONSIDERATIONS: Donald Murray and the Pedagogy of Surprise

Bruce Ballenger

When Donald Murray died last winter at 82, I joined thousands of friends and colleagues who mourned the loss, many of us, no doubt, glancing sadly at our walls where we had pinned a yellowed strip of card stock that bore Horace's words, "*nulla dies sine linea*" (never a day without a line). Over the years, Don distributed these by the hundreds to his friends and former students. One of the luckiest accidents of my life was coming to the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in 1983 to pursue a graduate degree in nonfiction writing, where I found myself in Murray's writing workshop. I had never heard of him before. I was unaware of his stature as a pivotal figure in the writing process movement, or his Pulitzer Prize in editorial writing, or even his reputation as a great teacher and a kind, gentle man. I was young and had chosen UNH because it was near the ocean. I had come to learn to write well and learned instead to write badly, a far more useful lesson. It was the kind of thing that a working writer might teach, and I fear now that lessons such as these are diminished in a discipline that doesn't quite know what to do with people like Murray, compositionists who are more likely to call themselves writers than scholars.

Donald Murray's commitment to the idea that writing is daily practice and, especially, his forty years of scholarly contributions to the field reflected his belief that composition studies should focus on the "act of writing." In an afterward to a 1977 essay, "Our Students Will Write—If We Let Them," which was republished by the *North Carolina English Teacher* in 1993, Don wrote that he hoped that "research into how writers—student and professional—wrote would illuminate our understanding of this vital human act and that our teaching methods and curricula would be based on this new knowledge."

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This is not what has happened. Our discipline in the years since 1977 has increased its research into significant but peripheral issues, decreased its efforts to understand through research how writing is made and how writing is taught. We are a profession with a black hole in the center. We do not yet know how effective writing is made, and all theory and practice should grow from that understanding. (88)

Don's belief, back then, that there was a "black hole in the center" of the discipline reflected his concern that research and theory were leading scholars away from looking closely at what writers do when they compose. But I also wonder if this complaint didn't also arise from hurt feelings, something most of us rarely admit. Our published scholarship—or our textbooks—are reviewed by peers, and we expect to endure some criticism, and it is often helpful. The response to Don's work was similar. Once, in the late eighties, while sitting in his Jeep in the Durham Marketplace parking lot, I asked Don whether he was stung by the dismissive criticism of "expressivism" in general and his work in particular. He said he wasn't. Yet he began his 1993 afterword to "Our Students Will Write—If We Let Them" by confessing that he wished the piece "was better written." Then he added, "that's normal enough for a writer—but it is not normal to wish his writing was dated, yesterday's news, old fashioned, perhaps even what an article of mine was called in a recent journal rejection: 'quaint.' It is not. Not yet" (Murray 87).

I remember that journal rejection well because Don made me a copy of the rejection letter. In 1991, he submitted an essay, "Pushing the Edge," to two of the major journals in the discipline, one of which had requested the piece.¹ Both turned it down. This alone is hardly noteworthy. All of us, no matter what our scholarly status, endure rejections from good journals. But it was what the reviews of the piece said that speak not only to Don's personal contribution to composition studies, but to the larger critique he was making about the direction of the discipline. "Dear Professor Murray," wrote the editor of one journal. "This is a pleasant piece, very practical, and Murrayesque. But it doesn't make the sort of generalizations and theoretical moves we need."

Although at the time I shared Don's indignation at the term "Murrayesque," I see now that the essay Don submitted, "Pushing the Edge," *was* "Murrayesque." The essay made many of Don's familiar, writerly moves—the strong personal voice; the autobiographical digression; the mixing of genres with fragments of poetry, fiction and essay; and the practical lists. For example, if you want to teach students to "push the edge," Don wrote, "you need . . ."

- Quiet
- Obsessions
- Ignorance
- Failure
- Humor

The rejected essay was also “Murrayesque” in its emphasis on voice, on play, on writing fast enough to invite those “accidents of meaning” that lead to the pleasures of surprise. And there were no citations. Yes, I thought years later, Don’s essay was “Murrayesque,” but was it lacking in “the sort of generalizations and theoretical moves” that a leading composition journal expects from its submissions?

