

Pat Mora

Dear Teacher

Pat Mora, in this letter of praise to educators, suggests that teachers need to be writers to better teach writing. Helping students “bring themselves to the page” through their writing is one way to get them to know the joy of books.

D

ear Teacher,

Warm greetings! In January 2003, I began writing you letters.

I’ve met so many dedicated educators through the years, and often you’ve asked why and how I write. Highly verbal, you confided your private desire to write, too. I had become convinced of the strong connection between developing our creative selves and becoming even more creative and effective teachers. Teaching writing when we write regularly—and I don’t mean progress reports—can

produce far more exciting and satisfying classrooms.

How I wish I had been writing when I started teaching years ago in my native city of El Paso, Texas. I would have been able to articulate the need and value of understanding the structure of language, but from concrete experience, from my questions and wrestlings.

Where should I begin this poem? When does including Spanish enhance this section of the essay?

Now, examining my life and habits as a writer and educator, I want to share practices I’ve discovered that assist the development of creativity, yours and mine. That exploration became the manuscript, “Dear Teacher: Seven Practices for Creative Educators.” Calorie-free if you avoid the kitchen, the habit

or discipline of regular time for exploring this imaginative part of ourselves is rewarding and energizing. When I began making time for writing in my life, I was working full-time as a university administrator and had three children. Helping them with homework and preparing dinner and enjoying it with them were important to me. I began, then, by setting aside the time I could, two to three hours on the weekend, for sitting still with books, paper, typewriter. Precomputer. The old days.

Practice, an undramatic word, a sturdiness to it, faith in repetition as dancers, musicians, and carvers know. The practice of valuing time alone and thus of valuing our creativity begins to shape our week and self-perception.

We connect with a complex part of ourselves and more and more want to value each student’s creativity. We see and feel differently if we’re diving deeply enough into our work, into our humanity. We learn *with* our students. By creating space that nourishes our interior selves, we can more critically examine the practices and spaces in which we strive to nurture student work. We’ve encountered the fears and doubts our students bring to the blank page.

What have you discovered about the art of teaching? What have you discovered about assisting students to float rather than thrash in the writing process, the powerful metaphor of poet William Stafford. As we practice to become better writers, we can share what we’re learning with our students, how we con-

As we practice to become better writers, we can share what we’re learning with our students, how we continue when we’re discouraged, and how we revel when the words fit together. The zing of writing.

Copyright © 2004 by Pat Mora. Used by permission of Author.

tinue when we're discouraged, and how we revel when the words fit together. The zing of writing.

Some of our students are blessed with families who can work with them on their literacy skills; but in our diverse democracy, we have students whose parents may not read text themselves or who may not read or speak English, though they read the world wisely and have survival stories and oral linguistic wealth to share. We can foster a literacy legacy that doesn't exist in all families by valuing each student's creative self, asking her questions about her life and dreams, listening to her stories and ideas and assisting her to draw and write her unique tales. From personal experience, we now know that bringing the inside voice or image out into the world requires effort and some faith in ourselves or in the process.

Let your students see you both reading and writing often. Students need to see us practicing what we urge them to do. A fellow writer, you can concretely talk about your strategies for adding details to a piece about your first home or resources for unusual information about bees, for example. How do you deal with your frustrating moments? They, then, can share their approach in a community of writers supporting one another in the difficult process of clear and evocative expression. It's a tall order and like most things can seem easy until we dive in.

Your high expectations for all students honor them. You believe they can achieve. I know you become discouraged and even angry at peers who judge students' capacities based on their skin color, ethnicity, accent, gender, religion. Poverty is a way to categorize people, too, of course.

Slowly, too slowly, we are able to provide students with books that reflect our many cultures and languages. What we call American literature is at a snail's pace becoming far more interesting as we savor and explore our national and hemispheric linguistic wealth. Textbooks are changing because teachers are insisting on books that more accurately include our varied literary traditions. Don't stop! Now on to convincing trade book publishers.

Our young need to see themselves in books and experience a wide assortment of voices and images. I was an adult before it dawned on me that I hadn't seen a family like mine, a bilingual family of Mexican descent, in the books I loved. When the young see their teacher excited about books that include

families and homes like the students', they connect more deeply with themselves, with us, and with text.

