A woman begins to read. As she gets deeper into the work, her voice cracks and she pauses. The rest of us wait in respectful silence. She continues, her voice still shaking with emotion and effort. Finally she ends. Everyone applauds. She looks up, smiles, and we all take a deep breath, glad she is okay. And only then do we begin to carefully and respectfully discuss and critique her words, her writing.

I have been part of this scene and many others like it for over twenty years now. As a writer, and thus, almost incidentally, a person who also gets paid to teach Creative Writing, I have stood, talked, paced, waved my hands, and then sat down to listen to people reading their work. I have done this in drafty community halls, in evening sessions at colleges, at summer schools in the mountains, at conferences, at universities, in elementary and high schools. I began teaching writing almost accidentally—the way many people do—because I had a degree and a first book and I thought I knew something. Now, so many years later, I am much less sure of what I know than I used to be, and I am also pretty sure that I am a much better teacher.
A number of significant experiences have informed my teaching practice. When I first took Creative Writing classes at university as a young writer, it was both a formidably terrifying, and also, in many ways, a wonderful experience. But even as a young, shy ‘emerging’ writer, I knew that some of the practices of my teachers were less than supportive.

I remember a noted writer glaring at us all one evening in fiction class and proclaiming that the only thing we would learn in his class was not to care what anyone else thought of our writing. Another instructor was proud of the people he had driven out of his class. He told us that if we were tough enough to survive his teaching, we were tough enough to be writers. This was at the end of the seventies, when, indeed, it was very tough to be a female or a non-white writer. I decided then that if I ever did get a chance to teach Creative Writing, I would not follow most of the practices that had been modeled for me.

**Learning to Teach**
I first began teaching writing to classes for women in the Extension Department at the University of Alberta. I had lots of bright ideas and not much experience but my students were amazing and often their stories were deeply moving.

I moved from there to working at a small and rapidly growing First Nations college, where I was hired to teach basic English writing skills to people who had already been deeply scarred by their experiences within the school system—whether a residential school or the mainstream system. I had an astonishing variety of people in my classes: older women, young men, people from local reserves and people from far away. I was both white and naïve about First Nations history, even though I had tried to prepare myself through reading First Nations history and literature.

At this time, my oldest son was also in his first year at college. One day he came home in frustration, swearing that he was going to quit school. When I asked him what had happened, it turned out his English teacher had written some remarks on his essay that indicated the man hadn’t really read it. My son was incredibly hurt by this carelessness—he had put a lot of effort into writing an essay about a subject that was important to him—and I was moved and impressed by how hurt he was by this teacher’s inattention. The next day, at the First Nations college, I told my classes that whatever else I did, I would try very hard to be their ‘first reader,’ that I would read their stories with care and attention, and pay attention, not only to how they were writing but also to what the story was that they had to tell.
And indeed, the stories they wrote were harsh beyond anything I had ever known; stories of abuse at residential school, of sexual abuse, of alcoholism, of survival in extremes of emotional pain. It was difficult, if not at times absurd, to try to give them a mark, but they wanted to learn and I wanted to help them so I wrote them letters explaining what I liked about their writing and what I thought they could change and at the end of term, I tried to give them the fairest mark I could.

My three years there were some of the most intense and life changing I have ever experienced. I wanted to do absolutely the best I could for my students. Many of them, with justification, felt they had been badly treated and badly taught in the mainstream educational system. In an effort to create useful curriculum materials, I read radical teachers like
Paulo Friere; I tried to make my classroom a safe and rewarding place for all of us, and I spent a lot of time reading and learning First Nations history, culture and literature. And finally, sadly, I left because the politics of the college were difficult and because I found the frustration and difficulties of being a white teacher in a First Nations classroom to be insupportable.

From these key experiences have come the main facets of my teaching philosophy: I am there to listen, I am there to say yes to people's stories and experiences, and I am also there to try and teach them the skills I perceive are necessary to make writing 'work.'

The Craft of Writing

Writing has always been an elitist craft and with good reason. It takes a long time, a lot of dedication, a lot of practice, sweat, frustration, angst, reading, thought, and just sheer writing, to become a good writer. It takes a deep love and understanding of language as well as a keen observance of the writer's own life and other people's lives. None of this time is paid time and it often isn't rewarded by a huge amount of success. Nevertheless, the impulse to write exists powerfully in so many people because people walk around with a sense of story and they need and want to do something with it.

