

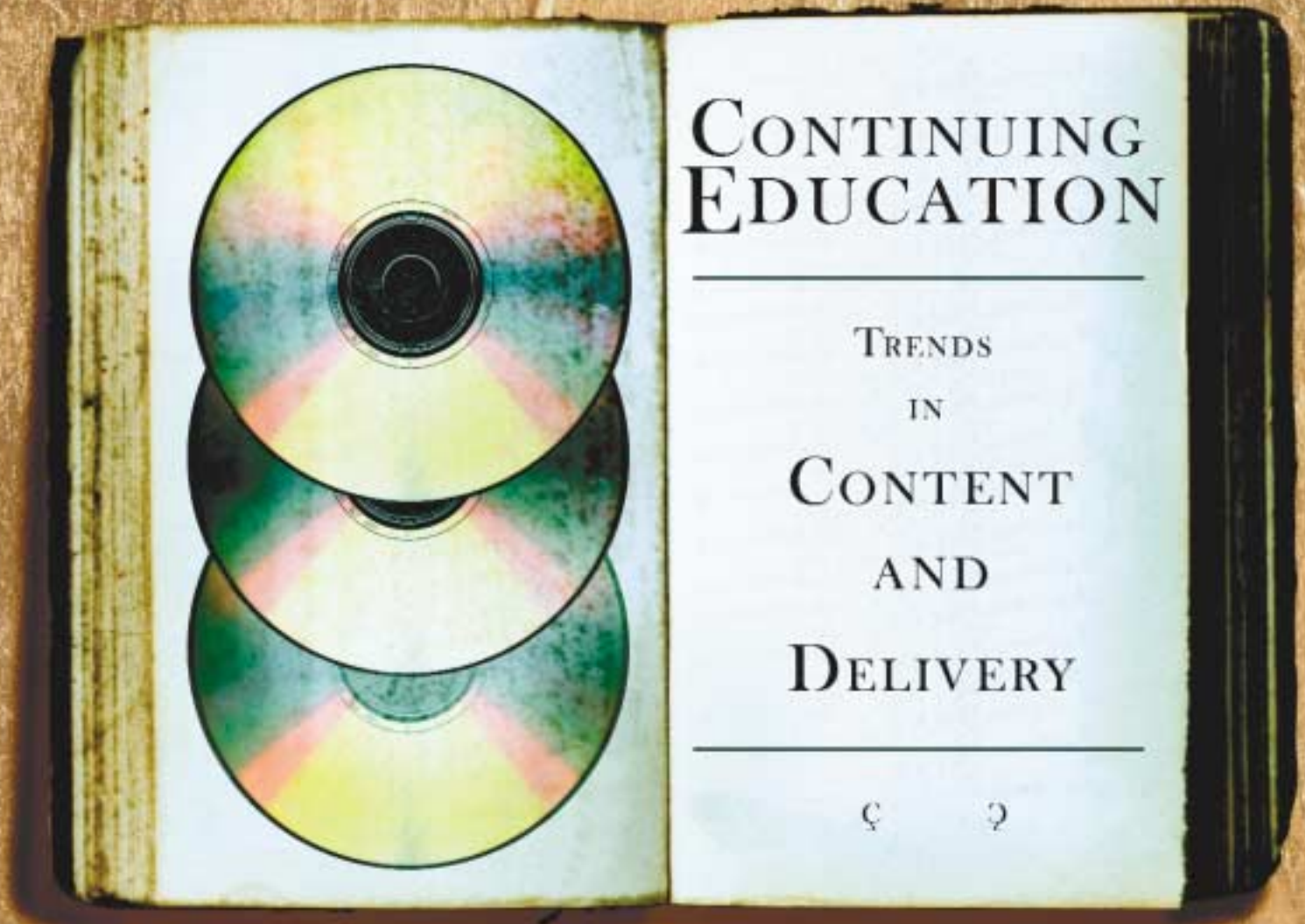
WRITING TO HEAL / LEARNING TO TRUST

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# WRITING TO HEAL *LEARNING TO TRUST*

BY HANNAH FISKE

“It is in our idleness, in our dreams,” wrote Virginia Woolf, “that the submerged truth comes to the top.” For centuries, writers have known there is power in their craft beyond simple storytelling. The mere act of putting pen to paper opens channels of creativity and energy that flow like lightning through the veins. Better yet is the interaction with one’s audience, reading the written works aloud and hearing and sensing a response.

