

# Chapter 11

## Don Graves

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### A Man Who Knew Teachers

Don Graves was an unlikely writing revolutionary in his wild plaid jacket and his too-short tie. I imagined a quiet intellectual when I studied his book jacket photo, but in person, Don seemed to always function at top speed. There was electricity in Don that raised the energy in a room. He skirted and sidestepped through crowds at the NCTE convention hall; he bicycled through Europe constantly calculating distances and miles per hour; he skied the trails around his Jackson, New Hampshire home with a wide stride and a delighted smile, outpacing everyone. No one kept up with Don. He wrote at first light for decades, completing twenty-six books in twenty-five years. It's productivity few of us could match, but Don was impatient to get stuff done. He would write the blurb for the book first, he told me, then write with the end in mind. With his last book, *A Sea of Faces*, he emailed me a poem a day. Don joyfully embraced life, all of it, gathering in moments and friends and poetry, but he also lived a remarkable balance between peace and intensity in teaching. Don always slowed himself down to lean in and listen to children.

Don learned to listen as a teacher. He taught seventh grade with thirty-nine students, and he made mistakes. Big ones. He described his early attempts to teach writing by assigning topics he would hide behind the roll-down map and then reveal with a snap just before the bell on Friday afternoon. Once he collected student



compositions, his objective was “to stamp out sin by correcting everything.” He told me he wished he could find each former student and apologize for all he didn’t know. He understood the precarious balance teachers must create between honoring individual differences and our goals for student learning. He lived those pesky interruptions in a school day that halt a writing conference, confuse a train of thought, or just minimize the importance of our time with children. Don knew the difference between what matters and what is a waste of time. He understood how teachers feel pressured to fill every minute with activity, but he also knew that learning is slow—especially for children. In 2004 when Don and I began interviewing students for the *Inside Writing* project, I watched him immediately connect with children through writing. He expanded time in those moments; he didn’t rush listening. He celebrated their work with his full attention and a big smile, saying, “Well, how about *that?!?*”

Don loved his role as a problem solver. He was always seeking solutions and collecting data. During the decade of our friendship I often brought teaching problems to Don. I’d tell the story of a student, and he would nod, then say, “Tell me more.” I had a notebook full of observations to share, but when I asked him what he thought was the next best teaching move, he wouldn’t answer. He would say, “Just rely on what you know about the child.” I still marvel at the power of this. The lesson was not about teaching or writing. Don drove me to independence as a professional and capable teacher. He empowered me to seek answers and expect to find them. Don believed in teachers—in a community of support for each other—in teacher thinking as fundamental to problem solving, smart assessment, and instruction that leads to student engagement and growth. He studied teacher energy and nurtured it. It may seem naïve in our current culture to put such faith in teachers, but Don surely did.

Don lived questions as a researcher. Don summarized his method as, “I pulled my chair up to a child and just plain observed the child write. I recorded everything the child did, I drew and labeled the process by numbers; I tried to anticipate what the child would do next (big mistake) and learned quickly that anticipation was just not quite right. I had to *follow* the child.” It sounds so simple, but no one had done this before. This week I was drawn again to his 1973 dissertation, complete with hand-drawn, numbered charts of data and labeled student drawings. He watched everything at the pace of children.

Don remained a researcher throughout his life, keeping data on *everything*. He rattled off obscure facts about the Red Sox or a battle from World War II. Don Murray would email his daily word count, and Don would counter with the hours and minutes he’d cleared brush on his 13.2 acres of land that day.

He tallied what he ate, the animals that crossed his property, and the elevation gains across miles of travel with Betty on their bicycle tours. This precision had purpose. Don said, “I’m always looking for the one big question—the one that will make the connections.”

Don’s curiosity led to revolutionary thinking about children and writing. He claimed we must give children time and choice and then teach through conferring into their intentions as writers. He defined a good teacher of writing as one who saw what you knew and made it possible for you to write what you know. The simplicity of that statement contains just about everything: teachers must know their students and create an environment that leads each child to independence and initiative. And what did Don notice? “Children want to write—if we let them,” but that “without realizing it, we wrest control away from children and place roadblocks that thwart their intentions. Then we say, ‘They don’t want to write. What is a good way to motivate them?’” We must create writing workshops that honor struggle, celebrate risk, and delight in approximation. But most of all, they must honor the idiosyncratic processes of many writers.

And of course, the teacher must write. You will notice as he works with children that he is relying as much on his understanding of writing as on his understanding of child development and process pedagogy. He mentions the surprise of his draft. He reminds teachers that in playing an instrument, “It would be unheard of not to demonstrate what you know—” and so of course, teachers must demonstrate the act of composition. Yet Don lamented to me, “After twenty-five years of writing and speaking about teachers writing with students, almost none do.” It is a practice we can and must embrace in our work.

