

UNDOING THE SILENCE: SIX TOOLS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE WRITING

Louise Dunlap. New Village Press, Oakland, CA, 2007, 229 pages.

Like a jewel, this book reflects and catches the light in surprising ways. Perhaps because Louise Dunlap—writer, writing coach, social activist, Buddhist, and educator—brings something from all of her practices to the crafting of this quiet but illuminating text, it succeeds in its bold intention: to empower writers to work for progressive social change.

While conventional tools for aspiring writers appear—learning to freewrite; discovering a subject; silencing internal editors; using affirmations; understanding writing as a process; attending to flow, logic, and grammar—all are significantly recast by their placement in real-world contexts. The many case studies and autobiographical anecdotes offered showcase writers breaking through silences born from genuine threats and despair, from writing for ignorant, disinterested, and hostile communities, and from writing about hugely complex issues. In such challenging circumstances, Dunlap maintains, effective writing necessarily requires both creative and critical thinking. It is when these clash or crowd each other that a writer risks silencing—either utterly (out of frustration or fear) or substantively, by rendering writing serviceable but not engaging.

The book is framed around six tools (freewriting, process, thinking, audience, feedback, and word-power) to successfully blend creative and critical approaches to writing and avoid “the dangerous method” (writing a finished version in one go). Each tool is explored in a dedicated chapter that defines it, introduces it in case studies, and gives multiple exercises, adaptations, and tips for the reader. Dunlap shows how the tools are used to divide the time for an important piece of writing into parts, with the first period devoted to writing a “mad draft.” Mad drafts gather in all kinds of substance: facts, arguments, stances, imagery, metaphor, pithy quotations, vignettes, etc. Generating mad drafts allows for all the creative passion, writer’s viewpoints, and voice to (messily) come to the task.

As Dunlap notes, this is useful not only in a technical writing sense, but in a political one. Any critical adult educator or activist knows that oppressions work in many ways, but often are cunningly elusive in appearance. When a writer allows a rich, associative process to guide the mad draft, Dunlap maintains one’s “deep mind can help you find connections between ideas when your surface mind sees only distractions” (p. 33). Thus, not just writing but analysis is aided. What becomes possible in a draft is that one allows room on the page (or the computer screen) for writing out loud the “ideas you are trying to avoid,” for the idea that is intuitively (but not logically) linked, for the anecdotes that provide touchstones or the points/images/quotes/vantages you want to make sure are not forgotten, for the important warnings to yourself. After an “incubative” break, the writer then returns to the raw material to review it for the actual contexts it must address (e.g., concern for formats, length, audience, timelines, word choices, flow, and grammar). Those contexts, however, are now stripped of their silencing capabilities. They cannot overwhelm the writer’s unique viewpoint or passion, because these have already been voiced. Instead, the real-world contexts become things to address calmly and methodically by any of the

myriad exercises, grids, prompting questions, diagrams, and activities offered by Dunlap in the remainder of the book.

Dunlap’s friendly first-person stance belies a deeply informed approach based on close analysis of some 40 years of research on writing theory, social change, power, literacy, and the links between thinking and writing. For example, an excellent annotated resources section mixes key intercultural social theorists (e.g. Paulo Freire, Carol Gilligan, and Taeku Lee) with writing theorists; essayists on voice, silencing, and politicized and non-adversarial communication; sources on writing for particular audiences; and further resources for most of the six tools. True to her activist identity, she also showcases the websites for most of the projects cited in the text. In fact, throughout its nine chapters, the book is designed for functionality: sections are well signalled; sidebars, shadowboxes, exercises, and summaries punctuate the text; and the chapters integrate successfully. Even as someone who has worked extensively with writing and thinking for nearly two decades, I found myself lifting passages, activities, and explanations to add to my own training materials; photocopying some pages for a friend frozen in non-writing; and, morning tea in hand, perusing quite carefully the construction of letters to the editor looking for what Dunlap had suggested were the most effective formats.

Among the many treasures of this book, there are some gaps. In particular I found the references to the intersection of writing and multiculturalism puzzlingly insubstantial. Given how closely Dunlap examines issues of class, race, and gender in silencing, I was surprised she didn’t mount a clearer analysis of writing as a form of cultural capital. I was also surprised by her assumption that struggling writers could find communities of support for early stages of writing, given that isolation, humiliation, and language difficulty so often characterize circumstances of social injustice. I suspect Dunlap, who gently signals her PhD through the chapters and that impressive resources section, has plenty she could say about these matters; perhaps the decision was instead an editorial one, based upon an intended audience?

If so, it makes sense. After all, Dunlap’s intention is not merely to undo silencing, but to empower and lift articulate, expressive, and powerful voices for progressive social change. In that sense, this book is a solid success. It will be of great value to anyone working in social change environments (at any scale); to anyone who deals with hostile, indifferent, or misinformed readers; to anyone whose writing has become neutral rather than effective; and to any educator working with novice writers and multiple audiences. I know of no other book that comes close to providing both the overview about, and the practicalities of, writing. In focusing on writing as a resource for changing the world, Dunlap has written a revelatory, hopeful, and even sparkling book.

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