It was the rejection from the other journal, however, that apparently stung the most. A reviewer wrote, “The author’s intensely personal view of what constitutes good writing seems, well, a little quaint in the context of our more rhetorical view of writing which acknowledges many different kinds of excellence depending on purpose and audience rather than on certain aesthetic considerations.” In a handwritten note on the rejection letter, Don scribbled, “I like the word ‘quaint.’” Apparently, he also never forgot it.

Does all of this really matter? “Pushing the Edge” may or may not have been one of Murray’s better essays, and, by 1991, he had firmly established himself, along with Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Janet Emig, James Moffett, and others, as a central figure in the early development of composition studies as a discipline. A 1968 book, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, which continues to influence new generations of writing teachers, was one of the first books in the field that encouraged peer response and a method—one-on-one conferencing between instructor and student writer—that will always be associated with Murray’s early experiments in composition instruction at UNH.

Don’s published essays and talks on writing and teaching were also enormously influential. One of the most widely reprinted essays in anthologies on the teaching of writing continues to be Murray’s “The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference.” In that essay, he confesses that “there must be something wrong with a fifty-four-year-old man who is looking forward to his thirty-fifth conference of the day,” a sentiment that stunned even those most dedicated to the conference pedagogy (13). Murray’s approach was to have a conversation with student writers “as fellow writers,” to not just “teach the writing process,” but to “follow it” in his writing conferences as he listens to students tell him what they’ve done and what they need to do (17). When I began teaching composition at UNH, we scheduled conferences with every student *every week*, and, while the method was exhausting, it could also be exhilarating. It is in such a conference, Murray maintained, that an instructor can glimpse the promise of a draft that is not yet written. “Of course, what my students are doing if they’ve learned how to ask the right questions,” Murray wrote, “is write oral rehearsal drafts in conference. They tell me what they are going to write in the next draft, and they hear their own voices telling me. [. . .] I listen and they learn” (16).

A Writer Teaches Writing, as the title implies, encouraged instructors to imagine themselves not at the lectern, but on the other side of the work bench with their

students. While it may not be “quaint,” this idea is hardly revolutionary, but, when Don and a few others urged writing teachers to reimagine their classrooms as places where authority is dispersed, they were doing it against the orthodoxy of current-traditional pedagogies, which emphasize the more formal qualities of composition that the teachers know and the students must learn. For Murray, writers always learn from each other. This idea was most powerfully expressed in Don’s 1972 essay, “Teach Writing as a Process, Not Product,” first presented as a talk to the New England Association of Teachers of English.

This brief essay provided the writing process movement its manifesto. Other scholars, particularly Janet Emig and James Britton, were headed in a similar direction, but “Teach Writing as a Process, Not Product” was an early and eloquent appeal for writing teachers to abandon the overriding concern about whether writing is “correct or incorrect.” Instead, Murray wrote, we must teach “the process of discovery through language” (4). The conditions that make this possible begin with the writing teacher simply “shutting up.”

When you are talking [the student] isn’t writing. And you don’t learn a process by talking about it but by doing it. Next [. . .] plac[e] the opportunity for discovery in your student’s hands. When you give him an assignment you tell him what to say and how to say it, and thereby cheat your student of the opportunity to learn the process of discovery we call writing. To be a teacher of a process such as this takes qualities too few of us have, but which most of us can develop. We have to be quiet, to listen, to respond. We are not the initiator or the motivator; we are the reader, the recipient. (5)

The idea that language generates thought, and that student writers need not always know what they want to say before they say it, was at the heart of the “write to learn” pedagogies that are now commonplace in the composition classroom. But, in 1972, this idea had currency mostly in literary circles, phrased most famously by E. M. Forster’s aphorism “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” With its focus on students rather than instructors as the agents of their own learning, writing as a “process of discovery” was also a direct challenge to the dominant current-traditional approaches.