People clearly have an innate sense of story. Cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner (2003) says that storytelling is implicit to the creation of human culture. The process of creating and telling stories appears to be fundamental to our understanding of not only what it is to be human, but how it is we are human. He writes that "the narrative gift is as distinctively human as our upright posture and our opposable thumb and forefinger." (222)

For human beings, he says, story making is

irresistible as our way of making sense of human interaction...it is through narrative that we create and recreate selfhood; that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity. There is now evidence that without the capacity to make stories about ourselves there would be no such thing as selfhood. (222)

People live within this sense of story; they tell stories to themselves and to each other. People’s ideas of their sense of self, their sense of family, community, and the creation of human culture are dependent on this narrative gift. But where people run into difficulty with writing is
when they discover, often to their surprise, that the craft of the written narrative is extremely complex, and uses very different skills than oral storytelling. So even though they might be sure they have an important story to tell, they are often disappointed at how flat and uneven the story seems when they write it down. They wonder what they’ve done wrong. Sometimes they give up or, sometimes, they come to a writing class.

Hearts and Minds

As a writing teacher, I try hard to contact people on many levels, to support and assist them in finding the story that they want to tell, and to help identify for them the skills and craft needed to write that story well. Often people have no idea what story might show up and demand they write it; someone might come to my class with an idea about writing a cute story about their dog and leave with a rough draft of a story about their difficult family. I don’t guide them to write difficult stories; I merely open the door and tell them it is absolutely okay if they choose to do that.
I am aware that in so doing, I am putting them, the class, and even myself, into an oddly precarious and conflicted position. I support them in telling stories that come from their heart and their guts. Often these stories are places of great emotion; they are like burning stones that people have been carrying for a long time.

In order to create both safety and structure in the class, I talk about these contradictions and how this conflict between the private story and needing an audience is a conflict that all writers have to learn to solve. I also give guidelines for how the people in the class can workshop each other’s writing with care and support. And I also know that even with all my care, people can still get hurt in writing class. In every class, someone asks whether writing is therapeutic. “Yes, it certainly can be,” I say cautiously, “but I am not a therapist and that isn’t why we are here.”

I learned this difficult lesson in the second year of my teaching practice. Every writing class is different but for some reason, one of the classes of women that I taught at the University of Alberta has remained in my mind as a particularly stressful experience. Perhaps because the class was advertised as being only for women, this particular class was made up of women who had come specifically to write about traumatic experiences.
One woman gave me a book length manuscript to read that described, in sickening detail, physical and sexual abuse by her father, physical abuse by her husband, and physical and emotional abuse by her grown son. Another woman was writing about being raised by a mother who had psychiatric difficulties. A third was writing about the recent suicide of her best friend. I realized quickly that I was in over my head and I called a friend of mine who was a skilled therapist for advice. She came to the class and talked about the difference between therapy and writing. It was an enormous help and the class proceeded more smoothly. But I was still very relieved when that class was over.

I learned from that session with my therapist-friend Donna to be carefully attentive to the emotional tenor of the class but not swept away by it. Another friend, an art therapist, when I asked her about my dilemma about working with people who wanted to write about trauma or pain, said, very honestly, “You are asking therapeutic questions so you have to be prepared to handle that.” I realized that it was my responsibility, order to allow people to be open to painful stories, to also set careful limits to emotional expression, to be up front about my approach and those limitations, and through that sense of boundaries, to create a sense of both honesty and safety within the whole class.

Nevertheless, I appreciate the fact that people often walk into a creative writing class with significant emotional loading, and in particular, with a certain amount of fear. Often they have gotten the idea, through their educational process, that there is a right way and a wrong way to write. They are expecting to go back to ‘school,’ to be told the rules, to be given exercises and told how to do them. It takes a while to undo these expectations, to allow for the idea of collaboration, for permission to write whatever they like, to communicate the idea that they are the ones who have ‘authority’ over their own story.
People are not always comfortable with such an idea; in fact, I figure it is probably, at times, downright irritating to come to a class expecting to be told the rules and be thrown back again on their own resources. I figure that one of my most important tasks as an instructor is to say yes, that’s fine, do it your way, find your own story, find your own process. But still, we all generally manage to have a good time; often members of the class bond strongly with one another, and the group continues long after I have moved on. I encourage this. Many of my own close and supportive writing friendships have come out of writing classes that I have taken.