Why do I miss Don Graves like I do? It is personal, of course. I miss the conferences on his deck with graham crackers in hand and our drafts resting on our knees in the late-afternoon light. I miss the surprises: a cone of flowers left by my front door on my birthday or the phone call, “Can I come by? I’m working on something new—” as soon as I arrived from work. I miss his read-alouds from Garrison Keillor’s *Good Poems* while waiting in the airport on our way to NCTE, and how my thinking expanded just by talking to him. Don believed teaching is precious work. He helped me hold onto all of the good ideas when so many bad ones threaten to crowd them out. But it is also Don’s vision for our profession that I long for. Perhaps you were in Nashville at the NCTE conference in 2006 when Don delivered his last address, titled “Reclaiming the Ground.” He began by saying (and I’ve copied this from my notebook from

that day, so forgive me if it is not entirely accurate), “Let’s have a little fun here.” I remember Don acting out the teacher’s day riddled with interruptions, his playful banter with the imagined intercom and the laughter we shared with him. But he soon turned serious, “You are the light in your room—and those students you have—those are at the center. The units and teacher’s guide have no power next to you. We need to know our students because then we can expect more. It begins with emotion. The kids are writing personal stuff on the first day because they know you’ll hear it—if you’re on the page with them. Not materials, but passion. Not lesson plans, but curiosity and interest.”

Don was a teacher, a principal, and a pastor of educational ministry before he became a visionary for teaching writing. He spent time in the Coast Guard. All of these professions widened his understanding of teaching and learning, giving him remarkable insight, but it can’t explain his following. True, the shuffling dance moves and a joyful, cackling enthusiasm engaged audiences, but I believe it was Don’s fierce love of teachers that drew us near. Don saw possibility and hope in our profession. In *us*. I was thrilled (and a bit terrified) to present with Don every time. He would encourage folks to keep coming in, to fill the aisles and pile up on the stage behind us. In Indianapolis our conference room was overstuffed, yet dozens pressed from the door. Don reached out both hands—a pastor’s move—to settle the rising agitation, but those outside were told we were beyond capacity. A woman cried, “No! We want to see the Don!” And of course we did. Don affirmed the power and the promise of our work. In this collection of his writing and on the video you can hear his voice, feel his energy. It is a gift at just the right time.

In the past decade I’ve come to live an understanding of two kinds of revolutions. There is the one that upends what we’ve known and how we see. It might begin small—who had heard of the University of New Hampshire after all—but it multiplies because the thinking holds up with children everywhere, and suddenly that one vision becomes many. Old ways of teaching are replaced by thrilling discoveries propelled by the energy of children and their teachers. This revolution was prompted by “Look what is possible with children and writing.” Don Graves was at the front of that revolution.

But a revolution can also begin with unrest. First there are small intrusions that feel manageable—we’ll gather with colleagues and look at data that supposedly tell us about our students. Small infringements on our time deeply thinking about children are annoyances really, but they multiply. Soon there are mandates for instruction that trample what we believe: we will give up writing time for test preparation. Really? We begin to grumble, avoiding confrontation

or openly defying new policies. The pressure increases. We struggle to identify exactly how mandates have limited our teaching and eroded the energy in our work. We form alliances—and agitate. But we're losing ground.

It's not right that children are crying at their desks, defeated, then held back because of performance on a single test. It's not right that teachers are reprimanded when they reject test preparation worksheets in favor of literature and writing. It's not right that so many of our colleagues are walking away from teaching. The disquiet in our profession demands a response.

When the teaching of writing is reduced to a simplistic series of prompts and scripted lessons that ignore the fragility of raising writers, we must stand together. When publishers negate the decades of research that has framed writing workshops driven by student choice and initiative, we must respond. We must fight for our students' right to seek, to create, and to develop their individual voices as writers. We must champion conditions in classrooms that allow writers to thrive and to joyfully discover. Children will live with more attention and care in our world because they live like writers, and this is in our hands.

Don Graves didn't just show us the mechanics and skills of a writing process—he showed us a way to be with children and each other: to live in possibility instead of fear. Don looked for curiosity, engagement, and joy in teaching and learning—fragile things. Guard yours with all you have. The energy in this work comes from the promise in children. No one will give you permission to use a process-conference approach to teaching writing. In fact, many may get in your way, but the biggest danger to curiosity and initiative in children may not be standards, or school boards, or strident administrators, it just might be pessimism. Teachers tell me today they just don't have time for writing workshop, or it doesn't fit with their curriculum; in the next breath they ask how to motivate their writers to care about their writing.

Workshop teaching is still possible. Children arrive curious, ready to write. We must let them compose the stories and poems and ideas and arguments of their lives. Give yourself permission to teach to that vision. It is grounded in research; it is proven. It can free you to your best teaching. At the back of your classroom I see Don in his plaid jacket, notebook in hand, with a wide smile cheering on your courage.

It's your turn: it's time for a new revolution for our children and our profession.

—Penny Kittle