For Donald Murray, “expecting the unexpected” was always the point of writing, and the first question he often asked his students about a draft was a simple one: “What surprised you?” Murray believed that “cultivating surprise” was the purpose of the writing process and the motive that kept all writers—students or professionals—returning to the work with eagerness and anticipation. “The writer sits down intending to say one thing, and hears the writing say something more, or less, or completely different,” Don wrote in *A Writer Teaches Writing*. “The writing surprises, instructs, receives, questions, tells its own story, and the writer becomes the reader wondering what will happen next” (7).

This was the insight of a working writer, and he wasn't the first working writer to have it. But Murray's insistence that composition students should enjoy the pleasures of writing that seem reserved for published authors was extraordinary at a time when most first-year writing classes were concerned with teaching the modes of discourse—narration, description, exposition, and argument—and focusing attention on correctness. In most composition classes, student writers surrendered control of their purposes for writing to their teachers—who told them what to write and how to write it. In Murray's classes, writing became a drama in which the accidents of thought that might occur in the act of composing became the motive to write in the first place.

For me, this was a welcome revelation, and it came most forcefully when Don handed me a copy of a speech that he was to deliver to the Second Miami Conference on Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing in October of 1983. At first, Don couldn't believe they were serious about inviting him. "I thought the invitation was a joke," he said. "Somebody was impersonating Don Daiker (the conference chairperson) inviting me to a meeting of sentence combiners, a rabbi invited to a Nazi rally. But I called back. We want you because you are not a true believer. [. . .] Of course I would address the rally" (Murray, "Writing Badly"). In thirteen single-spaced pages, Don dared to "write badly" in public. His talk sounded as if it was composed on the fly—"writing writing, writing in the act of writing, not writing written but lines searching for meaning," Don said. It was an extraordinary performance, particularly when it became clear that Don was much less interested in correctness than moments when the "syntax often breaks down," when meaning is unexpectedly "unleashed" from what might be considered a bad sentence, a line that Don called "meaning-full."

Of course, Murray had as little patience with poorly written prose as any English teacher. But Don's celebration of "bad writing" was consistent with his advocacy of writing processes that make discovery their aim and surprise a writer's main motive. Until I read his talk, "Writing Badly to Write Well: Searching for the Instructive Line," it had never occurred to me that there was another way to think of writing than muscling language into conformity with what I already thought. It was this single insight that changed me more as a writer—and as a writing teacher—than anything I've learned. Although write-to-learn pedagogies are now familiar, the generative power of "writing badly" continues to be a powerful insight for student writers as well. Among other things, it has made the assignment of journals, which are often an ideal site for bad writing, much more relevant and useful, and, because writing badly requires much less time, it is possible for student writers—many of whom struggle with time to write—much more likely to get some writing done.

Don worried, I think, that this was exactly the kind of knowledge that might be lost in the "black hole in the center" of the emerging discipline of composition

studies. Would there still be a role for writers such as Murray whose method of inquiry is to witness themselves and their students in the act of writing and report what they see? Should there be? In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987), Stephen North observed that “practice as inquiry” was an increasingly marginalized form of scholarship in the discipline, and Don seemed to think, particularly after the rejection of his essay “Pushing the Edge,” that his influence was waning. Creative writers in academia always have an alternative to publishing scholarship, and, in the final fifteen years of his life, Murray focused on personal essays, publishing a weekly column in *The Boston Globe*. He continued to publish new editions of his textbooks, including *Write to Learn*, *The Craft of Revision*, and *A Writer Teaches Writing*, but he rarely attended conferences, and few new essays graced the pages of leading journals in the field. There are, of course, a number of active scholars in composition studies who are also creative writers, people who bring insights from their work as poets, novelists, or essayists to their academic research. But I’m afraid that Murray’s “black hole” might be a permanent one.