**Writer as Teacher**

Learning to teach and learning to teach writing were two separate processes in my life. In order to learn to teach writing, I read all the books I could find about writing by writers. Some of them were more helpful than others but none of them were actually about teaching writing; most of them were books by writers designed for people who wanted to teach themselves how to write. In my own writing practice, I have never found such books helpful so I was hesitant to recommend or encourage my students to use them. Nevertheless, I found and borrowed ideas for exercises, plus occasionally useful articles and mantras about the craft of writing.
Learning to teach, however, was a different process. Many things about becoming a teacher, primarily of adult learners, surprised me. I was initially astonished, for example, by my level of emotional engagement with my students, by how deeply I came to care for their writing, their struggles, their processes, and their difficulties with their lives. Because of this, at the First Nations College, I soon found myself in an odd position. Because writing is or can be such a private medium, people often wrote to me about private stories, as if they were writing a letter to a confidant or a close friend. Often people disclosed issues of sexual abuse or other kinds of abuse for the first time. The writing broke the ice and once I knew about their lives, they felt relatively free to confide in me.

I soon found my office crowded with students who came in at all hours to chat. Even though there were wonderfully warm and competent counsellors at the college, somehow being a writing teacher also let me, in part, fulfill this role. I was comfortable being a reader but not at all comfortable at being placed in a kind of ‘therapist’ role for which I neither trained nor prepared. But people didn’t actually want therapy. They wanted to talk, to tell me more stories, and when I ran into situations I knew I wasn’t competent to handle, such as advising a woman who thought her husband was abusing their children, I asked them to seek out professional advice.

After the First Nations job, I began teaching at a small rural community college. The students here were also challenging but in a different sense. Many of them were taking the class for what they hoped would be easy credit, although in every class there were also dedicated talented students genuinely interested in writing. Despite my best efforts, the easy credit students had a tendency to disappear, while the dedicated students forged on.

But this experience taught me to be organized, focused, and to develop curriculum and reading materials that would suit a wide range and variety of students. I looked everywhere for curriculum ideas—in textbooks about teaching English, in books by and about writers, and in my own experience. One of the primary methods for learning to be both a writer and a writing teacher has been from taking courses. I learned wonderful lessons, both from my good teachers and also, surprisingly, from some truly awful teachers who were nevertheless often amazing people and good writers.

I have learned, in particular, that I am not, in fact, a teacher in the traditional sense of imparting knowledge. I am more of a guide, more a kind of person who walks alongside the aspiring writer pointing out various pitfalls and opportunities—somewhat akin to a mountain
guide, a person who knows the territory, the hazards, the weather, the opportunity for glorious scenery and great adventures, someone who has been there and back.

One of my writing teachers once said to me, “As a writer, you build your own jungle and then make paths within it.” Having wandered now through many jungles and undaunted, still looking for more, I feel fairly confident in having the knowledge to point out both the crocodiles lurking below and the bird-of-paradise flying above.

Now when I reflect back on my years of teaching, I do regret how ad hoc my training as a writing teacher has been. Although the ad-hoc and self-taught nature of my teaching practice made for a very interesting journey, there were definitely some things that would have made my journey easier. My teaching skills developed as my writing skills developed, as I tested what I taught against what I knew from my own practice as a writer and my experience as a student. But two things would have been supportive—an opportunity for discussion, for conferencing, and for idea-sharing with other writing teachers, and access to written curricular materials aimed at adult learners of creative writing and not designed for self-teaching.

I have also developed a strong conviction that people who teach writing at whatever level, should in fact be writers themselves, but that not all writers are necessarily going to be good teachers. The tendency for
educational institutions to assume that English teachers are suitable to teach writing has always puzzled me. Obviously, no one would expect to learn to play music from a music theorist however knowledgeable they might be. Writing is a practice and needs to be learned from someone who knows the tenets of that practice, not how it is supposed to work but how, in fact, it does work. And writers who also want to be teachers need to spend some time and energy creating curricular materials and figuring out what pedagogical methods will work best for them.

