

# Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* and the Ongoing Transformation of the Writing Workshop

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*When I returned to the classroom in 1994, I began at the beginning. As before, I knew I wanted to try to create an environment conducive to writing: a writing workshop, with plenty of time to write and plenty of opportunities for choice, response, and publication. But this time I had glimmers of my new potential as a teacher of writing. . . . Just as there are times when kids need a mirror, someone to reflect back their writing to them, there are times when they need an adult who will tell them what to do next or how to do it. Bottom line, what they need is a Teacher. Today I'm striving for the fluid, subtle, exhilarating balance that allows me to function in my classroom as a listener and a teller, an observer and an actor, a collaborator and a critic and a cheerleader.*

—Atwell, 2nd ed. (20–21)

**A**s we enter the twenty-first century, language arts teachers at all levels (preservice elementary and secondary teachers through college-level instructors) are looking closely at stories of the field of writing instruction, “taking stock” of the writing process movement (to paraphrase the title of Tobin and Newkirk’s book) as it has evolved over the last thirty years. In fact, this special issue of *English Journal* on teaching writing in the new millennium signals such a movement to analyze and interpret these narratives. ■ In this essay, I focus on one of the most influential of these “narratives” for middle and high school writing

teachers, Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle*, her seminal description of a middle school reading/writing workshop published in its first edition in 1987. Many of us can trace our emergence as writing workshop advocates to the program described in her text, which we imitated in our own language arts and composition classrooms.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of the new millennium, Atwell has published the second edition of *In the Middle*, subtitled *New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Indeed, the cover boasts that more than 70 percent of the material is new. As the opening epigraph illustrates, Atwell sees herself as a teacher with “new potential,” and she implies a radically-transformed writing workshop environment. What is so *new* about this new workshop? What does Atwell mean when she says she “began at the beginning”? If she is now a *Teacher* (with, as she says,

“a capital T”), what was she (and what were we) before? And what does all this do to revise our conceptions of writing workshop pedagogy, the training (and continuing education) of teachers of the English language arts, and the writing process movement?

## Teaching with a Capital T

In “How the Writing Process Was Born—And Other Conversion Narratives,” Lad Tobin writes:

[T]he history of composition is still written primarily through the stories we tell. Stories about the dreadful ways writing was taught—or not taught—when ‘we were in school’; stories about the miraculous changes brought about by the writing process movement; and, lately, stories about how some of those changes may not have been so miraculous after all. (1)

As Tobin notes, the “story” of the writing process movement is marked by movement from transformation (the “miracles” of the writing process), to questioning, to some kind of redefinition. In order to see what is so different about Atwell’s new approach to writing workshop, I begin with two anecdotes that illustrate the kind of teacher questioning that led Atwell to reenvision her pedagogy in the second edition of *In the Middle*.

In my language arts methods course, preservice elementary teachers and I discuss Atwell’s and Calkins’s descriptions of the conditions for effective writing workshops. Students tend to love the way Calkins and Atwell describe writers, classrooms, and writing. They are entranced. However, once they begin to work in the classroom, they begin to feel a certain uneasiness.<sup>2</sup> They wonder about those students who don’t seem to be “on task” and those who disrupt the supportive community by choosing profane or disturbing topics or by refusing to work with certain peers because of gender, race, or class differences. They question whether it’s okay to “allow” students to write in the same genres all year long. They wonder if they are doing something wrong if the “miracles” that Calkins and Atwell describe don’t occur. As Timothy Lensmire points out in his wonderful ethnography of a third-grade writing workshop, “Writing workshop advocates such as Donald Graves [1983], Lucy Calkins [1986], and Donald Murray [1968] tend to tell success stories” (original brackets), while the rest of us have been left to tell the “failure” stories—or to reject the workshop model altogether (2). All of these questions begin to brew during these class discussions. After one class this fall, a preservice teacher, who had already spent several weeks in a middle school language arts classroom as part of her field experience, summed up her dismissal of the workshop: “My teacher doesn’t like Atwell; she likes to have more structure. And I think I agree with her.”