Many of our students, because of previous educational experiences, poor skills, or weak self-image, need us to nurture their courage. We need to *en-courage* them to bring themselves to the page. Pupils of all ages can arrive at our classrooms as reluctant readers and writers. This isn't usually true of the little ones if they early on encounter support, enthusiasm, and clear directions. They plunge in. Ask them to select the animal they'd like to be and to inhabit it and to write a story in the voice of that creature, and they're ready, excited. And, they like what they've written. Sadly, that willingness to take imaginative risks can diminish as students move through our educational system. We humans wisely learn to protect ourselves. We repress our initial, perhaps wild and crazy, ideas, for fear of being laughed at or perceived as different, weird.

By the time students reach college, their apprehension can be visible. A professor who prepares students to teach writing says, "My students bring me their heavy hearts, their memories of failure. I have to help them unlearn their fear of writing." Many fine programs use a writing workshop model to counter previous narrow and prescriptive writing programs and to provide techniques and procedures that foster creativity while teaching conventions. Reading and writing are such essential skills, especially in a democracy, essential for civic participation, for being a lifelong learner, for economic opportunity, and for the full development of the person. Language liberates us to explore and defend our beliefs, to articulate our individuality, to sing our song in this world however gravelly our voice may be.

Although many learning strategies assist in engaging the imaginations of our diverse students, nothing may be more important than establishing respectful relationships for mutual learning. We won't always succeed. What challenges educators face when billions are spent convincing us that happiness can be bought and that entertainment equals the good life. How I hope that fewer and fewer teachers will disparage or ignore groups of students, kinds of students, because they don't speak English or

Textbooks are changing because teachers are insisting on books that more accurately include our varied literary traditions.

don't speak formal English well, because they live in housing projects or have learning problems or physical disabilities. You have the talent, dear teacher, for finding that divine spark within each student, and

You have the talent, dear teacher, for finding that divine spark within each student, and they sense your genuine interest.

they sense your genuine interest. They grumble and groan, but they appreciate the high standards you set. I still remember amazing teachers I've watched who have fostered a true learning community. The

group discussed and questioned together, a rich, transforming learning experience.

I'm writing you from Santa Fe, New Mexico, reveling in how this landscape of what we in the United States call the Southwest (north to friends from Mexico and Central and South America) is also a space of learning for me.

What landscape comforts you?

Memories of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea* often prompt me to mull over the gifts the desert gives me. Viewed as a desolate place, a location of physical and spiritual challenges, like any landscape it offers beauty and rewards attention. Many have retreated to deserts around the world for contemplation. Philosopher Paul Tillich referred to our Western desert as "the holy void," an interesting way to view a blank piece of paper before we begin to write. Plants and animals have adapted and thrive in the desert's vast silence and space. Prickly pear absorbs what moisture it can and brews its scarlet fruit. Snakes shed outgrown skin. Mountains and sandstone pinnacles face the force of water and wind; sculpted, age with inspiring grace. Sandstorms rise like uncontrollable rage and grief but scour and cool the desert air. Evening wind drifts between mountains, down crooked streets, around adobe houses, earth's

We can give students our faith and help them understand that we are a world of interconnected, vulnerable human beings.

welcome breath. Fossils echo, "Others came; others will come to this holy ground. Walk gently, savor. Gifts abound." Great clouds, the desert's brooding, rise; lightning and thunder proclaim a mysterious power.

Coyotes wander by the glow of white yucca blooms and lift their pointed faces to the moon. Rain, a wet blessing, replenishes and renews. And humans of varying colors and shapes lift their eyes to the vast sea of stars, humbled by this immensity.

Perhaps because spending part of the year in Santa Fe is still new, each time I make the trip to its hills, the journey feels like a pilgrimage. I feel I am moving within, inside myself. I write because I've learned to love that journey—the quiet, the exploration of ideas and languages. I also write to honor people and voices often ignored. When you share my poems such as "Elena" or "La migra" with students, when you share my family memoir *House of Houses* or a selection from *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle*, you help me connect to students I will never meet. I hope my words in books such as *My Own True Name*, compiled specifically for teens, support their emotional and intellectual journeys. I smile to the marrow of my bones when a reader says, "Your aunt was just like my Polish grandmother," or "We did that in my family, too."

