

Fund for Teachers

The Rural School and Community Trust

Project Summary/Presentation

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Paul Deagle

Skowhegan Area High School

Skowhegan, Maine

After twenty-three years of teaching, I still enjoy the first day of school as much as the last day of school. I know this sounds contrived but it's true, I swear. Seeing how much my students have grown over the summer, the new faces from the middle school moving through the halls, the brighter, more mature attitudes and the excitement, excitement, excitement, well, I'm a sucker for all of it. It makes sense that I still enjoy the start of a school, really, if you think about it. Every fall since 1966, that's forty-five consecutive years, I've gone back to school, either as a student, or as a teacher. No wonder I like it so much; I've no memory of doing anything else in September.

Yet, there is one part of going back to school that in the last few years has started to rub me the wrong way. I hate it when the first student rushes up to me to ask, "So, what did you do over the summer, Mr. Deagle?" I know that may sound callous, perhaps even petty, but let me explain. Even though the question is practically inevitable, being asked for first time what I did over the summer always catches me off guard. I stumble, unable to crystalize my entire, oh so precious summer into a few words, and do you know what I find myself saying? Yes, that's right, I say, "Oh, not too much." I hate myself when I say this because as soon as the student replies, "Oh, that's cool" and flutters away to find some

other teacher to talk to, I start wondering, well, what the hell did I do with my summer? I must have done something, I think, but mowing the lawn only to watch it grow again, or spending all morning trying to decide what to have for breakfast really isn't something I can say to a fifteen year old, is it? And after I answer the same question the same way 37 times before the first bell rings, I'm quietly left to conclude that, yes, I actually did waste my summer and thank you very much everyone for pointing this out to me.

But this year, well, it was different. I was ready for that first, fresh-faced student and when she asked what I had done with my summer, I had already been looking forward to the question since the middle of July.

"Hey, you know what I did? I went to Canada and studied creative writing with the greatest short story writer who's ever lived."

That stopped her in her tracks, let me tell you.

"You studied creative writing? In the summer? Does that mean we're going to have to do creative writing in class?"

"Sure does."

"Oh, well, that's cool. My brother broke his arm. Gotta go."

The Humber School for Writers Summer Writing Program (Humber College, Toronto) has quietly grown into the most effective writing program for emerging writers in the world, and ironically enough, this was never the intention of the program when it began nineteen years ago. To best understand the Humber School for Writers Summer Program you have to understand what it is like trying to become a published writer in Canada. Canada is big, very big if you're traveling by plane and practically gargantuan if you're

travelling by car. Ironically, though, ninety percent of the publishing industry in Canada is concentrated into about four square miles of downtown Toronto, Ontario. In the last ten years most of the major literary prizes in Canada have been awarded to writers who either come from Ontario or moved to Toronto to get published. Located in western Toronto, the Humber School for Writers began as a sort of “bootcamp” for promising writers outside of Ontario to come to the big city and figure out how to get their book published, or at least meet with hugely successful and talented professional writers who offer to critique about fifteen pages of their writing and then send them on to meet with powerful editors and agents in the Toronto publishing scene, if their work is promising. As you can imagine, unpublished writers are a financially desperate lot, and those who manage to first, produce a worthy manuscript that earns them acceptance into the Humber Summer Writing Program and second, raise the money to go to Toronto, fully expect to get their money’s worth, either in securing a literary agent, selling a manuscript, or at least getting some practical advice as to how to either improve their writing.