When I participated in an urban, alternative middle school as part of a two-year study of adolescent literacy in 1993–1995, I could see the same dissatisfactions as those implied by my student’s cooperating teacher. In an interview, the teacher with whom I worked (I call her Lisa in the study) described some of the constraints and contingencies impinging on teachers who attempt to apply Atwell’s method in real classrooms:

Before I thought I was meeting the needs [of students] because I believed that the needs of the

kids were pretty much what the State Learning Objectives were saying they had to have. That was in my youth. In my dotage I’ve learned that I haven’t a clue what the kids need. I mean, I don’t know what their needs are. All I can do is say, these are some of the things that competent writers need to know how to do. Okay. Now, where are you on this continuum? And so you have one kid like Peter who isn’t going to be a competent writer until he can focus on getting something done (laughs). So, I spend some time making . . . you know, this is what you need to do, I’ll be back. I find this is really messy and I get very frustrated because it doesn’t look right to me and I don’t know how it should look. But by doing it this way, I am hopeful that first of all, I don’t do any damage and that I don’t cheat them out of something; I hope that I don’t fail to provide opportunities for them that will be important for them to have had at some point. Like if I never taught grammar—I think that’s not fair because they have to know some of this stuff. So, I’m hopeful people grab onto different things. (Taylor 154)

After having taught middle school students for years, Lisa turned to Atwell’s 1987 workshop method because she realized that the “outcomes” the district and state had mandated were inadequate. However, without that official framework, she finds herself less able to say explicitly, “This is what you need to know.” One can sense the tension between allowing students the freedom to discover their own purposes and wanting to ensure that they aren’t “cheat[ed] . . . out of something” they’ll need to be fully literate. As Lisa said, “I get very frustrated because it doesn’t look right to me and I don’t know how it should look.”

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Both of these anecdotes show teachers questioning issues of structure, of student choice, and of teacher role, all summed up in the question “Am I doing it right?” Atwell’s second edition of *In the Middle* attempts to take on this question directly,

creating a new workshop structure she defines as “teaching with a capital *T*.” At the heart of this way of teaching writing lie two major shifts in her practice from the 1987 to the 1998 editions: defining a new interventionist role for the writing teacher in the workshop, and creating a more inclusive and balanced pedagogy that grows, in part, from a movement in composition studies toward a “post-process” view of teaching writing.

### An Interventionist Pedagogy

To understand what I call Atwell’s new *interventionist pedagogy*, it’s important first to acknowledge the force of her early transformation from traditional teaching to the promise of process, which was, as she says, a “necessary liberation” for the field of composition. In the introduction to the second edition, Atwell describes how she and other English teachers were drawn into the excitement of the writing workshop:

We laid down the old, stodgy burdens of the profession—the *Warriner’s Handbooks*, the forty-five minute lectures and canned assignments—and embraced new roles . . . These were heady times, as many English teachers abandoned the old orthodoxies and cleared the way for our kids’ voices. (17)

Like the other teachers we’ve heard from, however, Atwell began to question these orthodoxies in the eleven years between the 1987 and 1998 editions. She explains:

Something happened to me that happens often in revolutions. As part of my transformation I embraced a whole new set of orthodoxies. As enlightened and child-centered as the new rules were, they had an effect similar to the old ones: they limited what I did as an English teacher, but from a different angle. (17)

In her second edition, Atwell lists some of the orthodoxies apparent in the 1987 edition that by now should be familiar to those of us who have attempted to create a writing workshop:

- Minilessons should be between five and seven minutes long.
- Conferences with individuals are more important than minilessons to the group. Teachers should invest their energies in conferring.
- Attend to conventions—spelling, punctuation, paragraphing—only at the end

of the process, when the content is set. Tell kids editorial issues don’t matter until the final draft.