For many, simply knowing there is a reader is enough to satisfy the longing to connect with another. The opportunity to express one’s truth in a way that enables the reader to comprehend it—if only for a moment—is fulfilling. Writing forces a kind of honesty when words are scribbled in black and white. Not a bone-crushing honesty, but the kind that wraps the writer and reader in a blanket of truth, an understanding that what is being communicated is to be believed.

If writing opens and empowers, it is only natural that those in the helping professions have attempted to harness and direct it to those most in need. More than 15 years ago in a housing project in Massachusetts, one woman succeeded in doing just that—altering forever her own life and the lives of the underprivileged women she invited to write with her in an ongoing workshop.

Pat Schneider, MFA, founder/director of Amherst Writers & Artists (AWA) and author of *The Writer as an Artist* (distributed by Amherst Writers & Artists Press) and *Writing Alone and With Others: A Continuing Passion* (Oxford University Press, 2003) understood the benefits of

“When you write with other people, you break your silence and isolation,” says Pat Schneider, MFA, founder/director of Amherst Writers & Artists. “When your voice is affirmed in that setting, you gain self-confidence and begin to understand that your own story is important and that you are not alone—others have suffered through what you are suffering.”

writing—she had witnessed them in her own life—and had been sharing her unique methods and techniques for years through writing workshops in the Amherst area. When she was approached by social worker Deb Burwell about leading a writing group for women in a housing project in the nearby mill town of Chicopee, Schneider readily agreed.

The first week, Schneider recalls, was rough. No one showed up. The second week, when Burwell stepped in to provide

transportation and encouragement, the picture began to look brighter. “Once I had them, I never lost them,” Schneider says. “They stayed, and we formed a basic group that varied from 8 to 12 women. That core group has been with me for 15 years.”

The group met weekly, writing and reading their writings aloud for three hours. The impact this exercise had on the participants was astounding, if not unexpected, she explains. “When you write with other people, you break your silence and isolation,” she says. “When your voice is affirmed in that setting, you gain self-confidence and begin to understand that your own story is important and that you are not alone—others have suffered through what you are suffering.”

For women living in housing projects, these truths are especially important, she adds. “It is difficult for them to trust each other and find this kind of mutual support because there is always the fear that a neighbor might get angry and report you to the authorities to have your children taken away,” she explains. “It doesn’t matter whether or not the mother is doing anything wrong. This is a type of power neighbors have over each other.”

Additionally, women living in poverty often fear the men in their lives, who frequently do not want them to have female friends, Schneider says. “Some of the women in our group,” she says, “were



threatened by other women's husbands and boyfriends, who called them and said, 'You are all a bunch of lezzies. If you call again, you'll be sorry.'" Nevertheless, the group remained intact and continued to write each week, breaking through the barriers of distrust and dishonesty that are an integral part of life in housing projects and impoverished regions.

Robin Therrien, MSW, LCSW, program director of Amherst Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI) and an original participant in the Chicopee group, credits her continuing education and social work career to Schneider's workshop. "The workshops offered us so much strength, in addition to providing a place to write," she recalls. "I never expected to go on to college, I just loved to write. Pen and paper have always been my friends."

Therrien recalls the first time she met Schneider, who she remembers as "an old lady with glasses, white-grayish hair, and country clothes." She and the other participants were skeptical, she says, wondering whether the workshop was simply another way for a well-to-do country lady to give to the poor. "But, I loved to write, so I went," she says. "The groups were more than writing. They were Pat's way of introducing us to writing and making it safe and OK for us. She told us, 'If you can talk, you can write. Talking is writing on the air.'"

Schneider's AWA method consists of a series of practices designed to ensure the workshop is a safe place for writers to create and share their work:

- Writers are encouraged to write, but are not required to read their works aloud.

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This practice enables participants to write freely, without fear that they will be forced to share their writing with others.

- No criticism or suggestions for change are allowed when discussing first-draft material. "We tell the writer only what is strong, what we remember from the work," Schneider says. "No one will critique it, only offer positive feedback."

• Unless otherwise specified by the author, all work is treated as fiction. "We don't assume a piece of writing is autobiographical," she explains. "It's nobody's business whether you are imagining a story or whether it's your own." Schneider says this practice requires more than a little effort, as well as a well-trained facilitator, but when maintained, boasts impressive results. "It makes all the difference because it maintains this gathering as a writing workshop and not a group therapy session," she says. "It also protects the writer's privacy."

• The group leader participates in all activities with other members. "A person leading this type of group must be willing to reveal herself," she adds, "to be able to write alongside other people, to take the same risk of self-disclosure that the participants are taking."

