Writing to Learn: The Nurse-Log Classroom

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The nurse log, an ancient fallen tree out of which new and sometimes different varieties of trees grow, along with all manner of mosses, fungi, and other plant life, is an ideal metaphor for writing-to-learn strategies.

Imagine this scene: It is four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and five weary teachers wander into what passes for a faculty workroom. One seems preoccupied or just plain tired, while a second complains to the librarian that a film she ordered for fourth period never arrived. Still another teacher simply walks toward the door, rolls his eyes heavenward, and lugs a box of what are evidently student notebooks in the direction of the faculty parking lot. Yet, in a vacant corner, just to the left of the world's balkiest copier, you overhear what appears to be a lively conversation. And what is more, the participants are talking, of all things, about *school*.

A: So what's this writing to learn all about?

B: Well, the idea is that students can and should take responsibility for their own learning. They have to care about what they write simply by definition of the kind of writing they're asked to do.

A: You mean back to the old feelings and thoughts journals, right?

B: Not really. Students must stay on task, even though writing to learn is student-centered learning.

A: That sounds great, but what about grading all that stuff? I barely have time to prepare study questions and tests, never mind read thirty or more student notebooks every week. Look at poor old Johnson over there. I don't see how he lifts that box, much less grades all those notebooks.

B: With a well-designed writing-to-learn program, you can be freed from at least some of that and concentrate instead on working along with the students as they learn. Study questions and tests,

when you and your students feel a need for them, can be generated by writing-to-learn strategies.

A: This sounds pretty complex. If you don't grade all that writing, what keeps the kids on track? You must have some sort of system.

B: I do. But it's taken a good deal of experimenting, and I'm still fine-tuning it. The best brief answer I can give you is this: Because writing to learn is student-centered, expressive, and exploratory, evaluation comes in many forms and is used for a number of purposes. Much of it is carried out by the students themselves.

A: I'm interested, but I need to know more.

B: Maybe we could sit down and discuss what I do.

A: Okay, but later, huh? Right now I'm swamped with papers to grade and tests to prepare. In fact, let's hold off till next quarter. I've got five days' worth of lectures to write.

Teacher A is a composite of the many dedicated, conscientious teachers I know. She is a fastidious organizer, she sets high standards for her students, she works hard. Too hard. Most of the work she finds herself doing is tied to directing, monitoring, and evaluating her students. She spends an enormous amount of time assigning and grading papers, constructing and scoring tests, reading and responding to student journals. Yet despite her hard work and good intentions, she has been cheating herself and her students. Herself, because she rarely has time to reflect on course materials and sequence and misses the pleasure of becoming personally involved with her students' work. Her students, because they have not been given the opportunity—and responsibility—of helping to determine and monitor their own learning.

Writing-to-learn strategies have made a real difference for my students and me in four distinct but related ways. A writing-to-learn emphasis in my literature classes has:

1. Helped me make the transition from sage-on-the-stage dispenser and director to class coordinator and contributor, thereby placing more learning in students' hands;
2. Created an environment where students can express their feelings about and reactions to their learning, the subject's value for them;
3. Provided students and me with ongoing reviews or checks of their understanding and application of course concepts and material, along with their thinking processes and capacity for self-expression; and
4. Served as a springboard or incubator for activities and projects that demonstrate the extent and quality of student learning and involve students personally with class work.

Two years ago, following the first three weeks of my initial attempt to implement writing-to-learn strategies in my sophomore literature survey class, a girl who had been reticent to participate at best and downright negative at worst tossed a note in the general direction of my desk just as the bell rang:

> Mr. Pearce
> I just wanted you to know that I think I'm changing my mind about you. That first week when you told us we had to teach ourselves I thought you were going to be one of those teachers who lets kids do all the work while he does football plays or something. Now I see I was wrong. You wanted us to help each other do a good job, even if we don't like to read and write. I'm not promising anything, but I'll try.

I remember how hard it was for this girl—and many other students—to figure out "what the teacher wanted," even though I thought I had made myself and the program clear. Just taking the reins of her own learning spooked her, I guess. She was used to receiving a course syllabus that included a timetable for readings, films, quizzes, tests, and long-term research projects, then settling back and waiting for the usual things to happen: that first lecture, followed by discussion questions or a study sheet to be filled out and turned in the following day. In short, she was well schooled in passive learning. Occasional excursions into action, studying for tests or completing prescribed research, were tolerable because they were the exception, not the rule. For her, the teacher's job was to dole out the information; hers was to absorb and recite it.

To move students away from that traditional classroom model, I invest much of the first ten days of both my freshman honors English and sophomore literature classes in **community-building** activities. Whether a small-group exercise ("Write a sentence that makes only a little sense, using the first letter of each group member's name as beginning letters for five of your sentence's words. Each member should contribute his or her own word and offer a reason, if any, for choosing it"), or one involving the entire class ("List the first name of every person in the room as roll is called. Next to each name, write a complimentary comment about the person"), the emphasis is on establishing a positive, supportive atmosphere that invites open questioning and sharing.

As part of this series of small and large group community-building strategies, I ask students to consider my role as a member of the total group. By the end of the first week, students have had a chance to gain at least some sense of belonging; a class identity has begun to surface.

