

## Contemporary Writers' Forum with Marjorie Kanter, May 27, 2010

### Exercise 1:

Marjorie Kanter began her workshop by addressing the group in Spanish for a minute or two. Then (in English) she asked the participants to write down the feelings they had had during such an unexpected beginning. Some sample responses:

- Because of my very fragmented understanding of Spanish, I asked myself whether it was going to be like this for 90 minutes!
- I felt misplaced, as if I was in the wrong scenario.
- I simply felt lost when she started to speak in Spanish. First I tried to understand some words from their Latin origin, but that didn't work. She just spoke too fast for me to identify anything.
- I felt confused but also curious and tried to understand some words from the background of other languages I know.
- Irritation: It wasn't what I expected  
Observation: Oh, it's Spanish!  
Contemplation: I don't know enough to understand fully  
Adaptation: Oh well, I'll just make the best of it and play along
- I didn't fall apart since I know enough Spanish not to do so.
- I didn't feel completely helpless, but it did make me realize that I need to practice some more.
- I was surprised at first, but enjoyed it, since I like to apply my Spanish.
- I didn't feel "strange" because I can speak Spanish and had fun listening to Ms. Kanter's fluent Spanish!

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### Exercise 2:

Ms. Kanter asked the students to read this word which had been sent to her in an SMS:

cul8r

Some answers: calculator, color, see you later...

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### Exercise 3:

The workshop leader listed her three axioms of writing:

- a) Observation, noticing, paying careful attention
- b) Accurate recording
- c) Playfulness

Then she surprised the students by asking them to write down (*without* looking around!) what was *behind* them. In a second step they were to turn around to look and then add detail such as precise adjectives. Here are some results:

Step A: a pillar, my bag, the heater, a window, bushes, a path, a tree, office building including Sigrid Rieuwerts' office, grass

Step B: a gray pillar, my crammed-full bag, an old and cold heater, slightly dirty window, bristling thorny thickets, a red path under an old tree, ugly offices including Sigrid Rieuwerts' with her delicious tea, the world!

Step A: the back of the chair, posters on the wall

Step B: the back of the chair supporting my sleepy back, colorful student posters about English-speaking countries, behind the wall another one, and another, and another, and somewhere a tree

Step A: chairs, table, door, wastepaper basket

Step B: brown chairs, white table, class door, unappetizing wastepaper basket

Step A: window, curtains, carpet, meeting point for smokers outside

Step B: open window, heavy and long brown curtains, blue carpet, lively meeting point for smokers with the sharp odor of cigarette smoke wafting through the window

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#### Exercise 4:

Ms. Kanter read this poem from her book *I displace the air as I walk*, 2004:

**Mint tea**

**I served my  
neighbor  
salt  
in her  
mint tea.**

**We're still  
friends.**

The participants were asked to fill in what might have happened between the two “stanzas” of the poem. Some variants:

- Maybe it was an accident, but maybe I did it on purpose. It spiced up our friendship for some time and made us closer than before.
  
- She drank it  
My neighbour looked at me  
She spit it out on the floor  
I was shocked, she was too  
I didn't do it on purpose  
I told her  
We laughed
  
- She spit it out immediately.  
It was a mistake  
I mistook the salt for sugar  
I apologized  
She accepted
  
- I started giggling  
She asked me if I had put salt in her tea  
I laughed  
She got angry  
I told her it was just a joke  
She forgave me
  
- Salt instead of sugar.  
Sand instead of silk  
Sh\*\* instead of salvation  
That day, she truly deserved it, but  
  
We're still friends.
  
- I couldn't find my glasses.  
Anywhere.  
My friend came.  
I went into the kitchen,  
Fixed some tea.  
I reached for the sugar,  
Put a spoonful into the cup.  
It turned out to be salt.
  
- She was surprised

I was shocked  
I apologized  
And in the end we realized  
We're still friends

- I was in a hurry that day, my mind full of tasks that needed to be done. Then my neighbour came to visit, unexpectedly. I put salt in her mint tea. She didn't seem to notice. After she left, I saw the salt on the kitchen counter. I called her instantly to say I was sorry. She simply laughed.
- I had heard that people put salt in coffee to enhance the taste, and I decided to try it with mint tea. A neighbour whom I secretly fancy came over to borrow a light bulb. I offered her some of my homemade fresh mint tea. She took a sip and her face went numb. She was brave – she swallowed, forced a smile, excused herself, and promptly left. She didn't take the light bulb.

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### Exercise 5:

Ms. Kanter passed out a recipe (in English translation) for “Maklubeh” which she had found in a Spanish cookbook specializing in Arab recipes. She asked the students what they noticed about it which seemed unusual: they wondered why both the dish and the sauce should contain eggplant, why exactly 100 almonds (so many!) would be called for, what “pine nuts” are, why so much oil is required – and, above all, why *pork* was an ingredient in a Muslim recipe!

The students were asked to write a short text about what happened when someone served this Maklubeh to Muslim guests...

#### *Student text 1:*

I served my friend – she's from Marrakesh – a dish with pork, my favorite.  
We're still friends.

