

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY 2

Becoming a Better Teacher
of Authentic Writing

Ken Lindblom



Leita Christenbury

FROM THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE

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Foreword

There is nothing like life in the classroom.

What a gift it is to spend our days in the classroom with students. Anyone who has worked alongside students knows what an exciting journey teaching is. But it is also a journey that includes difficult times as well. Staying grounded and energized is sometimes a challenge for veteran teachers.

As Ken and Leila say in the introduction to this new book, “There is no more challenging a job than ours. There is also no job more important.” For those of us who are veteran teachers, we know how true this is. The journey of a teacher is a lifelong journey. We learn quickly that this job is about always learning, always growing, always reflecting. As a classroom teacher for more than thirty years, my journey continues each day.

I know this to be true: the key to sustaining joy is in the authenticity we bring to the classroom. In these challenging times, we have to work to be more intentional about making sure our work with students is authentic.

Continuing the Journey 2: Becoming a Better Teacher of Authentic Writing is all about authenticity. Leila and Ken take us on another journey in which we think about ways to stay current and authentic when it comes to writing instruction.

Let’s face it, writing instruction is always changing. There are new tools, new ways to share, new and better ways to connect to other writers. But the things we know about teaching writing help us to remain grounded with all of these changes.

Leila and Ken help us to see the power in staying current as well as the importance in staying grounded in our beliefs. They know that those two things create writing classrooms where teachers—who are writers themselves—continue to be energized and passionate, and students find joy and purpose in writing in direct reflection of their teachers.

This lens of authenticity threads through this entire book. Not only is authentic writing important, but Leila and Ken know the power of authentic relationships with students. They know that learning from and with other teachers is essential to each teaching journey. In this new book, we come to know several teachers in the Teachers' Lounge—a feature that runs through the book, highlighting the voices of classroom teachers and their own experiences.

NCTE is lucky to have Ken and Leila as leaders, and I feel lucky to have them as mentors on this teaching journey. May the thinking in this book, and present in each teacher voice contained in the pages, enrich you in the same ways it does me.

Franki Sibberson, President
National Council of Teachers of English

The Power of Teaching Authentic Writing

Holden Caulfield, the main character in J. D. Salinger’s classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, is obsessed, as many young people are, with being honest, with being authentic. He hates the fake, the façade, what he calls the *phony*. For Holden, the adults who surround him are the phonies, and he is determined not to be one of them. He prides himself on having what he calls a *bullshit detector*, and for decades the readers of *Catcher in the Rye*—especially adolescents—have loved Holden for that.

With the armor of age, the perspective of the years, we can chuckle a bit at Holden, at his youthful intransigence, at his assurance that he is morally right, at his occasional extremism. But in our classrooms, Holden lives and walks among us, and even today he has much to teach us.

For us, Ken and Leila, no matter how many years have passed since we have taught full-time in a secondary classroom, a great number of the students we know share Holden’s obsession. In our daily teaching, our students live with us, and we are adults who are close to them every day. As they work with us, they observe us, judge us, and, along the way, often want to know what truly motivates us. They don’t want us to give them the party line, the official version, the sanitized story; they want the real deal. To be real, to be honest, to be *authentic*, is a mandatory quality for an effective teacher, and when we teach the Holdens in our schools, we must be mindful of these basic requirements. Our students demand it. And, truth be told, we should, every day, demand it of ourselves.

If we are inauthentic, we find ourselves justifying ill-conceived school rules, traditional courses of study, or other questionable aspects of school and adult life with specious and even laughably half-hearted comments: *You'll thank me after graduation; You'll need this in later life; It's how we've always done this; Don't ask questions; It's just how it is;* or, the worst (we think): *Because I said so.* Aspects of some of these comments may be true, but the fact is they are also evasions and false contentions even at that.

To hew to the essential and the right, to teach with the sincere knowledge that what we are doing with our students and in our classrooms is truly useful and central and defensible, is to teach authentically. As veteran teachers, we are charged with putting that authenticity center stage; if at one time in our careers we were fearful or hesitant and we always enforced the rules, no matter what we thought of them, now is the time to shed those insecurities.

In the English classroom in particular there is a unique opportunity to enact authenticity in writing. This skill and area of study is essential to education and, indeed, to success in later life, but only if what we teach realistically reflects the world beyond school. Spending time with our students crafting accurate and effective arguments, using precise and targeted vocabulary, and shifting our discourse to meet specific audiences and purposes is central to our work with our students and central to what the world beyond school expects of them.

