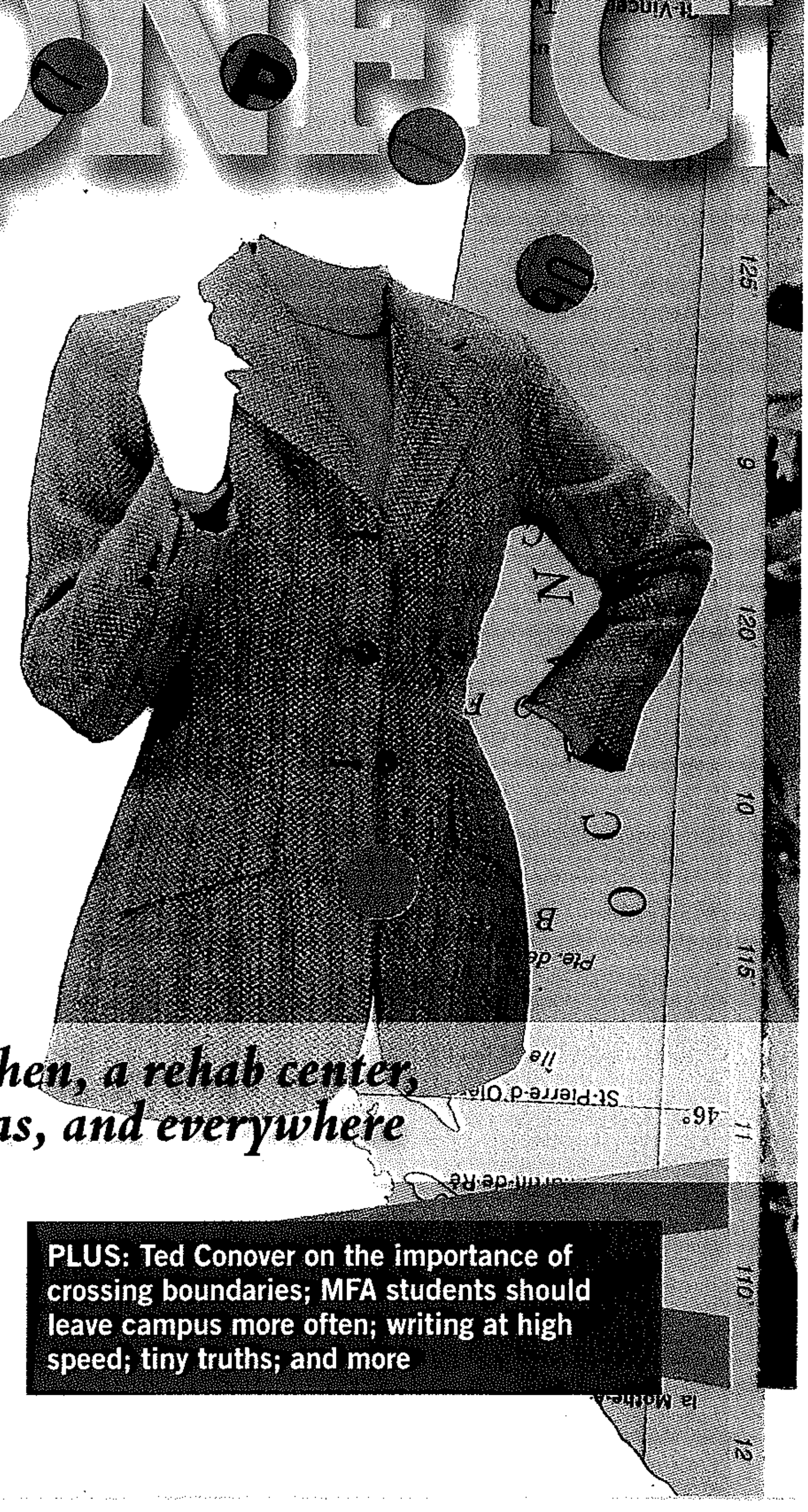
True stories, well told.

CREATIVE NONFICTION



HOW WE TEACH

In the classroom, the kitchen, a rehab center, the dentist's office, overseas, and everywhere

ISSUE 63

PLUS: Ted Conover on the importance of crossing boundaries; MFA students should leave campus more often; writing at high speed; tiny truths; and more

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Making Writing "HIP"

At one New York City school, High Intensity Practice writing keeps young writers engaged

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WHAT IS the Statue of Liberty thinking?

