

An Impartial Observer's View of Write-to-Learn Classes

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As reader-instructor in the English and Slavic Departments of the University of Washington, I am concerned with students' writing. As I read and grade papers, I find that many students' formulations of thoughts do not always reveal an idea at work or learning taking place. Thoughts that merit attention are not developed, or there is no focus to an essay. Often there is a confusion or profusion of ideas, and no attempt is made to clarify. Since there is little time at the university level to retrace the steps that should have been taken at the secondary level to correct these problems, or to teach students how to help themselves, I welcomed my assignment to interview teachers and students involved with the writing-to-learn program. These conversations and observations gave me an opportunity to hear and, in some instances, to see what is being done and to evaluate the results of the process in a variety of classroom situations. Here I will describe four representative classes in the program, classes which I visited as an outsider the way a parent or any interested citizen might.

Special Education in the Suburbs

My first interview was in a suburban school in a pleasant, secluded, residential area of principally middle-class, moderately well-to-do students. I overhear the students talking of colleges and entrance exams as I wait to be directed to the teacher's room. I am to talk with a teacher of special education. We meet during the lunch period in a small, private cubicle. My first question is how she uses the writing-to-learn processes and second, what are the results. She explains that her students have different problems and that she works with them individually and in small groups of three or four, using the free-write, journal, and discussion strategies. She is careful to observe their responses and helps

them develop positive efforts wherever possible. The free write is a struggle for many. The journals are not always clear, but the discussion groups help the student who has difficulty with writing by providing an opportunity to correct and explain.

She is particularly enthusiastic about the success of a dyslexic student. In the course of almost a school year, he has been able to make enough progress to graduate with his class. This is a breakthrough she had not expected, and she attributes this student's success to two vital factors inherent in the program. The first is that in the free write and in the journal there is no one right or wrong answer; the fear of being wrong is not present. The student's experience is valid. What he or she sees, feels, thinks, how she or he examines an idea are important. This is a beginning. This validity makes completion and comparison less the issues and creates a climate for learning that frees the student and contributes to self-worth.

She works primarily in reading and selects literature that will elicit a response. She is granted some liberty in this respect as the desire to learn is of prime importance in special education situations. She takes time to comment on the journal entries, though they are jumbled in the beginning. Every step of progress is there for the student to see, and she reinforces these positives. The opportunity to explore an idea, to discover, and to communicate are ventures the student must take, necessarily, at an individual pace.

Dyslexic students often are very bright and sometimes very articulate but unable to incorporate these abilities and talents into their learning. While listening, I am aware that the teacher is patient and persistent and the student determined and persevering. I am disappointed not to meet with the student and hear his response. I had hoped for more change, more improvement or success for many students. Yet the fact remains that, as this student succeeds, the incentive will be there for the teacher and other students. The fact that this student is a senior, that the problem has been with him for so long and yet is being conquered is heartening. This teacher is working with groups that need intense supervision and direction; yet she is discovering that writing to learn can help them to exercise more responsibility in helping each other. This is a discovery for her.

Literature in a Large City

My next visit is to a school on the outskirts of a large city. The area is densely populated, and the noise and distractions of traffic and the

bustle and busyness of the street are constant reminders of the tensions of city life. The building is old, revitalized with vivid paint on overhead structural supports. The pods of classrooms and the teachers' office-desk areas are separated by partitions. Several students wait outside the principal's office talking about the probability of readmission slips. The student body is predominantly black and I, an older white woman, am conspicuous.

The teacher arrives and tells me that many of her students have difficulty with reading and writing in literature classes, and her first experience with the free write proved less than successful. However, one day she asked her students to start a character sketch: "Write about someone you know, add to it each day for a week." Not only did she have some interesting and provocative sketches, but in the small discussion groups the students selected several to be read in class. Their interest in literature was considerably heightened. They began to observe how authors developed characters; how background, setting, speech, and attire contributed to the portrayal of character. She finds that these students' efforts at writing help them to develop critical ability: to compare and to evaluate differences in style and technique that give them the ability to appreciate a wider range of literary experience. She stresses to her students that differences in perception and experience enrich our understanding. Writing to learn is leading students toward a greater interest in literature, and these students are developing, from all reports, an interest in sharing and communicating. They have been issued a challenge and have accepted it. They are writing to learn.

Humanities in the Country

The third interview is in a school in a lovely rural area not far from one of the shopping-center cities strung along the freeways. The building is a modern cement complex, so recently constructed that the landscaping isn't finished. The teacher of the humanities class is enthusiastic about the high level of interest writing to learn evokes and introduces me to the class as "one of us—another learner—as we all are in this creative program." He directs the class to begin their assignment, and we talk quietly as students write (or ponder what to write). They are completing an assignment on their outside reading. Everyone has selected from a suggested reading list and is writing a summary as preparation for an essay. This is the first time students have been asked to write without the preliminary discussion. The teacher is trying to discover how much of the high-level thinking evidenced in the discussion groups is carried over and how well students can apply the analysis and

organization strategies on their own. He explains the free write, the journal, and the discussion procedures he follows and remarks how these have given him a new concept of teaching—creative in the best possible way, using the basic material (literature) as a tool for learning rather than feeding the material and hoping it will be ingested. He collects the papers and asks for response to the experiment. There are groans of “not enough time.” Other than that, the general consensus is that this writing was easier than it had been previously. The teacher asks how many are willing to share their notes. Most consent and the few who demur are to stay after class. He has five volunteers who meet with me after class. The young men want to talk first as they have to leave shortly.