And so we want to make clear at the outset that this book revolves around authenticity and how it guides and shapes the real-world teaching of writing and language. We also know you will find yourself in these pages, and we are excited to be with you on this continuing journey.

Our deep belief is that veteran teachers should be beacons of authenticity, and in this book we explore why and how. As one of our colleague reviewers, Darren Crovitz, noted:

Most of the writing students do in conventional classrooms is inauthentic; redesigning curricula and pedagogy around the principle of authenticity means questioning a variety of common assumptions and reshaping the writing classroom in fundamental ways. In particular, authenticity presumes a different kind of teaching and student persona that challenges us to teach writing through

community building, shared struggle over time, honest discussions of craft and quality, and a constant focus on real-world audiences and publication.

We could not have said it any better.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH WRITING AS A VETERAN ENGLISH TEACHER?

If indeed you would see yourself as an avatar of authenticity, consider whether the following paragraph describes you and your teaching.

No longer afraid of grade challenges or overbearing administrators, you are comfortable in your classroom. The students respect your authority, and they generally do what you tell them. You have a few years of lesson plans to fall back on, and you don't have trouble taking some risks here and there. You're a veteran. You've arrived. Time to relax into your teaching style and ride the back-and-forths of the education pendulum each year till summer break and then into a well-earned early retirement.

Chances are you're already calling *baloney* on the preceding paragraph, confirming that your own version of Holden's bullshit detector still works. No, we do not believe that you are one to rest on your laurels and coast on your confidence. Still, it's easy for veteran teachers to let a few years' experience settle them into complacency, and if you add to that the current political turmoil affecting almost all aspects of public and national education, one can understand the desire for a head-in-the-sand approach to almost all educational issues.

So is there a downside to being an assured veteran? It may well be that feeling too comfortable is not a positive but a danger, as teacher and blogger Tom Rademacher says: "There's no better sign that things are going poorly in a room than a teacher who always thinks everything is going just fine" ("My Name" n.p.).

We trust this is not you. Good veteran teachers know that each year brings new students for whom we may be their best hope for a successful future. Young people's literacy development is too important for us to simply forge ahead regardless of the complexities of this year's cohort of students. So yes, once we as teachers have reached a certain level of comfort and security in the classroom, it's actually our responsibility to challenge ourselves, to learn and undertake best practices in teaching even if—especially if—those best prac-

tices are misunderstood by the general public and discouraged by administrators, parents, education reformers, other teachers, and even our students. In short, we no longer have our inexperience and insecurity to fall back on as an excuse—or, truly, as a defensible reason—for playing it safe. Teaching English well as a veteran teacher is inherently risky work.

In the first volume of the *Continuing the Journey* series, we took on advanced approaches to teaching literature and informational texts (Christenbury and Lindblom, *Continuing*). We explored ways of bringing to students highly complex texts that raise the bar on their effort. We examined how real-world texts can engage reluctant students in literature. We looked at ways that informational text can enhance literature and stand on its own. We suggested methods for treating social media as a medium and content for English classes. And we explored the risks involved in teaching contemporary texts and the rough and unforgiving world of social and political discourse. In this book, the second leg of our continuing journey, we focus on writing, a subject that when taught well can be every bit as controversial as an adult-themed novel. We won't be shy about what research has taught us about writing, concepts deeply rooted in personal identity and real-world experience, and why we must teach them accurately, effectively, and fearlessly.

As in the previous volume, we'll make frequent stops in our ideal Teachers' Lounge, where we'll encounter highly experienced colleagues and well-known authors in English teaching. Their advice will help illustrate and in some cases challenge what we, Ken and Leila, have to say. We trust you'll find this journey supportive, encouraging, and (re)invigorating, and that it will inspire you to more authentic teaching of writing.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH WRITING AUTHENTICALLY?



WHEN I FIRST STARTED *teaching high school English, I was assigned a senior class called College Writing Skills. I had not been taught anything about how to teach writing, a common situation way back when I earned teacher certification. I found a text in the*

bookroom—remember searching through bookrooms?!—that I thought might do the trick. The book included several essays in which the identified topic sentence of each paragraph was removed, and that sentence, along with three other less suitable choices, was listed in a multiple-choice quiz at the end of each essay. There were ten essays, which meant I could assign two essays per class, which meant a whole week of lesson plans was all set and done. It was an amazing week, and all the students were thrilled. By the end, they all knew how to write the best topic sentences ever!