Personalities emerge as most students move from apprehensions about one another, the course, and my expectations to an anticipation that good things are going to happen. Just as the teacher's attitudes toward the subject and his or her students have always been central to student feeling and response, writing-to-learn strategies have to be presented in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, along with a clear sense of who will be responsible for what. This is no easy environment to establish, yet a fairly simple one to maintain.

Nothing new here; every successful teacher tries to set a positive tone, particularly at the onset of a school year or semester. And when I think of positive relationships between teachers and students, qualities like evenhandedness, enthusiasm, and high (but reasonable) expectations come to mind.

Such student-teacher rapport is especially critical to a writing-to-learn program's success, for both teacher and student must take greater risks, including moving into and out of one another's traditional roles. Risk taking has been centrally important to the students in my classes who have made the program work well for them. Those basic principles of direct and personal involvement with and creative application of subject apply to every learner.

Following the first several days that have been given to a course overview and community-building activities, along with an introduction to a number of writing-to-learn strategies, students are ready to consider the responsibilities and opportunities the program will place on all of us. They are primed, then, for a discussion of their views of teaching and learning, including how they and I perceive my role, now that they have an idea as to how the class will be conducted and what our goals will be. I begin by asking students to complete an **admit slip** anonymously during the first ten minutes of the period:

> Your admit slip today concerns teaching. Please write what you believe are qualities or characteristics of good teachers and effective teaching.

On teachers, such comments as "listens to my ideas," "explains things well," "makes me want to learn," and "cares but isn't pushy" come up repeatedly. On teaching, I get less-than-serious comments such as "films shown daily," "no tests or grades," and "time out for donut runs," but I also receive responses including "having a reason for everything we do," "letting us do some things on our own," "giving students choices."

That last comment, as students soon discover, is the most telling. Many fifteen-year-olds have begun to see beyond black-and-white solutions to complex problems; some have grown to the realization that

life is a series of difficult choices in an increasingly challenging, even confusing, world. This matters very much, since a major goal of my literature classes is for students to develop the ability to read with discrimination and insight as they recognize relevance for their own lives. And the shifting of many teacher responsibilities to students is vital to writing to learn; the student-centered curriculum reinforces such larger themes of transition as child to adult, taker to giver, consumer to producer.

As I read their admit slips aloud, a volunteer records key points on the board while others jot them down in course **journals.** The board writing leads to the next activity; the journal recording establishes a reference that students can return to if I (or they) feel they are not following through on their commitments to themselves and the class at some later time.

At that point we write a **biopoem** that fits the prevailing class view of "Good Teacher." As the poem begins to take shape, I remind students to keep the traits and descriptive phrases listed on the board in mind. The resulting product is less than aesthetically pleasing, but it helps students focus on key characteristics.

> Open-minded, friendly, patient, and caring
> Sister of Justice, Daughter of Wisdom
> Lover of learning, good books, and her students
> Who feels important, respected, and loved
> Who needs lots of support, help, and praise
> Who fears too many papers to grade, fire drills, and PA announcements
> Who gives time, energy, and compliments
> Who would like to see all students pass, everyone in their seats, nobody absent
> Resident of Shorewood High School
> Goodteach.

In the discussion that follows, students notice the complex nature of the teacher's job. While she may be open-minded and patient, she also needs support and help. And although she brings energy and wisdom to the job, a number of factors work against her ("too many papers to grade," for example). The next step is to steer students into considering the duties and skills that mark the traditional divisions of labor between teachers and students. My goal is to point out how the writing-to-learn emphasis has implications for all of us, and we develop a list such as the one that follows:

> Introducing new material and topics,
>
> Taking attendance,

Planning use of class time,

Assigning papers and other projects,

Collecting and grading completed assignments,

Helping students who are having problems or are behind,

Giving lectures,

Leading discussions,

Keeping everybody busy,

Making up tests,

Preventing and stopping disturbances, distractions, and

Giving advice on schoolwork and other things.

This listing helps students see how complex and demanding the total teaching act—and by extension, learning—really is. Students have always noticed from time to time the pressures of teaching; now an entire class has focused its attention on the subject. In addition, students invariably comment that, now that they have taken the time to consider all that is expected of teachers, it is difficult for them to see how any one person can do all those jobs, fulfill all those responsibilities and expectations.

And with that, I've sprung my trap: The only workable alternative to one person taking on so much must be found in some sort of division of labor, of shared responsibilities. Now we are ready to consider who might be expected to help out, and in what ways. Someone begins by offering up group leaders as glorified teacher aides, but others worry about how those five or six people might react to being singled out in this way, and how the class might respond to them. Another student volunteers one or two people who seem born to direct others, and that suggestion unleashes a few guffaws and several groans. Finally someone makes the sort of comment I've been waiting for: "It's not fair for only a few people to do the work! Everybody has to be treated the same."

Although I'll make my case for special group leader responsibilities, I'm gratified that this student has raised the need for everyone to take an active role in at least some of those duties and responsibilities we identified earlier. Now we are ready to chart the major tasks according to the four basic types of membership in our class: the teacher, all the students, the five or six group leaders, and the individual writing groups.