• Confidentiality is a must. While it may seem fundamental, Schneider stresses the importance of keeping everything that occurs within a meeting completely confidential, she says. "The group promises that nothing that happens or is written within the group will ever be discussed outside of that group," she says.

It is essential to note that Schneider—author of six books (fiction, poetry, and memoir) as well as a number of plays and libretti—does not consider herself a therapist. She is clear about the fact that the



A group of participants at an AWAI writing workshop

workshop is not, and never was, intended as group therapy. She designed the AWA method to be used by people with and without psychotherapy or social work training.

"Therapy has been important in my life, and I would never criticize therapy or therapists, but we have come to a place where many people refuse to talk openly about their lives to someone they do not pay to listen," she explains. "This fact is sad because there is something so healing, so primitive about our need to be in community with other people who know our story."

Our storytelling heritage is as ancient, she says, as our ancestors sitting around a campfire in a cave at night, women sitting around a quilting frame, or men sitting around the stove in a general store. In today's society, however, there is no longer an opportunity to gather and tell stories. "I see this work as inherent to what it means to be human," Schneider says. "It is important that it is art and not therapy. There is a healing power to art."

Everyone, according to Schneider, is an artist, and our primary form of expressing ourselves artistically is through writing. "To learn any of the other art forms, it is necessary to go through training," she says. "But if you can get a woman who dropped out of school at the age of 12 and has several kids to write in the voice in which she talks to her best friend, telling her own story—there you have literature."

Therrien agrees, adding that simply being able to jot her stories and read them aloud was a powerful tool that played a large role in her long climb out of the desperate poverty in which she lived when the group began. "When we say 'sharing,' it's not a therapy, social-worky type of sharing. What we are reading is a story, unless we specify otherwise," she explains.

The workshop had a similar effect on other participants, she recalls, all of whom are involved, in one way or another, with AWAI, which offers workshops for underprivileged populations and leadership

training to prepare individuals to work with disempowered populations.

"The only difference between the Chicopee group and other AWA workshops is that some people have money and some don't," Therrien says. "Because of their socio-economic status, some people, especially women, have been told to shut up in our cul-

ture." The workshop provided the women with a place where—for the first time for many—they could be heard.

The fact that participants were encouraged to write whatever they wished without

**"Therapy has been important in my life, and I would never criticize therapy or therapists, but we have come to a place where many people refuse to talk openly about their lives to someone they do not pay to listen," says Schneider. "This fact is sad because there is something so healing, so primitive about our need to be in community with other people who know our story."**

being forced to share their work with other group members made it easier to open up on the page, according to Therrien. The workshop, she says, afforded members an opportunity to interact with each other as women, a rare occurrence in their world.

"There is no support group to help women interact with each other when they are in a place where they can't trust anyone," she says. "They live in a community where everyone backstabs each other and where there is a tremendous amount of alcoholism and drug abuse." Having a safe, nonjudgmental place where they could express themselves in an artistic format became an essential element of the women's survival.

Schneider understood that it would be impossible for the workshop participants to write freely if they were afraid their writing would be read by someone at home or in their community,

so she offered to hold their notebooks between meetings.

Additionally, each week she collected the writings and took them home to type them in manuscript format. In her other workshops, she says, when she receives a piece of writing for critique, it is usually typewritten. In low-income workshops, however, the writing is almost always handwritten and often illegible. "That paper, the handwritten page, is sacred. There is a holiness about it," she says. "It is important not to put red-pen corrections all over it because this is someone's voice. One of the problems these women had was that they already had so many red marks on their souls."

Simply typing the manuscripts—once with errors intact, on which she made some corrections and suggestions and then again, incorporating her suggestions—had an amazing impact on participants, Schneider recalls. "I typed their names on top as if they were manuscripts being sent off to the American Poetry Review, as beautifully as I would do one of my own manuscripts, and gave them back to the writers," she explains. Sometimes, if a writer had composed a piece of prose that felt like poetry, she would type it out as a poem. If the writer preferred the piece to remain as prose, she would take it home and retype it.

The huge investment in time and effort was well worth it, Schneider says. "I had tears in my eyes—they rise even as I remember—when I gave every woman five typed copies of her work," she adds. "They told me their whole sense of themselves was changed when, for the first time in their lives, they saw their own words in print, free of errors and with no correction marks on them."

— Hannah Fiske is a staff writer at *Social Work Today*.



The AWAI Advisory Board. Robin Therrien is seated second (left to right). Pat Schneider the third person standing (left to right).