Nope. Not even close.

This class was so boring that the students got understandably hostile the second day I handed those books out. Already nervous with seniors, I capitulated quickly—I was so young looking that the high school principal had to bring me on stage during a faculty meeting to keep my new colleagues from yelling at me in the hallway! I don't recall what I did next, but I know that poor first group of students never got a decent day of writing instruction from me.

What Ken just described is distinctly NOT authentic writing instruction. First, he defined writing using an artificial construct that doesn't really exist outside a language laboratory: "topic sentence." Second, the students were required to use writing that came from an outdated, not very interesting workbook. Third, the students were not asked to do anything meaningful with the writing; in fact, they weren't even writing—in a class about learning to write! Although Ken later learned a lot more about teaching writing well, you as a veteran English teacher won't be shocked to learn that all of his formal teaching observations that first year (which he got to arrange and select, not to mention plan ahead for) were focused on literature lessons.

Authentic writing is real writing, written for a real audience, for a real purpose, in a real forum. For example:

- ▶ A letter to an editor for a specific newspaper, written by a student about an issue she or he cares about
- ▶ A presentation to the board of education written and presented by a group of students to argue for funds for an art club, to petition the principal to sponsor an LGBT night, or to request funds from a local sporting goods store to start a hunting club
- ▶ A class blog about school issues written and read by students, teachers, and administrators

But *teaching* authentic writing means more than coming up with interesting assignments. It means creating a writing community. Leila explains:



I THINK IT CAN *be easy to talk about authenticity and being honest with students but, for me, at least, it has been a learned skill and not one that has come readily. What could I tell my students about writing that was genuine? Not much, because I felt for many years that I needed to keep my private struggles to myself. Early in my career, I did not want my students to know that my own writing history was a checkered one. I wanted so to succeed, but as a student I struggled throughout almost all my school years—my poetry was lame, my short fiction was plotless, and as I worked on essays and research papers, I found that using elevated diction and vocabulary could mask my lack of structure and argument. I almost lost all confidence my last semester of college when my honors thesis crashed on the rocks and I feared I would*

never complete it. Luckily, I did, but the final writing was forced, stilted, and did not reflect at all what I thought I had wanted to say.

But I kept at it, and when in graduate school I had to write every week and meet multiple deadlines, something broke open. I found I could write, and write well and quickly. And so when I read in the professional literature about the power of writing with your students, I was, for once, all in. The formats changed with the times, but the classroom writing did not: on the board (using chalk), on the overhead (using acetate and a marker), on the document camera (using paper and pen), on the computer (projected on a whiteboard), I wrote my drafts in class, in real time, where students could watch as I composed. I then read what I had written aloud and briefly discussed my writing choices and goofs and bloopers.

This was one of the best things I ever did in my teaching of writing. Writing a first draft with students was beyond powerful; students noticed, and while they didn't praise my work—it was truly first draft stuff, and there was no reason to pretend otherwise—the feeling of a shared enterprise was demonstrated convincingly. Without preaching, without lecturing, without posturing, it was clear that I, the teacher, was a writer with my students. The sense of a community as I wrote with them established the writing class atmosphere and gave my teaching of writing the authenticity I knew was necessary.

Our colleague and veteran English teacher Deborah Dean agrees: it's really about getting students to see themselves as writers. Wouldn't it be great to hear from Dean in her own words? We're in luck. The author of the well-received *Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom* (2nd ed.), *Genre Theory: Teaching, Writing, and Being*, and other popular titles has time right now to chat with us in our ideal Teachers' Lounge.

FROM THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE

***Make Students the Focus of Authenticity***

Deborah Dean

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

As an early career teacher, I thought the only interpretation of teaching writing authentically was to have students send writing to audiences outside the classroom. I had my students write letters of compliment or complaint that they sent to businesses. They wrote letters to the editor of the local newspaper and saw themselves in print. As successful as those experiences were, the practice was hard to do: it was difficult to find authentic audiences, and I wasn't sure students saw themselves as writers from these limited experiences.



Last summer I found a list that my second-grade granddaughter left behind after her family took a very early morning flight. The list was titled "List to go to Arazona [sic]" and had these items in a column: "put PJs in suitcase, get dressed, eat toast, brush hair in car to airport, get on plane, read, draw, play, read, draw, play, read, draw, play."