- Keep conferences short. Get to every writer every day.
- Don’t look at or read students’ writing during conferences.
- Don’t tell writers what they should do or what should be in their writing.
- Don’t write on students’ writing.
- Don’t praise.
- Students must have ownership of their writing. (17–18)

She frames the problem with these orthodoxies as focusing on rules, which *become* the measure of success in the classroom. In other words, as we compare our classrooms to hers on the basis of these rules, such issues as the lack of student motivation, behavior problems, our difficulty in determining what “progress” means—all become focused on the perfection of our *method*; if we experience “failures,” we must not be *doing it right*.

In the revised edition, Atwell turns away from rules and toward *interventions* on the part of the teacher, a revision that reintegrates the teacher as central in the writing classroom. Citing Jerome Bruner, Atwell calls this method “handover”—when an adult intervenes and gradually provides less assistance to a learner. She calls this “knowledge-based teaching”: “There isn’t an orthodoxy in sight; there is plenty of child intention and adult intervention. And it feels like a human interaction, not facilitation by formula. The key to this kind of teaching is that it’s based on *knowledge*, not *rules*” (20).

At the heart of Atwell’s new *interventionist pedagogy* are two underlying shifts: a redefinition of student responsibilities (*expectations*) and an emphasis on expert demonstration (*apprenticeship*). While the workshop structures have not changed dramatically (we still see her advocating the use of minilessons, response journals, one-on-one conferences, and so on), Atwell argues that the biggest change in writing workshop is in “the directness of [her] approach to [her] kids” (25). Part of that directness lies in the specificity of her expectations. She explains:

As their teacher with a capital *T*, I also expect students to experiment with specific genres, attempt professional publication, produce minimum pages

of draft each week and finished pieces of writing each trimester (Rief 1992), attend to conventions as they draft, take notes on minilessons (Rief 1992), be quiet, and work as hard in writing workshop as I do. (25)

While the ideal of choice is still a major value in her pedagogy—for instance, in her chapter entitled “Making the Best of Adolescence,” she emphasizes the wonderful things that happen when adolescents “can choose”—there is much more of a sense of teacher direction and expectation in this edition. Thus, choice is a reconfigured value, reflecting a greater sense of the interrelation of writer, teacher, and larger rhetorical context.

This “directness” manifests itself as well through her notion of apprenticeship. In addition to making students responsible for certain behaviors (and for certain *products*), she places herself as an expert directly in the midst of her readers and writers, directing their activity. Thus, she now assigns both certain genres and particular literature to be read and written about as a whole group. Her minilessons have become more sequenced, more interactive, and longer. In addition, much of her energy in whole group instruction goes toward demonstrations of writing. In conferences, she still listens and reflects what she hears, but now she advocates intervening directly, *telling* writers what works and what doesn’t and collaborating on their writing rather than (only) “following the child.” As she explains in “Cultivating Our Garden”:

Instead of removing myself from the equation—functioning as a facilitator of the process who coordinates the workshop—I have come on like gangbusters in terms of teaching and expecting a lot in writing and reading workshop. And instead of diminishing or silencing their voices, I think that raising my voice, in the company of students in the workshop, has had the effect of strengthening theirs. (48)

This shift toward regulating writing behaviors (intervening in students’ *processes*) and demonstrating teacher expertise (directing students’ *productions*) answers, in some ways, the frustrations of teachers like Lisa who desire a more tangible structure to the workshop. It recasts the shape of the writing workshop space and the activity contained there. The new shape provides a sense of balance in our teaching, a second important element of Atwell’s model for “teaching with a capital T.”

## Post-Process and the Value of Balancing Tensions

Atwell’s “story” ends by highlighting a sense of tension:

The power of teaching in a workshop grows from making a place where students and a teacher can say “I don’t know” and feel “I think I can find out.” The tension of knowing and not knowing—writing, reading, my students, myself—becomes a continuous adventure and a source of inspiration for a lifetime. (484)

I think we misread her “continuous adventure” of always beginning if we assume that she is arguing for maintaining these oppositions—between “knowing” and “not knowing”; between “structure” and “choice”; even between “teacher-centered” and “student-centered.” Instead, I would focus our attention on the tension itself—the fluid, changeable middle space that offers a new sense of balance in our teaching of writing. It is this sense of balancing tensions that most marks Atwell’s interventionist pedagogy as “new.” It is also what places *In the Middle* as a response to what some have termed a move in the field from process to post-process.