## AWAI Training Seminars

Amherst Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI) offers a four-day training program that grew from the original writing workshop for low-income women in Chicopee, MA. Under the guidance of Pat Schneider, MFA, founder/director of Amherst Writers & Artists (AWA), the training program is designed to help build the skills and abilities necessary to work with underserved populations—from women in housing projects to incarcerated males, as well as from AIDS/HIV patients to nursing home residents.

While the program's goal is to train participants to lead future writing workshops in their home cities and towns, many who attend the training find themselves freshly motivated and inspired to pursue their own writing as well.

Annie Fahy, BSN, CAC, women's specialist and owner of Recovery Cafe, a private counseling center in Athens, GA, was attracted to AWAI because of her work with impoverished women in her region. "I always brought art workshop therapy into the program and found that many women responded better to that than they did to traditional therapy," she says. "The art process seems to help women open up, and the fact that there is a tangible result at the end is incredibly good for self-esteem."

Fahy attended AWA and AWAI training in 2000 to gain expertise in helping other women and found herself "blown away" by the effect it had on her own creativity. "I can see now that I was bringing art and writing projects into my work because I wanted more of that in my own life," she says. "It was fruitful for me to be a part of these workshops."

When she returned home, she offered a workshop for anyone interested—not limited to low-income participants—and received positive feedback, Fahy recalls. She decided, however, that she preferred to offer her workshops for those without other writing resources and applied for a grant to help fund it. "I'm pretty sure that within months we'll be running a writer's group for the housing authority," she notes.

Fahy also incorporated the AWA method in her private practice, using writing exercises to help women who are motivated to learn more about themselves. "Many women have a secret wish to write," she adds, "and the exercises we were provided with during training are so nurturing to people's inner voices."

The intense, thorough training offers participants an opportunity to reflect and examine the motivation and biases they may encounter within themselves as they work with underprivileged populations, according to Patricia Riggs, LICSW, hospice social worker for the Visiting Nurses Association Hospice Alliance, Northampton, MA, who also attended AWAI training. "The training challenges us to look at our own biases so we can be more accessible to the people we are trying to help," she says. Additionally, the training built confidence in her ability to guide others in finding the same rewards she has found in writing.

Riggs implemented her training at the hospice by obtaining a grant from an elder home care agency and offering a workshop for caregivers of elders. "Writing was a powerful tool in helping them express themselves, although none of them consider themselves writers," she explains. "It helps them to hear their own words being spoken and read aloud, reflected in the words of others."

Riggs explains that the power of a writing workshop is in hearing your own words "float out on the air" and seeing the recognition in others eyes as they listen. "We tend to be a verbal society, but writing offers us a chance to quiet our minds," Riggs says. "It requires us to be reflective and give some thought to what we are saying. The creative process is spontaneous, however, so there is no censoring."

Since the AWA method training seminar was first offered, more than 400 writing workshop leaders have been certified, according to Robin Therrien, MSW, LCSW, director of AWAI and



*Robin Therrien and workshop members encourage Ernesto Matoes to read from his work for the first time in public.*

author of *Voices from the 'Hood: How to Start and Sustain a Writing Workshop for Youth at Risk* (Amherst Writers & Artists Press, 1999). Of those, she adds, more than 25% have been social workers.

One of the most critical aspects of the training, Therrien explains, is teaching future workshop leaders to bring their language down to the level of the least-educated person in a room. "Everyone in the room should be able to understand you," she says. "A workshop may include someone from Puerto Rico who speaks little English. It is important to change your language so he or she understands you."

Changing the level of one's language is easier said than done, Therrien continues, particularly for professionals who have been trained to speak in academic terms. "It's especially hard for English majors who may have spent 20 years of their lives focusing on their love of language," she says. "Social workers, however, are usually trained to understand that we can't use our professional jargon with clients."

For Fahy, adjusting her language was the most painful part of the training weekend. "Many women, myself included, have learned to use language to get us where we want to be in this world," she says. "It was difficult to realize that the way we use language can act as a barrier, excluding people, making them feel they aren't good enough, and creating an atmosphere of snootiness."

Not comprehending what is being said can be devastating to workshop participants who may feel that they don't belong in a writing workshop to begin with, she adds. "It is important not to talk down to people or to write differently, but at the same time you can't just throw out a lot of words they don't understand," Fahy continues. "The workshop provided techniques to help avoid that."

When participants leave the training seminar, they are not sent home alone, Therrien says. "We send them home with so many resources it probably takes most participants a week to sort through them," she jokes. "They leave with packets filled with writing exercises and information about how language impacts one's ability to understand and progress in life."

For more information about AWA and AWAI, visit [www.amherstwriters.com](http://www.amherstwriters.com), write to Amherst Writers & Artists, P.O. Box 1076, Amherst, MA, 01002, or phone 413-253-3307.