To me, this example exemplifies the goal I eventually developed for my students. Authentic writing instruction isn't only about finding audiences beyond me or their classmates; it's about developing writers who see themselves as writers who use writing for real purposes in their lives. I needed to make students the focus of authenticity.

To teach writing toward that goal means, first, that students don't see writing in my class as simply completing assignments. It means that the genres we write in class exist in the world outside of school. It means giving students room to make some choices in their writing: in the topics, genres, processes, and language options they use. It means they should

have personal goals they are working to improve, not just learning outcomes determined by me, the district, or the state. In all, authentic writing in school means that students get to make some choices and use writing to do things—not only to show what they know or know how to do.

Teaching writing authentically also means that students see me using writing in meaningful and purposeful ways, with all the messiness and struggle that entails. I share my writing successes and failures. Students see me writing in my writer’s notebook, revising and publishing, trying the same tasks I ask them to consider. Sometimes I bring a piece I am having trouble with and ask what they think I should do. I write in front of them, taking risks, and they see me doing it.

When I teach writing authentically, I know that sometimes students’ writing will not be as successful as it could have been had I made more of the choices for them. Becoming a writer is mostly a messy process, full of stops and starts, risks that succeed and ones that don’t. To me, though, teaching writing authentically is more about my students’ development as writers than the success of a particular piece of writing or the score on a standardized writing test. If my students see writing as purposeful in their lives and see themselves as writers, like my granddaughter, then I feel that I’ve succeeded in teaching writing authentically.

ENHANCING AUTHENTIC INSTRUCTION IN WRITING AND LANGUAGE

Here are some ways we have enhanced our own writing instruction to be more authentic, to help students engage more in their own development as writers, which includes, of course, also expanding their exposure to language:

Writing

- ▶ Use authentic processes and authentic topics

- ▶ Write yourself
- ▶ Write in front of your students
- ▶ Use peer groups for revision
- ▶ Bring internet and social media writing into class

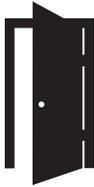
Language

- ▶ Bring internet and social media terms into class
- ▶ Acknowledge and work with the changes in language formality and acceptability
- ▶ Explore new words

Teaching language authentically is similar to teaching writing authentically. Instead of focusing solely on standardized English, an authentic language classroom focuses on language as it is actually used in varieties of contexts. Authentic language includes standardized English and the many other forms of English Language (see Chapter 8 for an explanation of our preference for this term) that function in the real world. Authentic language *contrasts* versions of English rather than *corrects* them (Wheeler). Students in classes that treat language authentically learn to use language to suit their own purposes in a range of real-world contexts.

Teachers who focus on authenticity do not try to break each student down and then remake him or her in a single image. They add to each student's language background so that students can function effectively in any social context in which they choose to be successful.

We're inspired by veteran teachers who find new ways to incorporate authentic writing into their classes. Let's take another trip to our Teachers' Lounge, where Nicole Sieben is waiting to tell us about how she uses authentic writing instruction to engage students in thinking and writing that encourages hope and empowers their future. In her recently published *Writing Hope Strategies for Writing Success in Secondary Schools: A Strengths-Based Approach to Teaching Writing*, Nicole outlines what she calls a Writing Hope Framework that underpins the concepts she describes here.



FROM THE TEACHERS' LOUNGE

Encouraging Hope with Writing Instruction

Nicole Sieben

SUNY College at Old Westbury, Old Westbury, New York

When we give students the space to write from a place of authenticity, we give them opportunities to build hope into their personal and professional narratives. Along with this increase in hope levels, writing competencies increase as well.



Allowing space in our classrooms for our students' own linguistic conventions and expressions sends a message of care to our students about how we value them as people with empowered voices in our classrooms and communities. If we force on students linguistic conventions that are teacher imposed, we do not give them the chance to express their individual goals and writing styles, inadvertently stunting students' hope-growth potential. Conversely, student-selected goals and discourses can magnify their hope-growth exponentially and can also tell us a great deal about how our students identify as writers and learners in the world.

Among those strengths-based discourses in education today is an empowering discourse of hope that can be woven into classroom conversations about authentic writing and being in the world. "Writing hope" is a vehicle for linguistic freedom, identity formation and exploration, and personal empowerment. It helps students (and all of us, really) to choose the pathways to self-defined success and propels writers forward in meaningful ways. With all of its intrinsic value, it's no wonder that writing-hope levels predict students' writing competency levels as well. When we place value on the things that really matter to our students—their goals, their voices, their cultures, their opinions, their audiences—we

incite the use of those values in our classroom spaces, and we make room for student success to manifest in a variety of ways.