In a sense, perhaps this isn’t such a bad thing. The professional writer isn’t always the best study subject for theorizing about the composing processes of composition students, most of whom are inexperienced and relatively unmotivated writers in a required course. Yet unlike other forms of knowledge making, as North points out, practitioner knowledge arises from unexpected problems encountered when the usual practical routines fail (37). Because writing, for professional and student alike, involves developing new habits in response to new situations, Murray’s reports on his own and his students’ composing experiences were invaluable research, made more so by his willingness to be vulnerable. His were very personal reports, to be sure. But the power of his method may transcend Murray and be located in the personal essay itself and, especially, in what the genre demands of writers—to be carried on their shoulders through busy crossroads of thought, dodging and weaving through a swarm of voices, entertaining both wonder and doubt. While the slender “I” may be a narrow gap to look through, the essay rides on the assumption that there is much for us to learn from the peculiarities of one writer’s experience. Murray’s work was a part of this tradition—a fine part—but as long as our journals continue to publish personal essays, this kind of work might continue.

Don never stopped being a student of the writing process, and, although he was a master writer, he stumbled like the rest of us. One notable example was Carol Berkenkotter’s case study of Murray published in the May 1983 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. The project involved Don talking into a tape recorder for two months as he went about his usual writing activities, an effort that produced over 120 hours of commentary on Murray’s writing process. Berkenkotter also visited Murray for two days and observed him at work at home. But it was a one-hour writing assignment, administered in a closed room at Berkenkotter’s university, that

Murray later said reminded him of the panic he felt in combat in World War II. The assignment was the kind we might give a composition class: “Explain the concept of death to the ten- to twelve-year-old readers of *Jack and Jill Magazine*” (159). Murray could not write. He later admitted that he was paralyzed by “a desperate desire to please.” The experience reminded him “of that laboratory experiment where subjects would push a button to cause pain to other people. I would have blown up Manhattan to get out of that room.” After an hour, Murray squeezed out just a few words: “*Dear 11 year old. You’re going to die. Sorry. Be seeing you. P. Muglump, Local Funeral Director*” (169).

Don’s performance anxiety that afternoon was an interesting phenomenon, but his admission that he experienced it was even more powerful. The professional writer can feel the same terror as a novice, and, knowing this, we can better accept our own struggles with words. I think it’s easy to underestimate what a gift this is; ultimately, Don’s contribution to composition studies rests on the humanity of his work.

In the spring of 1983, Don’s graduate seminar met at his home, and, while Minnie Mae baked cookies for us in the kitchen, his students reported on their experiments in creativity. We were all charged with spending the semester involved in some creativity activity, and exploring through writing how the process of learning that activity—painting, photography, music composition, piano—might be compared to the writing process. Every week, we wrote response essays. And, in his usual fashion, so did Don, who had chosen sketching as his creative activity. Don’s essays that semester were, like ours, often rushed and fragmentary, and they were always inspiring models of his belief that, when writing defies intention, a writer is really getting somewhere. “There is always magic in this for me,” he wrote in one of his last responses that spring, “because I do not know what I am going to say until it is said.”

The writer within is always a stranger, with a grin, a top hat and long, quick fingers which produce what was not there a moment before. I shall never know this magic man well, although he has been within me for sixty years. He entices me with his capacity to surprise. We’ve been a pretty good team, all told, the surpiser and the surprised. (“Importance of Making Snow”)

They have been a pretty good team, those two, and, although the departure of Donald Murray is a loss for the field and a very sad time for his friends and admirers, thanks to Don, “the surpiser” continues to work his magic with our composition students, tricking them into chasing their own words, following the scent trails of meaning that may lead them to what they didn’t know they knew. There is great power in this, and, for those of us who want to pass along the pleasures of writing, especially to those who only see it as a chore, Murray’s curriculum is quite simple: “a full pen, empty paper, an empty room, and time. To do what? To do whatever”

(Murray, “Talking to Myself”). Many of us will never be completely alone in that empty room. Don will be there, urging us on, reminding us of the pleasures of intention gone awry.

NOTES

1. The essay was later published in the spring 1994 issue of the journal *Writing on the Edge*.

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