#### *Student text 2:*

It had taken me the whole day to prepare dinner and the pork had cost me a fortune. But my Arabic friend didn't look completely happy. I thought the eggplants were especially tasty, and so were the almonds. Oh! I think I know what the problem is... I looked at her, she looked at me. I said “I'm so sorry.” She said, “Don't worry. I don't mind salty tea.”

#### *Student text 3:*

Friends came over for dinner  
There's pork in the meal!  
We leave everything behind  
the plates  
the pans  
the food  
and go to  
the vegetarian restaurant  
around the corner  
What a nice twist  
A blessing in disguise

*Student text 4:*

So many eggplants!  
And how to count 100 almonds quickly enough?  
Oil twice.  
Where to buy pine nuts, and what the heck are they anyway?  
Fresh pork – that's easy to find.  
Here come my Arabic guests – I'm sure they'll enjoy my Maklubeh dish!

*Student text 5:*

It's my birthday party. I invited some friends for dinner; one of them is a Muslim. Since it's the first time he's ever been to my place, I cook an Arabic dish especially for him. When I serve the food, my friends are curious and ask what's in it. Everyone eats heartily, except for the Muslim, who doesn't take a bite. Luckily he likes the dessert!

*Student text 6:*

Without thinking, I served a pork dish to my Iranian friends. They said they liked it, complimented my cooking skills, and asked for the recipe because it was so tasty. But they never accepted any of my dinner invitations again.

*Student text 7:*

It took me 3 hours to prepare this meal, and I even decorated the Maklubeh. My guests arrived and admired the meat dish – except for one of them, my Muslim friend. All of a sudden I realized that I had committed a cultural *faux pas*. We ordered pizza (without salami) and my family ate the beautifully garnished Maklubeh the next day.

*Student text 8:*

Danny is Muslim. She was really looking forward to eating the special Arabic dish I had prepared for her. She took a bite and began chewing it – suddenly she stopped and looked at

me. “There’s pork in this food, isn’t there?” I apologized for my thoughtlessness, but I wondered how she knows what pork tastes like.

*Student text 9:*

Guests arrive 3 minutes early. They offer to take off their shoes, but I forbid this – I don’t mind some street dust. They refuse an aperitif, lemonade instead. (A question of health?) The guests take their seats; first course is soup. Second course is Arabic, especially for them. They smell the dish, exchange glances. I think “How impolite! How inconsiderate!” “We’re sorry” they say. Their faces redden in confusion. Then explanation. My face reddens. They smile. We become friends.

*Student text 10:*

Nothing happened. You can’t tell whether the meat is pork or not when the dish is ready. I forgot to tell and my friend forgot to ask. And since pork doesn’t kill Arabs, everything is fine. What you don’t know won’t hurt you, or, more like the Koran, What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve over.

*Student text 11:*

My Muslim friend: “Recipes may taste divine, but God doesn’t approve of everything that’s good.”

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**Exercise 6:**

Marjorie Kanter asked students to flesh out the following poem of hers, giving it an “essence”. Then in a second step, they were supposed to reduce that expanded poem to a **tweet** with 140 characters or less.

**“Essence of Nothing”**

**I entered.**

**I ordered.**

**I received.**

**I consumed.**

**I paid.**

**And I left.**

Student text 1: “Essence of Taste”

There's that nice little restaurant around the corner,

I entered it the other day.

Through large wooden doors I stepped into a whole new world.

I ordered a dish, one out of the diverse menu.

The waitress, a strawberry-blonde, beautiful girl, so charming, smiled at me.

When the meal arrived - means when I received it - I thought I could never finish the dish.

Oh! What a tasty smell!

I consumed, but perhaps 'consuming' is not the right word for I enjoyed every single bite of it.

I paid – I left.

But I was left with an impression.

**Tweet version:**

A restaurant around the corner Large wooden doors and lovely smell Waitress with a charming smile I had my meal - it left me speechless! (137 characters)

Student text 2: “Essence of Distaste”

I entered silently and shyly, not really noticing the surroundings and not playing any attention to my fellow students.

I ordered the most expensive meal and wine they had on the menu.

I received the most disgusting, unlikely food I had ever seen in my life.

I started to consume it, wondering if I would get sick, and then decided to leave it on my plate.

I paid with nothing except with not so nice words and I left as I entered, silently, not playing any attention to the students who were staring at me.

**Tweet version:**

I entered paying no attention 2 my fellow student ordered & received the mostDisgustingMealEverSeen.PaidwithnothingAndLeft as I came. (133 characters)

Student text 3: "Essence of a Sunny Day"

A wonderful start to the day!

I entered a bright and inviting café on a sunny morning.

I ordered a big mug of cappuccino along with some biscuits.

I received it soon from the friendly waitress.

I consumed it with great pleasure and took some time to look outside the window and observe people on the street.

I paid and gave the waitress a tip.

And I left feeling absolutely awake again.

**Tweet version:**

A ☺unny morning, an inviting café. I ordered a mug of cappuccino and biscuits. Friendly waitress. Pleasure and time to look outside: Paying and feeling awake again. (139 characters)

Student text 4: "Still Essence of Nothing"

I entered a room full of people.