This past summer, more than seventy-five percent of the emerging writers who attended the Summer Workshop with me travelled well over a thousand miles to get there. I met a twenty-two year old writer from Whitehorse, Yukon who washed dishes in a Chinese restaurant for three years, saving up money to attend the workshop. He took two weeks off from work, drove gravel roads for three days before his truck died in northern Alberta, and then he hitchhiked three more days to get to Humber Summer Writing Program a day late. Needless to say, he had very high expectations that he would learn a lot in a very short period of time, and that’s exactly what happened. By the end of the week, he had a contract with an agent recommended by the Humber Summer Writing Program, as

well as several meetings with Miriam Toews, the most promising, most gifted new voice in Canadian fiction, described by the London Times as one of the top ten female novelists in the world. He told me she had given him “brilliant advice” about how to edit his novel. Three weeks ago, only a month after he limped back to the Yukon, he sold his manuscript to Harper Collins Canada. The last I heard from him, he was back in Toronto looking for an apartment and a new laptop with the modest little advance he had received for his book. He will be the 262nd alumni of the Humber Summer Writing Program to be published, one of the twenty-six percent of their graduates who have achieved such success since 1990.

As you can see the Humber School for Writers Summer Program is a no-nonsense, intense introduction to every aspect of professional writing – from finding inspiration to selling finished manuscripts. My original intent in going there was to work on my own novel, “The Honor Song of Dreamer MacIsaac” – which I had been drafting for four years and conceptualizing for over twenty years. Every goal I had for my experience was met. I didn’t know if my writing was good enough to be published when I arrived and by the time I was driving back to my home in Maine, I had been told by Alistair MacLeod, Canada’s greatest living writer and the world’s premier short story writer, that my writing was “very, very good” and that I should devote myself to writing a second novel, shorter and more accessible for publishers, because it was only “a matter of time before I’d be published by a major literary house in Toronto.” Likewise, when I arrived in Toronto, I had no idea how much money a major publishing house would put into editing my draft, and before I left, I had met with three of the most powerful editors in Canada and the CEO of Harper Collins, all of whom told me the same thing: they would need to invest about \$80,000 dollars in my draft, which was far too much to invest in a first time writer, and so I

had to write something different, something shorter and less labor intensive to edit, and then the boardroom doors would open for me and my manuscript received for consideration. And finally, when I arrived I had no idea if my writing process was effective, and my classroom interactions with other writers indicated that I should not be concerned about how I write because my product was just fine. In conclusion, I had an absolutely complete and fulfilling experience at the Humber School for Writers Summer Program, and I feel very confident that I will be a published writer within five years.

So, how did my experience affect my secondary teaching? Well, to put it simply, you have to see things this way. When we design K-12 curriculums we pay close attention to what universities and vocational training centers require as basic entrance skills. We structure secondary education to serve continued learning after high school. This past summer I had a chance to see what creative writing is like at the professional level, and being an educator at heart, I transcribed everything I saw in my classroom, my conferences with world class writers, my business meetings with editors and publishers – all of it, I filtered through this single question: “How can I prepare students K-12 so they can be accepted into a program like the Humber School for Writers Summer Program after high school?” To answer that question, well, takes some time because what I am really asking myself is, “How do encourage young people, K-12, to try expressing themselves as writers”, or to put it another way “How do I help students discern whether they have the gift (or even the desire) to become writers?” These are big educational philosophy questions, and I have only these few defining benchmarks to guide my K-12 creative writing curriculum so far.

- Creative writing instruction should begin with a student's first experiences with literacy in kindergarten.
- Students should be taught early in life to think of themselves as writers, and then work to prove this to be true.
- Late elementary students should practice all types of creative writing exercises until they begin finding their own voice and then shift their study inward to draw out the stories waiting inside them.
- All middle school and high school instruction should be manuscript-centered, with the instructor offering little more than a reader's response. All revisions to manuscripts must be made by students, not teachers because a creative writing teacher's role should be to shift all responsibility for growth back to the writer.
- Emerging writers should spend as much time reading as they do writing, and the authors they should read should be ones with whom they share a common vision.

Currently, I am in the process of designing a K-12 creative writing curriculum for my school district, something I've initiated myself and will continue to develop for some time, regardless of the economic uncertainties that often lead to cuts in arts programs. While I have little of this curriculum design on paper, I have never been more driven and goal-oriented in my entire teaching career.

Thank you to Fund for Teachers and the Rural School and Community Trust who helped me accomplish this.