I draw a chart on the board on which these four "populations" are represented, and we discuss which tasks are best suited for each, not-

Learning/Teaching Tasks	*Teacher*	*All Students*	*Group Leaders*	*Writing Groups*
Introducing new material	X		X	
Taking attendance	X		X	
Planning use of class time	X	X	X	X
Assigning papers and other projects	X	X	X	X
Evaluating student work	X	X		X
Helping students with learning problems	X		X	X
Giving presentations	X	X	X	X
Leading discussions	X		X	
Keeping everyone involved, on task	X	X	X	
Designing quizzes and tests	X			X
Preventing disturbances, derailing distractions	X	X	X	X
Giving advice	X	X	X	X

ing that some tasks might be shared. As we begin to fill in the chart, students think of other teaching tasks ("keeping everybody busy" is divided into "keeping students from working on other teachers' assignments" and "not letting anybody just sit there"). I tell them to keep major categories or tasks intact for the time being; we'll have chances to return to our chart if we find something has been overlooked or is imprecisely worded. Completing the chart and discussing its implications helps students view the next eighteen weeks as a process of establishing a personal motive for success, discovering and practicing learning strategies, and evaluating and sharing their work with one another. Certainly, the chart's categories do not touch upon all of my course's action strategies for learning (where is "sharing and responding to written work," for example?). Yet even though the chart focuses on teaching as opposed to an integrated view of teaching and learning, we have begun to consider all of our obligations to one another. Students know that I have designed the program and established its objectives, yet they realize that the learning process requires everyone's involvement and commitment. I point out that even those tasks most often associated with the teacher (assigning papers and projects, helping students with learning problems, and giving presentations) will be shared with them in a number of ways. I stress that being able to recognize one's own understanding of and ability to apply course material is the course's ultimate objective, its purpose.

Students know, of course, that I will be exercising a good deal of authority in the room, no matter what sort of program or emphasis I establish. They expect me, for example, to decide which literary concepts should be included in our study of the short story or of contemporary poetry. But if students are going to be asked to connect personal experiences and observations with course material in an honest and direct way, it is appropriate to involve them in designing, presenting, and evaluating (after responding to) individual and group assignments, projects, even tests.

Students in my writing-to-learn classrooms are more involved and clearer about our purposes than students I have taught in more traditional ways. Writing to learn plays a significant role as students move more actively and meaningfully through course activities and units. Actively, because they are obliged to "talk through" mental blocks and misunderstandings that occur in group discussion and individual writing exercises; meaningfully, because the affective mode naturally emerges and in many ways takes precedence over students' cognitive development. The need to express their reactions to and feelings about literature is met by writing to learn.

As an introduction to writing to learn and to our first unit (the short story), I ask freshman honors students to complete a **focused write** in response to the question, "What makes or constitutes a good short story for you?" Comments usually include references to personal likes and dislikes—the right starting point for the reading, discussing, and writing to follow. I want students to use their own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes as points of departure, as frames of reference; in this way an environment encouraging personal connections begins to take shape.

Sheila's response to this opening question was as follows:

> A good short story is very difficult to determine because many people have different ideas about what a good story is. In my opinion a good story is one that you can get involved in, and that will make you feel some emotions, such as sad, happy, mad, or anything else. The story should have a good setting that makes you feel like you were really there and that this event could very easily be happening to you. I like stories that have an interesting full-bodied plot, full of adventure and excitement. The story should have some sort of theme that could be put across to the reader in a very subtle manner, or in a way that is easily distinguishable to the reader. Stories must make you feel a part of them, and let you get so caught up in them that you lose track of time. Of course, this is just my opinion of what constitutes a good story, but most "good" stories I know are this way. Characters are very important to a story because these characters should be so real, that by the end of the

> story you would feel like they were your best friends. The characters often help depict the mood of the story.

Sheila's first writing-to-learn journal entry is a telling one. She demonstrates her reluctance to express her thoughts and feelings; "Many people have different ideas about what a good short story is" and "Of course this is just my opinion" are forms of apology. But her comments also indicate a working knowledge of a number of literary concepts. "A good setting that makes you feel like you were really there" is a reference to verisimilitude; her use of setting is definite and direct. "A good story is one that you can get involved in, and that will make you feel some emotions" points to Sheila's understanding of mood and atmosphere and their contributions to fiction. Finally, her statement, "Stories . . . let you get so caught up in them that you lose track of time" demonstrates her awareness that unity of impression, a term I will soon introduce, is a key component of the successful short story.

Admittedly, Sheila's focused write is self-conscious rather than self-revelatory. Before long, though, she discovers that I really mean it when I announce that only sharing and suggesting—not evaluating—will be applied to this sort of writing to learn. Sheila's writing will become more exploratory, less tentative. Further, Sheila will be able to use this piece as a springboard for a major essay she will be writing in the coming weeks, and I can use it now as an indicator of her innate understanding of the short story.

At the cognitive level, then, Sheila's focused write is a kind of pretest, and she has done remarkably well, as have many other students. But from the perspective of her role in the class and her obligations to herself, including her need to express reactions and opinions freely, we have work to do. In the affective domain, writing to learn helps me assess students' attitudes, inhibitions, and growth.