Brainstorm a little, but then just go. Write for twenty minutes. Don't worry about spelling or grammar or if your idea is good. Try to write neatly since you're doing this by hand and I'll need to read it later. Put away all screens, and pop out your headphones. No tech or talking for twenty minutes. After time is up, we'll go around and share first lines. OK, begin.

I gave this prompt to my freshman high school writing classes at Avenues: The World School, located in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, the week after the 2016 presidential election. I'd planned the lesson far in advance, hoping the question would provoke thought no matter who won. It didn't hurt that a palpable sense of disorientation hung in the air above our heads, which is not always desirable for life but often makes for bold writing. Here are some of Lady Liberty's musings:

> *I should have stayed in France.*
> *You people are in my head, so you think you know me.*
> *Dear America: You've changed a lot since 1776.*

It's one of my greatest pleasures as a teacher to hear these fun and inventive lines read aloud in class. The students learn to overcome their fear of being judged—a huge psychological component of the writing process—and they hear the class react to their words.

Having everyone share is key. Avenues classrooms have circular tables so students can look each other in the eye.

Inevitably, with this type of prompt, one or two students insist on being literal. "The Statue of Liberty cannot think. It's made of steel." This is fine. Without calling out the students in class, I make a note on their essays and encourage them to imagine that the Statue of Liberty *can* think, to try and leap into the head of an inanimate object and bring it to life on paper.

And for the next class, I prepare a lesson on literal versus metaphorical thinking. I want them to think in metaphor, to see the hills as white elephants, to make a foray into the world of language, what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls "a metaphoray."

This is the format for every class: twenty to twenty-five minutes of writing, ten of sharing, and ten more of micro-instruction from me—forty-five minutes total, twice a week. Every class, I give new prompts; in fact, I often give a choice of three in case one proves more inspiring than another. My students write in notebooks, not on computers, to minimize distraction. (Never mind the temptations of the Internet—imagine eighteen pairs of hands clacking away.) It's also so we—and they—can monitor their progress. If, flipping through the history of the notebook, I notice a student writing in strict essay format each time, I suggest they next compose an answer using a scene, dialogue, or even, if they want, a poem. If they write poems all the time, I suggest they try a formal essay. One student, an aspiring vocalist, sometimes writes in lyrics.

At the start of each class, I choose two students who produced strong essays from the previous prompt and have them read their works to the class. Then I introduce the new prompt. If they're feeling sluggish, we brainstorm a few ideas on the dry-erase board, but then they're off, foraging on their own, and I'm left supervising a table of silent writers, which epitomizes the old teaching canard: "The one doing the most talking is the one doing the most learning."

In this case, the one doing the most *writing* is the one doing the most learning. And our students write a lot. Class after class. All year. Our intimate team of five teachers conducts sessions for the sixth to eleventh grades, with twelve to eighteen students in each class. We don't give lectures on, say, empathy. The students' only job is to jump into the sandbox and play with a prompt such as "What is the hardest part of being a parent?" We see what they produce unconsciously and then give it a name.

> *What better way to inspire young minds than by allowing them space to experiment outside the normal pressures of the school day?*

If someone writes in first person, we talk about unreliable narration. If someone writes about a talkative cousin who needed to have jaw surgery, we learn about irony. If someone uses a scene and dialogue, we discuss how a story can dramatize theme and character. Occasionally, I bring in a snippet from James Baldwin or Annie Dillard, but the lessons originate from student work. The feedback we give is minimal and skews positive—*Nice sentence! Great transition! Wonderful metaphor. Try this or that!*—since we are also trying to foster a love of writing. They practice, practice, practice, and we read, read, read. We don't give grades or homework, and we don't look for polished mechanics. As my supervisor, Todd Shy, says, "We're in this for the long game."

This process is formally called High Intensity Practice writing, or HIP. As far as I know, the acronym was born at Avenues, and the program is unlike anywhere else. (If I'm wrong, I'd like to hear from you.) The long game is to develop in these young minds the major habits of creativity, empathy, and critical thinking—all under the umbrella of cognitive flexibility. We're trying to mold writers who can write from the perspective of their least favorite relative on the holidays or of a stone on the beach, who can argue both sides of the argument in the space of twenty minutes, and who can take song lyrics out of context and use them in their own essays. (*Who made the doves cry? The nuclear weapons, of course. Let me explain. . . .*)

