

## Foreword

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Here's a statement that doesn't need stating: teaching is good, important, *pressure-filled* work.

All the teachers I know got into the work because they wanted to promote the long-term flourishing of young people by way of helping them master the disciplines. Writing teachers like you and me are no different—when we were new, we hoped that, through helping our students master the written word, we'd unleash their potential and open up a whole new means for accessing the power of their hearts and minds. We aimed at nothing less than emancipation—after all, writing had had this kind of effect on us.

And boy oh boy, were we *wise* to endeavor toward that. Our hearts were noble and beautiful because teaching is good and important work.

But then we got into our first teaching gigs, and we taught our students to write those first essays or stories or poems, and all of a sudden a new character entered our personal stories: a stack of papers. Our students had poured themselves into these things. And we thought, "Oh. Well, I guess it's time to give feedback on these."

This was fine at first! After all, we had signed up for this. The only problem was that this feedback took so much *time*. Before we knew it, that stack of papers followed us everywhere. It developed its own little indent in our teacher bags. And it had this weird and disturbing tendency toward *growing*. No matter how many papers we feedbacked, this thing just seemed to keep getting bigger.

And we heard, for the first time, that question we had once asked some of our own writing teachers. "Hey, Mr. Stuart: Have you had a chance to read our papers yet?"

Oh no, we realized. That stack of papers isn't just any character in our lives.

It's a monster.

What on earth had we gotten ourselves into?

As Matt Johnson quickly points out in the pages that follow, the indomitable feedback monster is an old beast for writing teachers. I love that Matt finds, in the earliest edition of the *English Journal*, an article lamenting the weight of the writing teacher's paper load. This was in 1912. Talk about confirmation that

today's pressing problems are often the pressing problems of our predecessors. Over a century later, it looks like Solomon was right: there's nothing new under the sun.

When I first met Matt, we were at a pub in Cedar Springs, Michigan, eating lunch and enjoying authentic German microbrews. Matt had emailed me months before, asking if he might drive across the state to discuss some questions he had about the teacher-writer life. Lunch was on him, he said—and so, I delightedly agreed. By the time the tab arrived, I had given Matt a daunting list of recommendations regarding how I would start a blog for teachers if I were starting one today, what my long-term vision for that blog might be, and what the publishing landscape was like in teacher books, from my perspective.

Within a year, Matt's blog was being read by thousands of readers each month, his work was being featured on Edutopia, and he was in talks with Corwin Literacy for a book contract. That book is the one you now hold in your hand.

Matt Johnson is *that* good, I thought. But now, having read this book, I see it differently: his sense of urgency is *that* strong.

So here's the good news for every teacher I know: teaching *is* an incredible way to promote the long-term flourishing of lots of young people. I can't think of a better way, actually. It is beautiful and important and reverberating work, even in 2020 as Matt's book is being published.

And for us teachers of writing: we weren't crazy. Teaching our students to write well *does* unleash their potential, and it *does* open up a whole new means for accessing the power of their hearts and minds. Writing *is* that important. It *is* emancipatory.

And as Matt shares in these pages, there's a way to do this work that doesn't require us to make peace with the paper monster. There's a way to *do* feedback well, and to do it efficiently, and to do it humanely.

For Matt Johnson—and for all of us now, thanks to Matt's book—flash feedback isn't just a theory. It's a reality.

Best to you, my colleague, as you enjoy and apply Matt's book. I'll be doing the same for years to come!

**Dave Stuart Jr.**  
Cedar Springs, MI