By the midpoint of the first quarter, nearly all students are writing (and discussing) more freely. Sheila's journal entries become less restricted, more wide-ranging and representative of, as she puts it, her "true feelings." Her response to **metaphorical questions** ("Imagine this work of art as a medicine. What is the disease? What are the symptoms? How does the medicine cure it?") in connection with Jean Stafford's seriocomic short story "Bad Characters" is still a bit restrained yet is also more forthright, less qualified:

> The disease would be inability to get along with people—Insecurity around others—insecurity about yourself. The symptoms are, not getting along with people, blurting things out and hurting people, not being able to communicate very well with people. The medicine would have to help them realize how they are acting, and

> how they really are hurting other people. This story would help them realize about themselves, and that they are selfish and a little bit spoiled. When people see themselves acting they are taken aback because of the realizations of their actions!

Not all writing-to-learn activities need to refer directly to personal experience; the group readings and discussion that follow give Sheila and the others a chance to move from the generalizations included in their metaphorical question responses to a listing of experiences (a kind of group write). The purpose of this sequence of activities is to gain insight from one another's comments and suggestions, not to ascribe a value to individual written responses. Simply observing the dynamics and listening to class presentations of each group served as informal evaluation for me.

Students have opportunities to discuss and otherwise share journal writing throughout the semester, yet in keeping with the class concept and organization agreed to by all of us, some writing-to-learn exercises are purely expressive (Britton 1970). That is, they are written to and for the writer. When writing is shared, the nature and purpose of that sharing needs to be communicated clearly (springboard for an in-class essay, grist for discussion, search for concepts) before the writing begins. Writing to learn is, as I have been suggesting, flexible and adaptable. But if it is to be used to "free up" students who might not otherwise participate wholeheartedly in class activities in their own learning, students need to be let in on the purpose and potential use of their writing. To shroud assignments in mystery is to deny real student involvement and to undermine the very atmosphere that is essential if students are to develop a personal stake in the process as well as in the subject.

Writing-to-learn strategies that lend themselves well to small and large group sharing in my classes include **dialogues, unsent letters, scenarios, metaphorical questions, free writing,** and **brainstorming.** All can be seen and used as divergent, exploratory, writer-based exercises that help students make connections. Yet although most such activities are writer-based as opposed to reader-based, most students are willing, and even eager, to share their work in writing groups and welcome other students' ideas and reactions. Once I have explained what they are about to do and why, students relax at least enough to tell the truth. As Ken Macrorie says about writers, "Perhaps when they're telling truths (as they see and feel them, not as superhumans with absolute truthtelling powers), they concentrate first on what they're saying and second on what others will think of it" (*Uptaught*. New Rochelle: Hayden, 1970).

Most of us remember a time when the anticipation of tackling a new skill or task was fraught with worry and even dread; the thought of learning to swim or ride a bike, for example, may have been far more threatening than the experience itself. And those kids who always seemed so self-assured did nothing to help us to feel better, to be more optimistic about our own chances for success.

When I announce the first major test or to-be-evaluated (summative) writing assignment, I ask students to write about an experience or responsibility that was traumatic for them. But before they begin to write to and about themselves, I break the cathartic ice by relating a personal anecdote that speaks to the need and value of rehearsal, of writing for oneself in preparation for and in anticipation of an assignment or other obligation. This anecdote is significant to me; students recognize this importance and are able to identify or classify it with an experience of their own.

> I was twelve when our family moved from upstate New York to a Detroit suburb. Adjusting to new situations had always been difficult for me, but one incident was particularly unnerving. It was in gym class, in the days when boys' gym teachers either actually had been Army drill sergeants or played convincing interpretations of them.
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> This one always wore a tight crew-neck T-shirt, regulation gym shorts, a brass whistle and an authentic military-issue scowl. Everything we did included lining up, counting off, and competing with one another. I could deal with ropeclimbing, long-jumping and even balance-beam running, but the prospect of moving hand-over-head from one end of a ten-foot-high horizontal ladder to the other was too much. We never knew what we were going to be doing from one day to the next, and finding myself third in line to leap from an unsteady metal chair at what seemed a ridiculously distant first rung violated every principle of self-preservation.
>
> The only chance I had to prepare was watching the kid in front of me nearly miss, just manage to white-knuckle rung number one, then flail his way to the end of the ladder. Meanwhile, the coach blew his whistle from a distance of two feet as the kid behind me jabbed his thumb into my back, just in case I hadn't noticed that I was next. In that brief moment, I decided that I would certainly miss the rung, then succumb if not to a broken back, most assuredly to terminal embarrassment.

I tell students that I believe I did in fact slip and fall not because I couldn't reach the ladder, but because I had not had a chance to persuade myself that I could. If only I could have walked up to that chair, reached for the rung from a position of safety, then seen myself firmly grasping each successive rung, hesitation and panic almost certainly would never have occurred. What I needed was a chance to rehearse,

to see myself dealing positively and confidently with a new experience.

So too for students who are asked to write about literature (or history or science). Writing-to-learn activities allow students to express their feelings about literary works and concepts that they may be uncomfortable or just unfamiliar with. Rather than begin a survey of contemporary poetry by defining or otherwise describing it, I ask students in my Introduction to Literature class to respond to the question, "What are your feelings about or experiences with poetry?" in the form of a focused write.