Shyly I ordered the special box, magical, sweet pieces of unbelievable delight.

I received a box of nothing – empty, dark.

In desperate need of some other form of satisfaction I consumed alcohol.

Although I did not want to, I paid.

And even more depressed than before I left.

**Tweet version:**

Want special box! Magic. Get box of nothing. Desperation. Need some satisfaction. Alcohol. Dark, empty. Pay & leave. Depressed. (127 characters)

Student text 5: "The Essence of Nothing <sup>2</sup>"

When I entered the new restaurant I was very curious about what it would be like. After a young, friendly waitress showed me to a seat and gave me the menu, I ordered a dish I had



never tried before. I received a huge plate, but there was hardly anything on it. After I consumed the meal in less than 10 minutes, I asked the waitress for the bill. I paid lots of money and I left. When I turned around I noticed the name of the restaurant: "The Essence". In my mind I added "of Nothing".

**Tweet version:**

I entered, I ordered, I received, I consumed. I paid. I left. Where were the beef and the smile? I never came back. (117 characters)

Student text 6: "The Essence of Speed"

I entered a lovely restaurant in downtown LA at 7 p.m. and the sun was about to sink.

I ordered a medium steak with French fries, salad, and a coke.

I receive the meal after a record-breaking 10 minutes.

I consumed it just as fast because it was delicious.

I paid 45 dollars and gave a 10-dollar tip.

And I left at 8 p.m. and drove back to Beverly Hills in my brand-new Ferrari.

**Tweet version:**

Entered restaurant downtown LA. Ordered medium steak with fries. Received it soon. Consumed it fast bcause was delicious. Then paid and left. (140 characters)

Student text 7: "The Essence of San Francisco"

I entered the restaurant the concierge had recommended.

I ordered a Corona and angel hair spaghetti.

I received them promptly.

I consumed them quickly, glancing at my watch.

I paid, including a big tip.

And I left, heading back to the hotel.

**Tweet version:**

SF: Entered restaurant concierge recommended Ordered Corona+angel hair Received promptly Consumed quickly Paid&tipped Left, back to hotel. (139 characters)

Student text 8: “The Essence of a Tip”

Blinded by the Spanish sun, I entered a dark room, the air heavy with cigarette smoke.

I ordered an ice-cold tinto de verono and a bocadillo con jamon.

I received a big glass of red liquid and a tasty sandwich.

I consumed the delicious items.

I paid and gave the handsome waiter a tip.

He smiled, gave me his phone number and I left the café...more than satisfied.

**Tweet version:**

In Spanish sun ntrd smoky dark room Ordered drink+snack Received + consumed Paid handsome camarero He gave tel# Left more than satisfied 😊 (139 characters)

Student text 9: “The Essence of a Bargain”

I entered the universe.

I ordered crème brûlée.

I received two.

I consumed both eagerly.

I didn't pay a cent.

And I left with a broad smile on my face.

**Tweet version:**

Some place inthedarkparts of the city neverbeenthereb4 I ordered cremebrulee with cookie but did not pay Left with broad smile on my face (137 characters)

Student text 10: “The Essence of Habit”

I entered the shabby kebab place I've been going to for years.

I ordered the same dish I always do, with special this but without that.

I received most of what I expected, changed according to the current cook's style.

I consumed first quickly, then more slowly, forced in the end.

I paid more than last time.

And I left feeling fuller than ever, as I always think I feel.

**Tweet version:**

Went to my kebab guy today. Haven't been there in a long time. Bad as usual. Will come back for sure to see what hasn't changed. (129 characters)

Student text 11: "The Essence of Virtual Suicide"

I entered the internet.

I found something I hadn't looked for.

But nonetheless I ordered it – of course something I didn't need – and paid. Then I forgot about it.

I received the item after several days. I tried it out. I didn't like the size, didn't approve of the quality, hated the color, and found out I couldn't do the things with it I wanted.

I sold it on ebay and wished I could leave the virtual world forever.

**Tweet version:**

Ntered internet Orderd sthg I didn't need Paid Received it but didn't like anything about it Sold it on ebay Depart virtual world forever (137 characters)

Student text 12: "The Essence of Mickey"

Mickey entered Disneyland in Anaheim near Los Angeles and was puzzled to find his non-existent comic world had turned into a visitable place for his fans.

Human beings ordered and ordered food and chocolate and mugs and T-shirts and pencils with his and Donald's face on them.

They received coupons and free gift certificates, bags for their items, and an entrepreneur's smile...

...as a special thanks for their consumption. They consumed all day.

And they paid and paid, spending all their hard-earned money.

It made me very sad, so I left.

**Tweet version:**

Postcard from Disneyland: Our collector's items prove us right - We were there in Mickey's comic world. Wishing you were here 2. (129 characters)

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**Just tweets:**

Café Vienna Plush sofas Penguin waiters Soup+salad+goat cheese+meat+coffee with cake  
How can she pay? (101 characters)

When I entered the sun was going down I ordered my usual drink AgainAgainandAgain Then  
I paid And when I left the sun was rising (128 characters)