**Teacher as Writer**

Despite my years of experience, I continue to be astonished at the complexity and intricacy of writing practice and how much there is still to learn, both about the craft of writing and about teaching writing. Being knowledgeable about writing theory and teaching writing hasn’t necessarily made me a better writer. What makes me a better writer and will continue to do so is writing itself; the ongoing, prickly, and painstaking practice of combining word plus word, plus idea, plus thought, plus image, plus revising and editing, consultation with readers and back to revising, and knowing I must constantly consider how I write and how I convey that knowledge to others.

Writing is time-consuming and patience-consuming and picky and often ferociously difficult and discouraging. It is also incredibly satisfying. For me, writing is a way of thinking. I am not sure what I would do without it; in fact I simply can’t imagine my life without writing. I have tried and it is a frightening thought.

It is this awareness of the importance of story, of narrative, of writing as thinking, of narrative as a source for understanding, that continues to motivate me to become a better writing teacher. But it also forces me to question why I am teaching, how I am teaching and who I am teaching.

I have now also been a professional writer for over twenty years. I have written and published books of poetry, novels, children’s books, and now a non-fiction memoir that was part of my Ph.D. dissertation. Books and writing fill my life. I edit other people's books; I write for magazines; I review books, I even survived a few years as a small publisher. I also pay attention to the book business. In the last few years, I have watched as the market for book publishing has narrowed; more and more voices are being left out.

When I teach in the summers in the mountains of British Columbia, I have classes full of thoughtful people with good ideas for interesting books. I know that their chances of being published are slim; more and
more I am encouraging people to publish independently, to work within their own communities to do writing and publishing projects. I have watched as independent movies, and independent music have started to become predominant in their respective markets. Now I wonder if it isn’t time for independent publishing to do the same, and consequently, I have added information about self-publishing to my workshops.

Stories can carry personal understanding, are vital to creating a sense of community; stories unite us within our families and our extended relationships. The literature of a society is vital to the understanding and nature of that society. But published literature is literature that is increasingly legitimized through a publishing process controlled by market forces. Increasingly lately, I worry about all those other stories that might never make it into books because the publishing business thinks, for whatever reason, that they don’t have a wide enough audience. And yet such stories are often vital to the history of the family or community or region in which the stories are born and live. Montana writer, William Kittredge (1999) says:

We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark and rework our stories and we do it again the next morning and all day long, before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing our purposes. Without storytelling its hard to recognize ultimate reasons why one action is more essential than another. (52)

When I teach writing, I am aware that the people with whom I am working are carrying stories with the potential to both unite and enlighten their readers. They are also people with experience and expertise in their own right. Whether they will ever become literary writers is beside the point. If what they gain from my class is a sense of the legitimacy of their own story, a validation of the power of their own experience, and an understanding of the power, the intricacy, and the amazing craftwork that goes into creating a piece of writing, then I have done a good job.

If they become serious about writing, keep editing and polishing their work, take more classes, and become published writers, then I am delighted but I can’t take credit for that. My job is to show them the various paths in the jungle and theirs is to walk the one that suits them. But I am always very glad, at the end of every class, that, together, we have shared our stories and thus we have shared both our private journeys and our common humanity.
References


About the Author

**Luanne Armstrong** is a novelist, freelance writer and editor, and publisher from the Kootenay region of British Columbia. She completed a BFA in Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Luanne has worked at a variety of jobs, including coordinating women’s groups, teaching at a First Nations College, and working in Indonesia with an environmental organization. She has taught Creative Writing at the University of Alberta, the College of the Rockies, the Kootenay School of Arts in Nelson, and the Okanagan School of the Arts in Penticton. She was the Berton House writer in residence in Dawson City, Yukon, from September to December 2000. She is the managing editor of Hodgepog Books, which publishes literary and children’s books.

About the Artist

**Lynda McLeod** has no formal education in art; instead, she draws on her passion for nursing and the relationships formed while caring for patients in extreme grief, pain or constant suffering. As an effort to sustain balance and meaning in her work as a nurse educator and a consultant, Lynda connects with nature and her family by going on long canoe trips in the summer months. The meditative act of painting these moments provides a vehicle for her to express and celebrate the transformational relationships formed while serving and/or coaching patients, nursing students, and health care workers.