As a student, a writer, and an aspiring English professor, Donald Murray's essay “Teaching Writing as a Process, Not Product” speaks to me on many levels. Reading this, I cannot help but feel some degree of disappointment and discontent with my own education. Murray asserts that many English teachers “teach writing as a product, focusing [their] critical attentions on what [their] students have done, as if they had passed literature in” (Murray 3). I cannot deny that this has often been the case in my own education, particularly in my formative years, and it was not until now that I understood why this process has been malnourishing to my growth as a writer.

To be clear, I do not want to accuse any particular teacher or even any school district of failing me. I’ve never been directly put down by any educator, and certainly, there have been many who have been fundamental in fostering what love I hold today for the English language. Still, examining the processes and implications which Murray sets forth in his essay, a part of me wishes that it were required reading for any instructor of writing. I, like so many students which Murray speaks for, have often had my work viewed through a hypercritical lens. “Year after year the student shudders under a barrage of criticism, much of it brilliant, some of it stupid, and all of it irrelevant” (3). I could safely use this single quote to summarize my experience with language and writing for the first ten years of my education. Each semester, English teachers would assign a dauntingly specific subject or theme, and each semester I would feel an immense, inhibiting pressure to live up to their expectations. For years, everything I wrote for school was entirely an
assignment, without any of the aspects of writing that make it such a beautiful process. As with the academics in Peter Elbow's "Being a Writer Vs. Being an Academic," my papers always begged of professors, "Is this okay? Will you accept this?" (Elbow 82). It was not until the creative writing course I took in my junior year of high school that I gained a bit of room to breathe. Looking back, it is incredible to me that I managed to retain any desire to write until then. Certainly, the harsh reviews of my younger writing "[did] little more than to confirm [my] lack of self-respect for [my] work and for [myself]" (Murray 3), but I suppose I'm just as stubborn as my teachers, and I am grateful for that, because that attitude carried me into the classroom of one Mr. Chuoke.

The day I sat down in Chuoke's classroom, I took out my materials, set my book on my desk, folded my hands, and watched him closely. In the following hour, he introduced himself, reviewed our syllabus for the upcoming months, and assigned the first piece of writing. I moved very little throughout, studying him in an effort to determine just what it was he wanted from us as students. He must have sensed a level of apprehension in my stare, because as class ended, he came to me and opened a conversation about what I was reading. I can't deny having been wary – after all, here was another English teacher, and in all my training, I had learned that English teachers wanted very particular answers. But to my surprise, he'd read this novel, and asked what I liked about it. I told him that I enjoyed the blending of prose and poetry, and he immediately suggested I try a similar process for my first assignment in his class. I don't remember the exact conversation, but it went something like this:

“I don't know, I've never written anything like that.”

“So? There's a first for everything. Give it a shot, if you'd like.”

“It probably wouldn't be very good, I'll just go with the traditional style.”
At this point, he must have understand what it was that had kept me on edge, because he smiled and said “Forget about the syllabus. They're just guidelines. Write about what you want to write about, and write it how you'd like. I'll just offer suggestions along the way.”

This was a first, and I didn't know how to react, but over the following weeks, he delicately carried our class through the process of prewriting – one which Murray suggests ought to account for “85%” of the writing process, but which we all had very little experience with (4). More importantly, Chuoke guided me and my peers through the rewriting process, which I had never used before. It seemed foreign to alter my draft once it was in such final print, but he encouraged me, assuring me that all of my favorite books had gone through this same procedure. By the end of the semester, I'd written a slew of pieces that I enjoyed, both as products and processes.

I do not know if Mr. Chuoke has ever read Donald Murray's essay, but I know that he was the first to introduce to me its concepts. As Murray says, “you don't learn a process by talking about it, but by doing it” (5). It was not until I felt the freedom in Chuoke's classroom to explore my own writing style, to “glory in its unfinishedness,” that I found effective ways to refine and complete pieces of work that I could be proud of (4). Chuoke was the first to “respect and respond to [me] not for what [I had] done, but for what [I may do],” and for that, I am thankful (6). In recent years, I have used this freedom and encouragement to better understand my own writing, and to explore writing methods without apprehension.

Murray's approach to writing as a process cannot be anything but beneficial to the young writer. The act of composing is the fundamental framework on which all great pieces of writing are built, and if educators continue to drill holes in this framework or ignore it altogether, we will inevitably lose many great writers before ever recognizing them as such. Instead, we need more
professors like Murray and Chuoke, who will quietly supervise the construction of that foundation, and offer a bit of cement from time-to-time so it may stand for years to come.