One tells me this class has helped him realize school “isn’t a bust.” He didn’t like free writing and journals originally. They seemed “kid stuff.” However he discovered that this is what he liked to do. For the first time he felt free to write what he thought, how he felt, and he wasn’t “shot down for it.” He worked out some frustrations and difficulties in writing about literature. “Once I get into a character, I can be me and the character.” He can’t yet understand why writing works when he is analyzing a character or a book, but he manages to get in a lot of what he sees and the work itself becomes exciting and rewarding to him. He likes the exchange in the discussion groups and finds others often agree with him, “even if I’m far out.” (I later learn this student had behavior problems and, formerly, was more often in the principal’s office than in class). He is discovering he has values, and writing in the journal helps him express them. One of the girls suggested he is more “straight” than he likes to admit. This brought a laugh, and he remarked that he did like to turn out a good piece of writing. While he is not a model student, by his own admission, he now is more perceptive and is willing to discipline his thoughts and feelings to a higher purpose than “letting it all out.” He hopes to write for the school paper.

The other young man entered the class reluctantly, but felt “it would be good for me.” The free write is not his favorite part of the day but the journal has become a habit he enjoys. “I don’t mind putting myself on paper. It helps with other classes because I put down questions I don’t want to ask in class.” He does not say so but it is apparent that he is gaining confidence in putting himself on paper and that he is thoughtfully responding to assignments. He is learning to defend his positions and to respond to others.

The young women are enthusiastic for different reasons. One has gained confidence in expressing her own opinions. She is learning to apply logic: to organize her thoughts. “I used to say what I thought and

expect people to agree without clearly considering the power and persuasion of words." Another adds, "This is like a game. I can find clues in reading that help me. When a character does something foolish or threatening, I can remember being that dumb or daredevil. I want to say, 'Hey, wait a minute.'" She is beginning to relate cause and effect: to connect experiences. The third young woman feels she is taking a risk every time she puts herself on paper. She risks change and growth. "I find I am thinking, not just mouthing what I last heard. I see myself growing when I look back in my journal at what I wrote in September."

For all of these young people there is a sense of accomplishment and reward. They are learning to deal with ideas, with concepts. There is a one-to-one relationship as they work with the material. They analyze and evaluate on their own.

I return to the classroom to inquire about the students who have had trouble with the summary. The teacher explains that, for the most part, these students have reading problems. He talks with each student to determine where he or she is in relation to the story and asks that each begin there, with the known, the central characters, a central idea. If this still presents difficulties, he asks them to consider a poem or a short story with which they are familiar, to write their first quick thoughts then to use the journal for further thought and comment. This return to basics usually solves the problem.

Here the writing-to-learn skills are being used well and effectively. Students are contributing creatively and developing perceptive sensibilities. I am, however, concerned that they are not moving from the personal to the concept of broader issues. There is a lack of direction, lack of effort to see more objectively and widely, a lack of attempt to see how words can lead to actions. This may be taking place, but it was not evident in our conversations and my observations. There is an evident success with these beginning steps of the writing-to-learn process, but, also, a resulting homogeneity. The teacher is aware of this and plans to direct further literary reading to an appreciation of differences in human experience, behavior, cultures, and an involvement with a larger world in considering social and political injustices and human rights.

Literature in the Country

The final interview is in a school some distance from the city. The school sprawls over an extensive area, surrounded by small farms and garden plots. I am directed to the teacher's room and arrive minutes before the class is to start. The teacher informs me they will begin with a free write and some readings from those writings. I sit to one side and

observe. The room is windowless, bleak but for the attractive posters and the small signs posted randomly. Three particularly catch my eye.

"Learning improves the quality of the mind."

"Writing is the act of discovery."

"Creativity: the ability to make connections."

These will come to life as I listen and talk with the teacher and members of this class. There is an unexpected vitality for this last period of the day as thirty students file in, some nodding or speaking as they pass me. Every seat is taken, the desks arranged in a semi-circle with the teacher's desk centered against a wall. Everyone seems to be talking at once, to his neighbor or addressing the teacher, yet it is an orderly confusion with which they appear comfortable. The general hubbub subsides when the teacher says, "All right. Take up pencils and journals. Free write." I learn later, in the interview, the five-minute interval before writing is a brain-airing session. The students are accustomed to this exchange—a chance to gear up for the fifteen-minute writing period that is to follow. The teacher writes with them. As one of her confidence- and trust-building techniques, she shares her writing with them from time to time. This group has been together almost a full school year and has developed a routine and an art in working together. Students listen to each other. What captures the eye and warms the heart is their evident enjoyment of what they are doing. When the fifteen-minute writing sprint is completed, there are more volunteers willing to share their writing than there is time. The teacher selects three who reveal very dissimilar styles and subjects. The first is pure fantasy—a Walter Mitty type of experience, resembling a dream, with one quick final sentence to bring us back to reality, the reality of the schoolroom. The second, an experience of racism that proves later (in the student interviews) to be autobiographical. The third, a comment on war. None of these is polished in the accepted sense of that word, but each reveals something of the identity of the writer and a freedom of expression that speaks well for the ability to grasp an idea or a subject and to present a thoughtful consideration of it. (I heard from the teachers themselves, earlier, how the free write can inspire and refine one's thinking. The teachers have had this experience in their own training workshop. This is the first time I have seen it work so effectively in a classroom.) An interview after class gives students an opportunity to say what their experience has meant.