Many students say that they have no feelings about or reactions to poetry, that in fact they do their best to avoid it. (Of course that gives me an opportunity to return to their claims of disinterest!) Others point out that poetry is either serious business or senseless play, and that in either event, they have never cared for it. A few refer to past experiences with poetry that were enjoyable and meaningful. But whatever the response, being given the chance to write open-endedly about their thoughts and reactions goes a long way toward creating a positive, accepting environment for the work to come, especially after students have a chance to discuss and share their ideas and experiences in groups.

Because this is the first subject-related writing-to-learn exercise I ask these students to complete, it helps me gauge their attitudes, voices, and perspectives. Peter's comments, for example, point to his need for reassurance and support, as well as my need to convince him that I really do want him to write to and for himself when he is asked to write freely:

> How should I know what poetry is—I guess I just don't have feeling about it, except I don't like it. I hope we're not gonna write any poems, I had to do that in junior high. Ugh.

Peter doesn't seem to trust me or himself when it comes to something as alien and suspect as poetry. And as I decide who will work with whom in writing groups, I consider Peter's reticence. I want him to work with students who will accept him but who will, I hope, be a bit more receptive to the idea that poetry has value for everyone. But what bothers me most about Peter's comments is that they are other-centered; he is complaining to me rather than speaking to and for himself.

Wendy, on the other hand, evidently accepts poetry. I appreciate her comments, but I worry about her purpose for writing, too:

> I like poetry! In fact I write it all the time. My mom encourages me and my friends say I'm a good rhymer. My all-time favorite poems are inspirational, even though I like fun poems, too, like limericks and haiku. Well, that's why I like poetry.

I want Wendy to write to and for herself also, but this first focused write is obviously written for me. Wendy's apparent enthusiasm is refreshing, but her response is too controlled, too orderly to be an example of spontaneous (if focused) expression. That last line ("Well, that's why I like poetry") is the clincher. In my first conference with her, I tell Wendy that I value her comments, but that she needs to become her own audience for this kind of writing.

After students are convinced that I really do want them to write expressively for themselves, they usually respond more freely. For example here is John's focused writing response to the question, "What sort of person must or should a poet be?"

> I guess I have trouble thinking about poets, probably because I don't know any. They're serious people I guess that go home at night and think beautiful thoughts or something. No, I know that's not true. I suppose they get up, eat breakfast and go to work like everybody else, but they might smile more or something. Unless they write death poems. I know I can't be a poet because I don't like words that much, but it's good somebody does it, I guess.

John's response rambles, even though it focuses on the topic. It moves from point to point almost at random; the voice I hear is unrehearsed, disordered, spontaneous. It is John speaking to and for John, even though we all know he is completing a required assignment. The teacher is surely nearby; otherwise, John would probably never indulge in this sort of expressive writing. But providing the opportunity and the impetus is, I think, where my influence ends and John's own interests and needs begin.

And that's when I know students are ready to use writing to learn as a guidepost for their own learning. Once they are fairly comfortable with writing to learn and sharing much of it with others, students learn to use a variety of written responses as checks for understanding course material. In this and other ways, students are making writing to learn work for them.

Students make previous journal entries work for them as they study for tests, prepare for group and individual oral presentations, and generate topics and constructs for end-of-unit projects. The writing groups also adjust, as students are expected to find and share key ideas and information found in one another's writing, devise tests and discussion questions for themselves and other groups, and contribute suggestions for individual members' project proposals or essays. Writing groups move from sounding boards to critical readers to synthesizers and back again as they support, encourage, and prod writers who are reluctant to participate and are in turn inspired and helped by those who lead best by sharing with others.

To illustrate how writing to learn helps students recognize and apply their understanding of course material, I'll explain the purpose and sequence of activities in a unit on poetry. My major goals for these students are (1) to become involved (through reading, writing, and discussing) with representative examples of contemporary poetry, (2) to recognize how a variety of poetic devices (such as imagery and figurative language, for example) contribute to a poem's effects on the reader, and (3) to develop critical skills that lead to analysis, evaluation, and application of those devices.

A tall order, to say the least. And not all of my students learn to read critically to the extent that I intend for them. But no student has ever completed the series of activities dealing, for example, with distinctions between prose and poetry without demonstrating both affective and cognitive growth. I know this to be true because students' writing-to-learn responses illustrate and underscore it.

I chose Andrew Grossbardt's "Fifty Below," a poem that graphically depicts the effects extreme cold has on anyone caught in it. Grossbardt's poem works on other levels and suggests other meanings, of course, and because it uses so many devices so effectively, it is an excellent poem for students to read and respond to.

Back to my sequence of assignments. I begin by telling students that my objective is for them to recognize and explain distinctions between language that is typically prosaic and language that is poetic. I also mention that I want them to become aware of language's richness and diversity and its tendency to combine prosaic and poetic elements.

Before they read the poem, I ask students to complete a personal scenario: "Describe an experience in which weather conditions made you very uncomfortable or even frightened." Tracy's response is more formal than most, but her message and incorporation of poetic devices are typical:

> As I stepped off the plane, the heat caught me as a gale would overcome a lone tree. The warmth was almost nauseating as I had been accustomed to the fragile hum of an air conditioner. The effort to make it in to the airport terminal seemed to strain every nuance of energy from my body. The 150 feet I had to walk seemed a mile. I not only had myself, but my luggage as well. My companions, as I could see through the streams of sweat stinging my eyes, also seemed reluctant to launch one of their two feet forward. This did not happen to us once, but it happened three times. My clean hair had been transformed to strings of wet masses clinging to my head. It took me a month to finally get used to the hot, humid weather which I had succumbed to.