# multimedia



—Image courtesy of Diane Garey and Lawrence Hott, Florentine Films/Hott Productions, Inc.

Scene from *Tell Me Something I Can't Forget*

## *Tell Me Something I Can't Forget*

By Diane Garey and Lawrence Hott

**Florentine Films, 1993**

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When Pat Schneider, MFA, began offering, at the request of social worker Deb Burwell, writing workshops for economically disadvantaged women in Chicopee, MA, nearly 15 years ago, the only requirements for entry were that members “had to be women and had to live in public housing.” The journey that group shared, the writing its members created, and the impact it had on their lives are documented in *Tell Me Something I Can't Forget*, (Amherst Writers & Artists Press, 1993) a film by Diane Garey and Lawrence Hott of Florentine Films.

The film's focus is the groundbreaking writer's workshop that led to the formation of the Amherst Writers & Artists Institute, an organization dedicated to finding and training people to lead creative writing workshops, free of charge, for underprivileged populations. [Editor's Note: See “Underprivileged Women Find Healing Via Written Word” on page XX.] The National Endowment for the Arts-sponsored film received the highest awards from CINE International Film Festival and the National Educational Film Festival, and has been aired on National Educational Television and the Public Broadcasting System series *POV*. Participants of the workshop who appear in the film have been interviewed on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*.

Encompassing the workshop participants' interactions, Pat Schneider's philosophies, and readings from the works created by the women, the film opens with an invocation: “I want you to let me see something. I want you to let me hear something, taste something, because the world comes to us that way.”

Encompassing the workshop participants' interactions, Schneider's philosophies, and readings from the works created by the women, the film opens with an invocation: “I want you to let me see something. I want you to let me hear something, taste something, because the world comes to us that way.” Schneider uses writing prompts and exercises to spark creativity, releasing the flow of words that pour from participants' pens onto paper.

Born into poverty herself, Schneider received a church scholarship and attended college, eventually earning her master's of fine arts degree. She began leading writing workshops based on methods she developed and founded Amherst Writers & Artists (AWA). Her success caught Burwell's attention, they met, and the Chicopee Writer's Workshop was born.

Schneider uses random objects, postcards, and lines of prose and poetry to help writers access memories and stories buried deep within their psyches. “I can do outrageous things with postcards,” she says. The various photographs of people from all backgrounds and walks of life are, she adds, “an instant flash of memory, an instant slice of life as you experienced it or as you fantasize about experiencing it.”

Random objects placed on a blanket for writers to choose from reflect the world, she says. “That is the way the world comes to us,” she adds, “in objects and things.” Writers are asked to pick up an object, not necessarily for any specific or logical reason, hold it for a few minutes, and then begin writing.

The results are often amazing, both to Schneider and to the women she wrote with in Chicopee. Throughout the film, participants read their work, both to the group and to the camera, in an intimate setting. Their prose and poetry speak volumes about life in a world in which they are not expected to speak, to voice opinions or desires. “Writing a poem is discovering something about yourself. It's telling the truth. It's saying, ‘I am,’”

Schneider says. “Finding out who you are, feeling good about who you are, is the first step toward changing the world for yourself and your children.”

Within the group, Schneider implements several practices to protect the writers and their fledgling works. Perhaps the most important is that every piece of writing—whether or not it appears autobiographical—is approached as fiction, unless the author says otherwise. In one particularly moving scene, Robin Therrien—who later earned a master's degree in social work—reads a piece in which the narrator describes her mother's death. When Therrien breaks down in tears, Schneider asks if she would like someone else to finish reading the piece aloud—an offer Therrien declines. “We are primarily a writer's group,” Schneider continues. “And the way we protect each other is by dealing with this as writing.” The group goes on to discuss the strengths in the work, the voice and language Therrien used, the images that stayed with them. Her message is that strong, true language comes from deep emotion.

The workshop's impact on participants has been tremendously positive and long-lasting. “None of us had any idea what the end would be,” Schneider says. “Every woman is in school. Every woman is modeling for her children how to go to school, how to become free, how to get out of poverty.” The most important change of all, she adds, is the way the women see themselves, how they feel about themselves, and how they feel about their place in the world.

Schneider is director of AWA and editor of Amherst Writers & Artists Press. She is widely published in literary journals and magazines and is the author of six books, an autobiography, plays, and libretti. Her forthcoming book, *Writing Alone and With Others: A Continuing Passion* (Oxford University Press), will be released in the fall.

— Hannah Fiske is a staff writer at **Social Work Today**.