

A Graduate Program That Connects the Writer to the Teacher: From MWP to MPW

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Tina Dushel

I am a writer and I am a teacher. I first felt that interconnectedness in the 1990 Summer Teacher Institute, but over the years, I never knew quite what to do about those two parts to my whole self, that is, until I enrolled in Towson University's Master's in Professional Writing Program (MPW). I enrolled in the master's program for the usual reason any teacher begins graduate school – the State Department of Education demanded me to.

I picked Towson's MPW program for some practical reasons. I wanted a graduate degree in my subject area rather than in general educational leadership. I needed a part-time evening program since I was home during the day with my children who were three and seven at the time. Plus, I needed to afford the tuition. I applied for admission to Towson's writing program, completing my application, forwarding transcripts and writing my entrance essay. I selected my concentration, Writing in the Professions, over Writing for Public and Private Sectors. From there I chose a track: teaching writing instead of five other possibilities: health professions, teaching college writing, journalistic writing, scientific writing or creative writing. I registered for my first two classes, Rhetorical Grammar and Research Techniques, and I jumped in with both feet.

But in just a few short weeks, something happened that I didn't expect. The program nourished both parts of me – not just the part that needed 36 credits for an advanced teaching certificate, but also the part that searched for a message, an audience, a voice. The writer in me burst forth and clasped hands with the teacher in me. It happened in Rhetorical Grammar. During one class session, we had been discussing commas. I had never recognized the amazing versatility of the comma. It not only tells a reader to pause, but to speed up, slow down, notice an important word or idea, directs a reader's attention, exemplifies a writer's emphasis, and makes a rhetorical point, a point the author wants repeated.

While sitting in the second row, a little left of center, my mind wandered. Daydreaming, I recalled a student I had taught years before. You know the one I mean. The smart student. The precocious one. The one who asks questions you have no answers for. I recalled my former classroom. This student's hand resolutely airborne, I remembered acknowledging him.

"Jamille."

"Mrs. Dushel, Why do we have to learn this stuff and who makes these rules anyway?"

He was referring to grammar rules. I had no idea how to answer; I think I may have mentioned the name Daniel Webster

or Noah Webster or some other Webster. He didn't buy it, but he didn't bother asking a follow up question. As I said, he was the smart student. But while sitting in Professor Edwin Duncan's rhetorical grammar class contemplating the comma, I realized, joyfully, that seven years after the fact, I was armed with knowledge to answer Jamille's question. I could explain "why we learn this stuff."

But my revelations didn't end there. In my research class, I investigated teachers' practices with writer's workshop. I gathered other teachers' stories and realized I had one as well. From that first semester, I searched within myself and around my world for stories that I needed to tell. By the next semester, my concentration shifted to include creative writing. For the next three years, I explored poetry, personal narrative, fiction, freelance writing and freelance editing. I grew as a writer, and while I did so, I grew as a teacher.

I understood that each part of me – my writing self and my teaching self – nourished the other. The Master's in Professional Writing Program gave me a chance to explore my writer's voice and to enhance my knowledge of craft to better communicate the writing process to students.

I've returned to teaching full-time this year as a language arts and reading teacher at Perry Hall Middle School. My writing self and my teaching self met in my sixth grade classroom recently. My students and I were reading *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen.

One of our objectives was to understand how Paulsen's writing style created a mood of high intensity and excitement for his readers. I identified many of Paulsen's style techniques, techniques I had first learned in rhetorical grammar. Together, my students and I identified the effectiveness of resumptive modifiers, deliberate fragments, and dashes used for emphasis. Then, we wrote like Gary Paulsen.

My model was a scene from a children's novel I had begun in the MPW program. The excerpt, which depicted children falling into a rushing river, needed life-saving revision for dull un-captivating description. Using the elements of style I had learned in Rhetorical Grammar and subsequently taught to my students, I wrote and rewrote.

When I shared my "Gary Paulsen" writing with my students, they applauded. It was my most successful moment as a published writer, a moment made possible by the Master's in Professional Writing Program – a moment where my writing self and teaching self molded into one, a moment when I felt unity as a writer and as a teacher.

For more information on Towson University's Master's in Professional Writing Program, visit www.towson.edu/ english and click on The Professional Writing Program under Program Information. Both the STI and Teacher Inquiry Institute are accepted as electives in this program.