Literature also can make us feel uncomfortable, ask us to go where we'd rather not go, like the poem "Sugar" about a teenage migrant worker. When literature does its deepest work, it humanizes us. The writer does what he can with his experiences while he is here. In "Passing Through," written on his seventy-ninth birthday, wise poet Stanley Kunitz wrote, "gradually I'm changing to a word. . . / . . . I only / borrowed this dust."

We all need allies to remind us of our potential for good. There is no neutral space in being effective advocates for the young. Students are taught not by robots but by humans shaped by their society. Critical thinkers, we can choose to reject stereotypes and superficial values. We can give students our faith and help them understand that we are a world of interconnected, vulnerable human beings.

You can be one of those voices to your students, helping them to persist in believing in themselves even when those around them may ignore their potential. You can also support them and motivate them to persist in developing their talents, their abilities to think critically, to read broadly, and to express themselves articulately. What power you have, dear teacher. "There is in you what is beyond you," wrote poet Paul Valéry. How's that for optimism? Your leadership is needed by your students, peers, and profession, too.

You and I belong to many communities. To be active members bringing our unique talents to our tasks, chosen or assigned, we'll need practices that sustain our convictions and enthusiasm. If we become parched, cynical, we cease to be forces, agents

for improving the world, the world that can be a gathering of un-lived lives. What habits allow you to continue to be or to become a leader with your own style in your professional organizations and at your school or university? Change is needed. You and I know that. We must let our light shine, which means valuing that light, nurturing it, and sharing it for the good of all.

Educators at times look perplexed when I refer to them as community leaders. You know: daily you and your peers teach the next generation, influence the future of your community. Of course you're leaders, though some may relinquish the opportunity to be totally engaged.

It's difficult to fully express my deep respect for the work you do. In a world of commercialism, you give information away. You and I are rich, print rich; many of our students aren't. We know book joy, *el gozalibros*; many of our students haven't experienced the private pleasure of savoring a book. We inherited a literacy legacy, and through our efforts, we can share that legacy with all pupils.

I love the words of chef Julia Child, "It's a shame to be caught up in something that doesn't absolutely make you tremble with joy." We're blessed to share this feeling about our work. I'm fortunate to know amazing teachers like you. I think far more teachers might feel this way were they to release their full talents, talents we need and their students need, talents that would warm teachers' lives.

In my completed collection of letters to you, I include suggestions for reflecting and writing. Let me make a suggestion here. Write a letter to your students. This may be an unsent letter that allows you to articulate the kind of space for exploration you plan to create. Who will feel welcome there?

Who will feel challenged but not totally discouraged? How will your students feel about learning, writing, and creative work at the end of the year or semester? Are there new strategies you hope to employ? What three adjectives would you like students to choose in describing you?

Let Us Imagine

Alike yet unlike, dear teacher, let us imagine. Let us imagine schools and campuses alive with students and faculty learning and exploring together. They share—aware of the importance of their collaborative learning in the history of the students, the nation, and the world, since we humans are interdependent.

Let us imagine textbooks and libraries that reflect the resplendent plurality of the country and the Americas, our many voices and stories, and that introduce students to the world and its complexity through literature.

Let us imagine communities and educational institutions that value teachers and librarians as essential community leaders who responsibly exercise their power to transform lives.

Let us imagine democratic communities determined to erase illiteracy, to create a literacy legacy for all, and to support the arts as an essential part of community building.

Let us imagine artists like you who persist in creativity practices to explore and share your talents.

Let us imagine creative and committed educators like you, dear teacher, who believe in the creative potential of each student, teachers who steadily practice the art of teaching.

Joy, dear teacher! Joy!

A literacy advocate, **Pat Mora** is the author of poetry, nonfiction, and children's books. Upcoming books for young readers include *Doña Flor* and *The Song of Francis and the Animals*. For more information, visit <http://www.patmora.com>.