"Streams of sweat," "caught me as a gale would overcome a lone tree," "strings . . . clinging to my head"; I point out to Tracy and others who volunteer to share their work with the class that their prose contains elements of poetic language. Then students return to their **writing groups** in order to find and categorize those phrases and lines that seem to fit our definitions of poetic expression. I also ask the groups to be prepared to offer their explanations of how and why each selected phrase works to create mental pictures for the reader or to draw striking yet fitting comparisons and associations. Students who may have had trouble identifying metaphors or similes—and especially finding and being able to explain the comparisons involved, for instance, on objective tests without such writing-to-learn preliminaries—become more conscious of figurative language and its effects on them. As a result, poetic concepts and techniques make the transition from isolated facts to be studied to real-world strategies to be practiced.

At this point, students are ready to read and respond to the poem. I ask them to circle any phrases or lines that seem particularly poetic and to look for references or details that carry a graphic picture of coldness. Students recognize that the most telling (dramatic, according to several students) lines and phrases were also those that incorporate one or more poetic techniques or features. Like their own scenarios, the poem's most strikingly realistic lines create pictures for the reader; they are image-based. A recent list of circled phrases included:

> the sky turns clear, brittle / as glass
> you scrape the ice from your breath
> the only tremor is silence too dense to dream moonlight burns
> the hills.
> A dull ache squats behind
> both eyes and stays
> You hear an underground river thud
> through some dense artery beneath the earth

We spend some time discussing why these particular phrases and lines are chosen by so many people. Nearly everyone says something about these selections being "colorful," "unusual," or even "strange," and "haunting." Students call attention to similes ("brittle as glass") and images ("moonlight burns the hills").

Aside from earlier discussion of how such poetic devices pervade even casual conversation, I had not prompted the students' next response to an assignment that asks them to list language that seems prosaic in one column and poetic in another (taken from "Fifty Below"). Jane's columns show her ability to make a workable distinction:

Prose	Poetry
at first there is no sense of cold, the first hard fact Three feet of snow give way your skin begins to turn	hear your frail breath catch in throat the air crackles every step dull ache squats behind both eyes and stays even the soul can start to freeze

Jane is not the most incisive thinker or prolific writer in her class, but she has succeeded in the basic distinction and awareness I had hoped for. And what is even more important, she now has a personalized study guide for any future quiz, writing assignment or project. And along the way, she has realized that just as elements of prosaic language are to be found in poetry, poetic devices are often characteristic of prose. Hers is an unstated but quite well-understood awareness of the fluidity and flexibility of language.

Following these activities, I have students complete a focused write that will be shared in groups and used to help each group arrive at a definitive statement that members must be able to defend and illustrate at a later time. In her response to "What are the differences between poetry and prose?" Wendy writes:

> The main difference between poetry and prose is that poetry is thought over more until you come up with a finished product. Prose is using more common words. Physically, poetry lines are in stanzas instead of paragraphs and the lines don't always end in sentences. Sometimes poems rhyme and poems have a deeper meaning than what you read when you first read it. Prose is not as original and it usually has only one meaning. Poems sound almost musical but prose doesn't. Poetry suggests, prose tells. Words do more in poetry.

Wendy was asked to generalize, and she certainly has. Also, I asked students to respond to this question as if "poetry" meant the exclusive use of poetic language (or nearly so). Yet the attitudes underlying Wendy's comments hit the mark. Wendy clearly recognizes poetic language's tendency to be complex, to operate on a number of levels ("Words do more in poetry"). She is able to discuss a number of poetic devices (stanza, rhyme, rhythm), and she is aware of the demands poetry often makes on the reader: "Poems have a deeper meaning than what you read when you first read it." Wendy's writing-to-learn response demonstrates both cognitive and affective growth, and she has something of value to share with her writing group as well as with the entire class. And finally, she has provided the kind of evidence that surpasses any objective test of her learning.

As every teacher knows, finding time to teach all the concepts and skills students need to feel and be successful requires careful planning

and a commitment to an integrated curriculum. No English teacher can afford to think in terms of discrete, unrelated units. Students need to see how such seemingly diverse topics and skills as editing, literature study, vocabulary development, sentence structure, and research are related and complementary. And even more important, all such skills and experiences contribute to the image we want most for our students: that of the confident, articulate, informed yet inquisitive learner and producer.

Perhaps writing-to-learn's most significant quality is its power of integration, the incorporation of many skills within a meaning web whose center is the student. Its adaptability to process just naturally encourages my own tendency to include convergent as well as divergent class activities. Since keeping up with the latest information in even the narrowest of subjects has become nearly impossible for any one person, to be able to integrate new information with old experience and use that knowledge in innovative, creative ways is critical to the student's long-term success or real progress.

