

Reflections on MALS and Learning to Write

Kathy Fortin

Can good writing be taught? This question is a recurring debate in both academic and literary circles, though as a student in Dartmouth's Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program (MALS), I was not aware the question even existed. A fellow classmate, now an archivist at the college's Rauner Special Collections Library, recently told me that the library had acquired the papers of Brock Brower, a professor in the MALS program she knew I admired. After my friend told me what she learned from the Brower collection, I decided to visit the question, in terms of my own experience, of whether good writing can be taught.

I had decided on the MALS program following a twenty-five-year career in a law firm. To experience Dartmouth's academic setting and to focus on writing became the ideal opportunity to satisfy my craving to learn. I savored every class, beginning with Professor Brower's course called "Periodical Journalism." Every week, the class of a dozen gathered around a large conference table, where he sat at one end. From the start, he captured my attention in his soft, yet compelling tone of voice, gentile manner, and refined style. It was autumn and he often wore a classic blazer over a dress shirt and sweater. I saw him as someone akin to a handsome William Holden and a grandfatherly Walter Cronkite. I knew Professor Brower was an accomplished journalist and author, but he did not reveal much about himself. Occasionally, he

would mention an article he wrote for “Esquire” or “LIFE Magazine.” In one of our early classes, he asked what periodicals and magazines we read. I remember the diversity of the answers, among them “The Atlantic,” “The New Yorker,” and “Time Magazine.” As we answered, he nodded, and advised us to keep reading good journalism.

Recently, after my review of some of the Brower materials, I learned that Professor Brower was a 1953 graduate of Dartmouth, had studied at Oxford, and was a Rhodes Scholar. He was also a contributing magazine journalist alongside notable authors that included Nora Ephron, Irwin Shaw, and Peter Bogdonovich. I discovered that he wrote an extensive cover story for “LIFE Magazine” (issue dated August 1, 1969) about Massachusetts Senator Theodore “Ted” Kennedy and the Chappaquiddick incident, in which a passenger in his vehicle, Mary Jo Kopechne, was killed.

I also learned that Professor Brower had been connected to the great literary circles of the 1960s and 1970s in New York, which included a friendship with the luminary writers Joan Didion, and her husband, John Gregory Dunne. The correspondence between them reflects interesting discussions of their writing projects. In one letter, Ms. Didion congratulates Brower and offers commentary on his newly published book, *The Last Great Creature*. The letters also provide a private glimpse into a different era of writers, including their lifestyles and travels, and the challenges inherent in pursuing a living from writing. Professor Brower had once told our class, “There is writing, and there is the business of writing, and they are very different activities.” When I sought to become published, I came to understand what he meant.

When I began Professor Brower’s class, I was an eager student, yet a bit intimidated. All these years later, I realize I had no idea what I did not know. I must have believed in the process and trusted that it would provide me with whatever I needed, even if I did not know that for myself. In a particular one-on-one meeting with Professor Brower, we sat at a library conference room table. The door was open, yet it was quiet. In the late afternoon, there were none of the usual shuffling sounds of students’ sandals or moccasins, or voices echoing in the outside corridors. On the table in front of him was my latest paper, a 1,500-word article about a recent visit I had made to my grandparents’ birthplace in Pietrelcina, Italy. There I had met

relatives, visited my grandmother's one-room stone house in the *castello* section of the village, and learned that my grandmother's next-door neighbor was Padre Pio, a Capuchin monk, later canonized into sainthood by the Roman Catholic Church. That visit was an experience that still holds deep meaning and one about which I had felt inspired to write.

Professor Brower held a red pen over my paper, which was already covered with numerous markings. I nervously waited for what would happen next. In his calm manner, he looked up from my paper, smiled, and said, "I love this part. It's so funny. I can just picture it." That moment is one I remember clearly. I felt exhilarated that I had written something that caused my professor to react favorably. I recently reread that very same paper and felt a flush of embarrassment as I remembered his advice on reordering certain paragraphs to improve the flow, reworking some sentences that ran too long, and other gems of his wisdom that I now know were gained through his decades of professional writing. His critique was constructive and delivered with genuine interest, honesty, and support. His style became the model for what I have sought in my writers' groups.

Professor Brower's comments that afternoon represented a starting point for my writing. Even more, his course excited and motivated me to continue with other MALS writing classes, such as Barbara Kreiger's "The Personal Essay," Thomas Powers' "The Art of Non-Fiction," and Harvey and Myrna Fommer's "Oral History." Each of these professors offered knowledge and encouragement beyond what I ever expected.

Reflecting on Professor's Brower's course and my MALS experience, I conclude with some final thoughts on the question of teaching writing. While I had an interest in creative writing before I entered the MALS program, I did not know that my experiences would result in pursuing a writing life, one I have continued ever since. I am certain this would not have occurred without teachers like Professor Brower. Finally, while the question, "Can good writing be taught?" will likely continue to be discussed, I know from my experiences in the classroom and in the library meeting room, that Professor Brower helped me understand what it meant to write, inspired me to want to write well, and that he did, indeed, teach me to write.

Note:

Brock Brower's papers can be found at Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth College.

They include printed articles, galleys, research and correspondence. Of note is his correspondence with Joan Didion Dunn, Norman Mailer, Thomas Wolfe, Robert S. McNamara, Arthur Penn, and Dan Wakefield. His handwritten notes and correspondence with editors reflect his writing process. The papers also document his time as senior speechwriter in the Office of the Attorney General.

The finding aid for this collection is:

https://archivesspace.dartmouth.edu/resources/2757#tree::resource_2757

(Compliments of Ilana Grallert, Rauner Library)