

YOU NEED MY CREDENTIALS TO BE A WRITER

Ronald Clark Brooks

Recently, I launched a public writing project to help people free themselves from writer's block, or to at least free themselves from writer's block for long enough that they could get some part of their own life stories written down. I particularly wanted to reach out to people who normally would not think of themselves as writers. Having considered most of the lessons of the process movement to be commonplace, I didn't anticipate resistance to this project from the people I would meet, but on our first trip out I encountered a young man who very much considered himself a writer, and he told me outright that he found the project offensive. "Not everyone can write," he said, and as he did so, the small group of people who had gathered around my booth started to disperse.

What is it about writing that generates this attitude, often held passionately, that some people are writers and others are not? Is it the romantic ideal of innate genius? The belief that one has to be initiated in a given way to join a special club called writers? Is it something unique to the craft of writing and the anxieties it provokes? I have never heard of a professional baseball player, for example, telling a community baseball league that they should get off the field or that they're a menace to the sport, but I have heard professional writers complain about there being too many people claiming to be writers. Is this an anxiety one sees from the practitioners of all underappreciated arts? Regardless of the answer to these questions, the idea that one has to be a credentialed writer in order to write is definitely a bad idea about writing, one that is pervasive in the general public and oftentimes fostered by writing teachers themselves.

When talking to the young man at my booth, I realized that as a composition teacher, and especially as a trainer of teachers, I have

encountered some version of the belief that one has to be credentialed in order to call oneself a writer for most of my professional life. Writing teachers should be credentialed (see Seth Kahn's chapter), and in no way am I suggesting that these credentials are not important, but the kind of credentials that one gets in order to speak authoritatively about a field—whether that field is literature, film, cultural studies, creative writing, linguistics, or even the often now widely divergent fields of composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies—those need to be set apart from the beliefs that one must have in order to teach writing well.

The most important belief that a writing teacher can have about writing is, as Peter Elbow (a well-known teacher of writing) put it, that everyone can write. And at the heart of that belief is the assumption that everyone's experience and perspective is already worth writing about as soon they arrive in the classroom. To expand that belief beyond the classroom, we should generally believe that everyone's experience and perspective is already worth writing about as soon as they arrive at the page or screen. If this belief is essential for teachers of writing, it is even more so for the writers themselves. At some level, when we sit down to write we must believe it can be done, regardless of our previous experiences, or nothing gets written. This is true for beginners, but it is equally true for experienced writers because every new writing situation brings on new challenges and, as many of us have discovered, one often has to learn to write all over again with each new project.

At the same time, believing that one already knows how to write can be as much of a barrier to writing as believing that one can't. Believing that everyone already knows how to write, however, is very different than believing everyone *can* write. Believing that everyone already knows how or should know how to write is a different bad idea (see Elizabeth Wardle's chapter), and it is one that often leads to the production of five paragraph themes and disembodied, formulaic, general writing. Believing that everyone can write is simply starting with the idea that even though writing is complex, sometimes difficult, infinitely varied and variable, and dependent on rhetorical context, everyone is able to start somewhere in the process, and only from that ground can one unlock the potential to do it well.

What is key, then, is to create a space where a writer can develop a more positive, empowered approach to the actual complexity that is writing. Peter Elbow began his career with the book *Writing Without Teachers*, and it might be that this more optimistic ground

is more easily fostered outside the classroom, as the culture of assessment that schooling creates constantly wants to reintroduce the bad idea that you need credentials to be a writer. This is not to say that classes can't hold on to the belief that everyone can write, but these kinds of classrooms require vigilance in order to reinforce optimistic attitudes about writing. Despite how difficult it is to do so, maintaining this vigilance has proven to be effective. In *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*, George Hillocks has shown us that optimism is the one factor that continually makes a positive difference in the outcomes of writing classes.

If you find yourself in a writing course (or still remember a writing course) that has not fostered a positive outlook toward writing, it is entirely possible to create this environment yourself by surrounding yourself with supportive writers. Supportive does not mean they will tell you everything you write is great (that's not what everyone can write means). Supportive means that they will hold you accountable to getting writing done and to help you continually improve your writing. That's the beauty of it being a bad idea that you need credentials to be a writer. There is absolutely nothing stopping you from getting started right now.

Further Reading

For a longer exploration of the idea that *Everyone Can Write* and for ways of thinking about assessment based on this philosophy, see Peter Elbow's book of the same title. For qualitative proof of the effectiveness of optimism and the writing process, see George Hillocks's *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching*. Because most process theorists share Elbow's optimism about everyone's potential to perform, it is worth studying the works of Ken Macrorie, Sondra Perl, Donald Murray, Wendy Bishop, and many others in order to know the best ways to foster your own supportive writing community. For even more specific information about how to create workshops beyond the confines of writing classrooms, see Pat Belanoff and Elbow's *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited*. More importantly, look for local writers' clubs and readings and community groups in your area. One possible way to find these is to sign up for and take part in National Novel Writing Month, Academic Writing Month, and Digital Writing Month. Many have found success by letting their writing communities develop from there.

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