Encouraging our students to find, build, and maintain hope while writing shows them we are invested in their personal goals for the future and will support them in getting there. When we engage students in a practice of “nexting,” in which we ask them to anticipate next steps, next challenges to overcome, next pathways, next successes, and next goals, we encourage a “future-casting” process that advances students in their writing in ways that are authentically powerful for each writer.

In my classroom, writing hope is omnipresent in our discourse community because it invites variety in writing process approaches, goal creation, and self-expression. Writing hope does not privilege one linguistic writing style over another; instead, it allows for a multitude of voices to be empowered within an equitably oriented system aimed at future goal pursuit for all students. Collectively, my students and I commit to recognizing hope in our work together, and we capitalize on hope moments for and with one another by celebrating the unique voices that contribute great value to our community of writers.

For example, in one of my composition courses, Women’s Voices, I include an artifactual expository assignment in which students are invited to weave together two distinct linguistic styles authentic to their writing lives in order to describe an artifact of their identities/cultures/histories that carries strong meaning for them. In an assignment that includes intentional code-meshing (using more than one style of discourse in the same communication), students’ writing illuminates the beauty of embracing multiple facets of one voice and/or many voices.

As a partner in writing hope alongside my students, I share a consistent commitment to future-casting with the writers I have the humbling honor of working with throughout our time together.

CONCLUSION: TEACHING FOR AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

Drafting this introductory chapter sometime in spring 2018, we can't help but acknowledge and note that the strong voices of young people, in particular high school students, are newly important and significant to our culture. Some sixty years ago, young people (as well as adults) gathered in large groups and, in boisterous and loud voices, demanded justice, social change, and the end of an unpopular war. Today, sparked by the continuous and seemingly unstoppable incidents of gun violence enacted in schools, young people—and their language, their tweets, their presentations in front of banks of microphones, their testimony to state legislative bodies—are garnering attention to a significant issue in American life. These young people are the products of our English classes and our schools, and whether we have helped them find their voices or they are finding them despite us, the evidence of the Parkland, Florida, youth is powerful and underscores the importance—and the moral inevitability—of teaching authentic language and writing in our classes and in our schools. We can do no less than continue to engage students in responsible and authentic practices in our classrooms and in our daily instruction.

As veteran teachers, we have the standing to push for topics and discussions that our less senior colleagues may shun or even fear. For us, however, this kind of authenticity is ours to claim and our responsibility to claim for our important partners, the students. With the rapid advance of technology and the new political realities reshaping global and national relations, we are less sure than our teachers were in the past about what the future will bring our students. But we know we must prepare our students for whatever the future brings, and that means teaching in a way that engages with the world as it evolves.

In this book, we hope to provide background knowledge and pedagogical tools that will assist you as a veteran teacher in teaching writing in an authentic manner. We aim to provide greater explanations of complex theory; rubrics, handouts, assignment ideas, and other materials; and examples of authentic teaching from real-world classes. Finally, as you will have already noted, we will present wise words from colleagues across the country in our ideal Teachers' Lounge, for as a profession we are at our strongest when we actively listen to each other, learning from the experience of multitudes.

If we've done our jobs well, you'll find that this book and its contributors inspire, enhance, and perhaps challenge your teaching. You, like us, are a veteran teacher. You are well past those first-year jitters and are ready to accept the full force of the responsibility to educate your students for an uncertain and ever-changing world. There is no more challenging a job than ours. There is also no job more important.

Ken Lindblom and Leila Christenbury return with the second volume in the Continuing the Journey series, this time focusing on authentic writing instruction for middle and high school classrooms. The authors draw on what research has taught them about writing—concepts deeply rooted in personal identity and real-world experience—and why we must teach writing accurately, effectively, and fearlessly. As in the previous volume, the book includes visits to an ideal Teachers' Lounge, featuring highly experienced colleagues and well-known researchers in English teaching. Topics covered include responding to student writing, handling the paper load, teaching grammar and usage in the context of writing, and seeking real-world feedback.

Although once again focusing on a veteran English teacher audience, Lindblom and Christenbury provide a wealth of information, advice, and resources that will help teachers at any stage of their careers better support their students' writing both in and out of school.

Ken Lindblom is associate professor of English and former director of English teacher education at Stony Brook University. **Leila Christenbury** is Emerita Commonwealth Professor of English Education at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.



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