I ask students to read less material than is usually assigned in comparable courses taught in my school district and in nearby districts. While students taking traditionally taught courses most certainly read more selections, a writing-to-learn focus makes each literary contact in my class count for more. Asking students to work toward higher levels of cognition means providing quality time and opportunity. Few students—whether motivated or reluctant learners—are disciplined enough to engage in synthesis and evaluation in the absence of teacher guidance and classroom time and emphasis. And simply plugging into the writing process for five days before the essay is due, following two or more weeks of subject-centered instruction, is not the equal of a consistent writing-to-learn program. We may tell students that we are interested in their personal responses to literature or history or science, but if we have time for writing only when it's essay-writing time, we are sending them a different message.

I wish I had a nickel for every uninspired, impersonal, dry student essay I received before I implemented a writing-to-learn program. Even the best thinkers who wrote nearly error-free, five-paragraph themes impressed me more with their powers of regurgitation than their ability to speak truly. Yes, a few student writers did incorporate personal experience in appropriate ways and arrive at striking yet well-supported conclusions, but these were young people who, as a result of innate ability or previous experience, would have done so in any case. Most students simply do not write freely unless they have been allowed and encouraged to draw the newly encountered into the circle of their experience.

In order to prove to students that their writing-to-learn responses are as important or even more important than recall of information and summative arguments, I begin each semester by explaining the course's grading system. In the introduction to literature class, every assignment and test successfully completed is awarded a set number of points, usually ranging from ten to fifty. Course journals—containing expressive writing, focused revisions, writing-to-learn activity sequences leading to major projects—account for 60 percent of the course grade. And because direct involvement in writing groups (meeting at least twice weekly) is critical to everyone's success, class participation/attendance is valued at another 20 percent. Quizzes and tests, then, are relegated to a secondary and subservient role. I want students to view tests as useful benchmarks for immediate feedback, not as measures of their success according to the teacher. And even though test scores are added in to the total grade, most students are not threatened by them and as a result don't allow themselves to become preoccupied with test taking. Some students may do poorly on objective tests, but their written responses to literary selections often demonstrate the ability to use concepts and strategies. More often than not, this ability surpasses their capacity for memorization or recognition. This is a distinction very much like, for example, the case of the student who couldn't underline all the adverbs in a sentence to save his life, but rarely if ever misused adverbs in his writing.

The 60 percent journal grade includes three entries that students choose to revise and share in writing groups, then earmark for my evaluation. My only restriction is that they work toward three distinctly different types of summative, transactional products. For example, although each topic/project might be inspired by previously completed focused writes, the writer might complete revisions leading to a bio-poem, or a dialogue.

Now students are moving from expressive to transactional writing, from divergent to convergent thinking, from writing to learn to writing to demonstrate learning. I do not want them to think that all those journal entries serve the cause of show-and-tell writing, but both they and I know that real-world operations invariably include the ability to communicate clearly what one knows to others. Additionally, students who see themselves as demonstrators and sharers are more confident and less hesitant to help themselves and others learn. Finally I benefit as a teacher; students who recognize a pattern or hierarchical order ending in a clearly defined goal stay involved. They stay interested.

Class time is provided for students to select earlier writings and to revise or build on them, with advice from writing groups at two or

more stages from initial entry to product evaluation. I provide criteria for each major project type, metaphorical question, focused writes, scenarios, monologues, unsent letters.

For example, if students choose the focused write as a product, I ask them to work toward the following guidelines:

1. Do you incorporate personal opinion in your remarks?
2. Do you analyze some aspects of the selection or passage, then make clearly worded judgments about it?
3. Do you refer to your own knowledge and/or experiences as part of your response to the passage or feature of the literature?

The revised focused write reprinted below was selected by Linda as one of the three entries she wished me to evaluate. Prior to submitting her notebook, she met with her writing group in order to get suggestions for improving her original ten-minute write.

> When one lives off the land, in harmony with the land, and believes to know the secrets and tricks of it, one would believe he's going to get the sweetest part of life, the sweet, rich nectar. In a small town in India, though, that is not the case. The farming families are left with virtually nothing, like nectar flowing straight through a sieve and leaving only minute signs of the product's passage.
> Rukmani, one of the villagers, and her family live as poverty-stricken peasants. They have too much pride and faith in their traditional beliefs to discontinue turning their soil and go to work in a modern tannery built by foreigners. Their farming is on a bare subsisitence level because the land is so barren and the weather so poor, especially during the monsoon season when the crops are destroyed. When one lives in these hardships it seems that it would be easy to lose faith in one's gods and reject the land and seek refuge in another form of work which would be more promising. However, these Indians did no such thing.
> Living, even according to Mother Nature's laws is not as sweet and rich as the fruit she bears but can rather leave one nothing, through natural disasters. When these people thought they have understood how to successfully harvest in the end was to be contained with a sieve.

This represents Linda's third product grown out of earlier journal writing. What follows is characteristic of the kind of response I generally make to students' summative writing:

> Linda:
> This is a successful piece of writing! You have followed the rules for effective focused responses here. I noticed references to the novel's major themes and concepts with regard to the importance of the

> land, the agonies of change, the contradictions of life—in short, interpretation. You analyzed the significance of the title ("like nectar flowing straight through a sieve and leaving only minute signs of the product's passage").
> I wonder, though, if you could have incorporated references to your own experiences, knowledge and/or beliefs with respect to human pride and sacrifice, hope and despair? Perhaps this entry has moved from focused write to a kind of miniature essay; that's okay, because I know that you did seek the advice and suggestions of your writing group, and I recognize evidence of your ability to connect the plot, characterizations, and atmosphere of the novel with issues that concern all of us (especially those references to man at the mercy of Nature). Overall, you've done well. Where might this revision lead, in terms of your choice of an even more detailed essay?