Briefly, a post-process orientation, like post-modernism itself, attempts to move beyond an easy unity—the unified self of an individual writer, a universal static notion of process, and the rules of a workshop—which separates writing from the rest of the curriculum and individual student choice from the conventions (genres, purposes, audiences, multiple languages and literacies) of a larger community. Joseph Harris maintains that a key feature of post-process pedagogy is a move away from “plac[ing] some vision of the composing process (rather than an interest in the work of students) at the center of a course of writing” (57). Focusing on “the work” of students means interesting ourselves in the tensions involved both in *the acts of producing* and in *the products themselves*. It recognizes that oppositions like skills vs. process are false dichotomies and that maintaining such orthodoxies of process can lead to a kind of disillusionment with writing workshop itself. Like Atwell, Lisa Delpit also takes a post-process approach, looking beyond the skills/process debate to a synthesis, particularly for a pedagogy that would more fully recognize the needs of students of color:

I suggest that students must be *taught* the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of

American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communication endeavors; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own "expertness" as well; and that even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent. (296)

This synthesis for which Delpit argues involves balancing the tensions of individual writers as they negotiate the conventions of the culture. Harris agrees, noting that a post-process writing workshop necessarily involves "addressing the tension between freedom and constraint. *Voice* has been used as a key term in describing both sides of this tension—in naming both what is thought to belong uniquely to a writer as well as those cultural discourses that are seen as speaking through her words and text" (44).

For Delpit and Harris, as for Atwell, this tension involves reintegrating a revised view of the teacher-as-expert, one who intervenes to create what Timothy Lensmire describes as an "engaged, pluralistic classroom community" ("Carnival" 389). Lensmire's study of third grade writing workshops leads him to argue for a post-process view of teacher responsibility that centers on balance:

What I have struggled to express here is what my students and I struggled for in the writing workshop: some sort of balance. We must recognize that children need room to talk and act in order to learn and develop. We must also recognize that children's talk and actions can be turned to worthy and less worthy ends, and that as teachers we have the responsibility to push for worthy ones. (*When Children Write* 159)

For Lensmire, as for Atwell, this responsibility means an increased curricular role for teachers in the workshop, in the creation of collective writing projects, and in direct interventions through teacher response to the content of students' writing.

### Implications for Writing Teachers

I can imagine several implications for teachers using Atwell's revised workshop model. First, in terms of the "best practice" for writing instruction in the twenty-first century, Atwell answers the concerns of teachers over the years who feared they weren't "doing it right." By focusing on balancing the ten-

sions in the workshop rather than focusing on rigid rules, Atwell offers a new kind of flexibility. For example, notice how her list of questions for the "sleepless nights in August" contrasts sharply with the list of "orthodoxies" cited earlier (particularly by emphasizing the teacher as questioner and intervener):

- When do assignments from a teacher who writes help young writers engage and grow?
- What else can happen in minilessons besides me minilecturing?
- How do I talk to—and collaborate with—kids in conferences so that I'm showing them how to act on their intentions, not hoping they can find their way on their own?
- How important are specific expectations for productivity and experimentation? What should I ask young writers to produce over the course of a year, in terms of quantity and range of genres?
- How do I teach about genre without trotting out tired old English-teacher clichés that don't get to the heart of what makes good fiction or poetry or exposition?
- What behaviors do I want to see in the workshop? How do I encourage them? Which should be mandated?
- How and when do I demonstrate my own knowledge of writing? To what ends? (23)

These questions mark the ways in which the field is moving from a static notion of what writing workshop *is* (and who teachers and students *should be*) to a more balanced and inclusive view of writing pedagogy.