If all of this sounds playful and fun, it is, and I wouldn't have it any other way. What better way to inspire young minds—the majority of whom will not grow up to be professional writers—than by allowing them space to experiment outside the normal pressures of the school day. And as a writer, I find this teaching approach feeds my own craft. My colleagues and I brainstorm new ways to engage students' imaginations and, in the process, stimulate our own. (*Wouldn't it be great if we had them write the "alternate facts" of a historical event? Hey, that gives me an idea for a story.*)

And lest one think we are not preparing students for the "real world" or college admissions, consider the following questions, which have appeared on university applications and job postings for major corporations:

> University of Chicago: *So where is Waldo, really?*
>
> Wake Forest University: *Give us your top ten list.*
>
> University of Richmond: *Tell us about spiders.*
>
> Google: *How many ways can you think of to find a needle in a haystack?* and *If you could be remembered for one sentence, what would it be?*

As you can see, HIP isn't just ahead of the curve—it *is* the curve. But while our team may have created the framework for these methods, we're just circling around to another shopworn canard: "Practice makes perfect." By the end of the year, students will have spent a total of 1,200-1,500 minutes—that's twenty to twenty-five hours—generating fifty to sixty pieces of writing. If they spend their whole career at Avenues, multiply those numbers by seven.

Naturally, some students are hostile to the idea that HIP will make them better writers, but they're also in high school and hostile to a great deal of their work. I get it; I've been in their overworked, hormonal shoes. I often wish I'd practiced HIP in high school, although I did have the next best thing: a "Writing Lab" (or workshop) run by the novelist Wally Lamb before he sold his first novel. A writer himself, he provided a quiet place amid our hectic days, a place where our work was read aloud, shared, and valued. My fellow students fondly remember Mr. Lamb's lab as one of the best parts of our education.

Now, in my adult life, in my daily writing practice, I'm still amazed that so basic a skill takes so much time to master, even after one has clocked Malcolm Gladwell's ten thousand hours—the number he claims you need to be a successful outlier. (If I dared tell my students this stat, I'm sure they'd spontaneously combust.)

I've tried to adapt the HIP method to the college and adult education writing classes that I've taught in New York City, but I've found a slight resistance, from both teachers and students. I can empathize with this, too. For a professional faculty of working writers, the exercises are one more thing to read. For older students, it somehow feels childish and a waste of time. How will these pithy exercises lead to the Great American Novel? Or publication in the *New Yorker*? They just want the secrets of writing. Quick! They're not young anymore, and their time on this planet is short!

RECENTLY, at Avenues, we flipped the script, instructing students to create prompts of their own and vote on the ones they liked best. We made it into a contest; the five best essays resulting from the prompts would win a Moleskine notebook and gift cards, and the class that produced the prompt that produced the best writing would get a snack during class. Most prompts were excellent—*Write a believable fake news story. Was 2016 really that bad?*—but the one that proved the most popular made me cringe.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Really, class? *Really?* We gave you carte blanche to come up with anything, and you chose the undisputed king of rhetorical clichés? Though I dreaded this chicken would be a turkey,.I didn't undermine their vote; if we learned nothing else in 2016, it's that democracy is sometimes a bitter pill to swallow.

But as my Catholic mother used to lecture, "Oh ye of little faith." I'd forgotten our mission, my own teaching. The cliché produced some of the best writing: chickens escaping from factory farms to start a new life, chickens questioning the need for asphalt roads in farm country, chickens crossing the road as a metaphor for the refugee crisis. Wonderful stuff. A teacher's dream.

Recently, a junior admitted to me he once disliked HIP but had changed his mind. "I realize," he said, "that if a HIP prompt doesn't seem interesting or relevant, that's more of a commentary on me than the prompt, and I need to ask myself to think about it differently."

Bravo. That's HIP in a nutshell.

That same week, I started taking kung fu classes, precisely to get off my writing butt and sweat through a different kind of high intensity practice. Surely, I thought, there would be a little instruction for novices before we started. Nope. *Form a line! Show me your Bow Stance! Stop looking at your feet! Are you looking for spare change? Look ahead into your bright future! Faster! Harder! More Chi!*

So I kicked, flailed, flopped, and cartwheeled across the temple, not caring how I looked, just trying to keep up. I'd like to imagine our students' minds operating in much the same way, the HIP mantra—*Cognitive flexibility via creativity, empathy, and critical thinking!*—ricocheting from synapse to synapse, bending and bouncing from brain to pen to page, producing critical thought and empathic thinking, and planting, hopefully, the seeds for a more nimble, creative, and empathic future. ■