The revision has moved in many ways from the expressive to the transactional. One purpose has led to another. This writer's journal writing and discussions have contributed to a clearer, more integrated and perceptive view of the literature and its implications than might otherwise have resulted. My comments to Linda are added to her cumulative anecdotal evaluation record, and she has the opportunity to indicate the letter grade she feels her work deserves along with a brief explanation or "defense." I determine letter grades only for major student projects.

Toward the beginning of this chapter, I referred to writing to learn as a springboard or incubator for student projects that involve students personally in course work. It is in my freshman honors English class that projects work best for me, largely because these students are highly motivated, and my emphasis is on blending instruction in writing with a study of literature.

During this course, students see many correlations and applications of subject matter as well as of process. When, for instance, I introduce them to drama in general and *Macbeth* in particular, students have developed confidence in literary interpretation, writing-to-learn activities, research and documentation, and the seeking of creative solutions to problems.

During the literature/writing strand of the course, I let students know by the second week that all of their notes, reading, discussions, and journal writing will serve as resources for a major writing project dealing with a theme, characterization, or other feature of *Macbeth*. When I discuss the role of their preliminary work with them, I use such metaphoric associations as incubator, nurse log, springboard, and seed packet. That which is about to emerge and bear fruit will evolve from raw material with which it may appear to have little in common. I tell

students not to anticipate too far in advance the nature or scope of the project they will eventually complete, for to do so would stifle, limit, or even eliminate possibility.

Jackie writes a series of newspaper articles that might have appeared in a Glasgow daily. Initial accounts of Macbeth's grab for power are objectively reported, but successive articles become increasingly subjective, even condemnatory as the facts and motivations of the play's events come to light. Jackie's project explores the connections between writing style and purpose and between tone and perspective as she implies the enormity of Macbeth's crimes, particularly as they effect and nearly destroy the sense of order that preceded his deeds. Representative headlines include:

> Scotland Victorious at War! Cawdor Commits Treason
>
> King Duncan Murdered!
>
> King Macbeth a Traitor!

Cary tries her hand with a soliloquy; her project captures her view of Macbeth's self-deception.

> I, Macbeth,
> at the pinnacle of power,
> looking down at the human steps over which
> I clawed, on which I climbed to the summit!
> Rejoice! Celebrate!
> It is my world!
> . . . .
> My eyes have warned me.
> They have seen the dagger, stained with blood,
> a weapon tantalyzing, offering itself to me,
> Yet I cannot grasp it.
> I am distressed; deceptive visions appear
> before my eyes.
> I have seen the fearsome ghost of Banquo,
> a friend whom I came to fear—his shadowy
> apparition, returning to haunt me, reminding
> me of my evil ways.
> My ears resound at the ringing of a bell,
> compelling me to proceed with my plan.
> The signal of doom!
> My ears echo with the knocking,
> the knocking at the gate.
> Macduff has arrived for the gracious
> Duncan. Oh, could they but arouse the
> King with their clamour!
> If it were possible . . . !
> I taste the bitter truth of false friendships,
> My lips recoil from the cowardly lies

that have stung my soul.
The sweetness of my lady is poisoned
by the distorted words that she speaks.
I feel love for her, my wife, my strength.
On her I lean, without her I am less.
I feel the craving for power, control, reign,
to fulfill my total ambition.
Yet I am reluctant, as if it were not
intended by nature, as if evil controls,
my soul destined for the devil.
I sense my doom;
it shrieks and I quiver
seeing,
hearing,
touching,
feeling,
smelling
the perverse truth.

Another student writes a children's story ("Mack and Beth") based upon characterizations and events of the play, but twisted and manipulated in such a way that a fitting moral for children (helpful, gentle people were and are appreciated by others) surfaces.

Ken writes a powerful political commentary in his version of "Macbeth: Soviet's New Leader" as published in a special edition of *Time* magazine. Ken drew upon his earlier response to the question, "Describe Macbeth as a modern-day politician."

Each of these students, along with their twenty-six classmates, followed a sequence of writing-to-learn activities; read them in writing groups; and generated potential formats and themes through brainstorming, unsent letters, and metaphorical questions. Each one produced a project worthy of the name, and most—especially when they shared their work with the class—contributed to the learning of everyone. And even though each project could have benefited from further revision, editing, and even proofing, writing to learn has worked. All but a few students who entered the honors program as freshmen are currently enrolled in the junior honors section, and many students who are taking standard classes have requested that they be considered for admission. Introduction to Literature via writing to learn enjoys a positive reputation among students who are usually lukewarm in their responses to any class that seems even a little bit like work. Evidently, this is work students are willing to do. As Bill, a terrible test-taker who earned a C in the Introduction to Literature class last year, said as we recently passed in the hall, "Hey, I still don't like all that writing, but I never filled a whole notebook before. When can I have my journal back?"