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Second, these questions highlight the necessity of continual transformation of the writing workshop based on teacher knowledge and teacher questioning. Atwell argues for a "knowledge-based"

writing pedagogy that is constantly reshaped. In the introduction to the second edition, she stresses:

I didn't intuit or luck into this place, and I didn't arrive overnight. I paved the way—I continue to pave it—through writing and reading about writing, through uncovering and questioning my assumptions, through observing my kids and myself in action and trying to make sense of my observations, through dumb mistakes, uncertain experiments, and, underneath it all, a desire to do my best by students and a willingness to acknowledge that my definition of *best* will be—*should* be—ever changing. (4)

Not only is she arguing here for teacher-research in our own writing classrooms, but also for teachers to research the field of writing studies. I think a related implication is that we can benefit as teachers by studying the stories of the field, including taking stock of the “conversion narratives” that have defined the ways we have described the writing process movement. If we can analyze, as Atwell has done, why the “miracles” may not be so miraculous after all, we can begin to design workshops that balance the choices of students *and* teachers.

Yet, when we hear Atwell say that she now “spend[s] as much time on lesson planning and laying groundwork as [she] did back in the 1970s” (“Cultivating” 48), her story of “always beginning” as a teacher of writing must strike some as coming full circle by returning to a current-traditional model of teacher control and student passivity. The most important implication of Atwell's second edition lies here—in understanding the kind of teacher authority granted in this new workshop. One of the most liberating features of the process movement is that it gave teachers the freedom to *be writers* and, thus, to share their authority with the other student-writers who inhabited the writing workshop with them. Atwell points out that, while this movement was exciting and *necessary*, it too produced its own rigidity and rules. In her second edition of *In the Middle*, Atwell again is granting permission to teachers to look beyond the rules of the earlier workshop model and acknowledge *teacher expertise*. She doesn't ask that we dig up and throw out process and workshop; instead, she's arguing that we “cultivate our garden” through careful study, observation, and planning. Teaching with a capital *T* means recognizing that teacher knowledge—of genre, of conventions, of writing strategies, of effective writing behaviors—*also* has a place in the writing workshop alongside

student choice. Atwell grants permission to teachers to demonstrate what they know and value.

## Conclusion

If the new edition of *In the Middle* is a narrative about the tensions of teaching writing, we shouldn't be surprised. After all, we have all been struggling with these tensions. What Atwell says is that we no longer have to choose between process *or* product, expression *or* communication, student choice *or* teacher mandate, individual *or* society. The tension between “knowing and not knowing” that marks the potential of writing workshops for Atwell means that our teaching can reflect a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” orientation. In perhaps the most direct statement of her revised workshop, Atwell celebrates this “both/and” perspective: “Today I'm striving for the fluid, subtle, *exhilarating* balance that allows me to function in my classroom as a listener *and* a teller, an observer *and* an actor, a collaborator *and* a critic *and* a cheerleader” (21). “Always beginning” as teachers of writing means, also, always attending to the space *between* the tensions—the fluid, subtle, exhilarating balance “in the middle.”

## Notes

1. For instance, I started my teaching career as a middle school English teacher in 1987, the year Atwell's first edition came out. I can tell my own “conversion narrative” (as many of us probably can) of those early days of becoming a teacher, during which I was radically transformed by the promise of workshop pedagogy. That narrative, like Atwell's, changed over the next twelve years as I taught more, researched more, and questioned more, leaving me where I am in this essay—exploring how the shifts in Atwell's construction of the writing workshop from the 1987 to the 1998 editions of *In the Middle* can serve as a metaphor for the evolution of the field of writing instruction in the twenty-first century.

2. In the methods course I teach, students participate in a ten week field experience. They spend approximately two hours a week working in an elementary or middle school classroom during their designated writing time. My students participate in a variety of ways—conferring, teaching minilessons, assisting with publication, occasionally designing writing projects or units, providing one-on-one tutoring, and so on.

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