I talk with seven of the students from this class. More volunteered. The teacher selected these as representative of different viewpoints. I ask, "What have you learned from this approach to literature?" The answers are varied. "How to think about connections—cause and effect,"

"how to read for ideas," "a love for words and their meanings," "self-worth," "concentration and organization of my thoughts." Each has taken a turn in this response but two opt to speak later. No criticism is given, no comment made. Their choice is tacitly acceptable to all. There is respect for others in this group. When one student has not spoken for a time, someone will ask him or her "What do you think?" I remark about this, and they tell me that in the discussion groups they try for full participation. "Everyone has something to offer. She or he may dispute or confirm, but we learn from each other."

They agree they were not enthusiastic about journals in the beginning. One member felt it would be "an invasion of privacy." He was reassured by the teacher that his personal life was not the purpose of the journal. Some personal revelation may be there from time to time, but the purpose is to encourage objective thinking. Personal gripes and difficulties may often be used as a catharsis, a clearing of the air before thinking (like the five-minute period before free write in class) but are not the primary considerations or the goals. (The teacher informed me later that she assigns a writing project when a student has a problem with writing only to gripe. A focus is often the necessary antidote.)

The journal has been helpful to more than one student. It is a record of comments and analyses and helps toward a more objective and thoughtfully critical viewpoint. One student in this group became interested in a summer writing seminar and gives the writing-to-learn process credit for his increased interest in his studies in general and an improvement in attitude and grade point average. Another is writing poetry, a venture he had always wanted to try, but he was afraid of being thought "sappy." The introduction of contemporary poets in the reading assignments has given him courage to try. One of his poems has now been published. Another has found he enjoys reading for the pleasure it affords. "I've read what I had to, but choosing to read is something else." He explains that he has a job that requires his presence but not his constant attention. He is a watchman and reading "good books" is not only recreation but gives him "the chance to make connections." He has begun to be discriminating in his choices and asks that literature give him more than a cursory look at life.

The two who chose to speak later have more detailed and personal perceptions. One of the class assignments was to chart a family tree consulting family members as available. For this student it meant contacting family members in other parts of the country. In one instance his letter effected a family reconciliation. For him the family tree became not a list of the dead but a communication with the living. Writing to learn has been purposeful in a concrete manner he had not imagined. He thinks there is "magic in words" that can make reconciliation

possible. He is beginning to see how diplomatic relations can hinge on the word and thinks he may make a study of languages.

This class is composed of students of different racial and cultural backgrounds, and, in the discussions of the family tree, students became aware that differences in race and culture do not always mean differences in customs and traditions. There was more than one laugh shared over an idiosyncratic aunt or uncle or an arch-conservative grandparent. The concept of family takes on new meaning as they realize the differences that exist in families who manage to exist together tolerantly if not amicably. "Democracy seems possible" as one student remarked.

The other delayed student response concerns a paper on rape that led its author into questions of responsibility and victimization. From a fear of being victimized, she worked toward possible alternatives in prevention (eye and groin defense tactics) and a concern for rape victims.

"I did not come up with anything new. TV shows it all, but I found it out for myself and learned a lot about how to protect myself. I learned how to present what I wanted to say and convinced myself that I am interested in psychological research."

These students commented particularly on the positive effect of having the teacher participate in the free write. The trust that is established contributes to the student's ability to share and to the interest and enthusiasm of the class. In "laying herself on the line" she establishes a climate for trust. It is evident that as entries in the journal are discussed in the small peer groups, there is a rapport that develops and the fear of differing with each other or speaking out gradually dissipates and a concern for others supplants it. A black student can learn of the bias and racism that Asian Americans suffer. All the comments are valid in discussion groups, and often personal attitudes are changed. Students learn to be constructively critical of themselves and others without being thought vindictive or stupid. This is a new concept for many students.

Differences in opinion can be instructive and revealing and the freedom to develop in thinking and writing helps to create responsibility. Identity is growing as standards, ideas, and value judgments are examined and questioned or supported. As perceptions grow, the students are increasingly aware of the elements of literature, or differences in style, in genre, and the character and quality of specific works. For those fortunate enough to be in a multi-racial, multi-cultural classroom there is an opportunity to find a common ground, a common study of differences and similarities where there are not divisive factors. This

may not make for an orderly or quiet classroom at times, but the students see education as a fresh and creative possibility that creates an atmosphere where learning is taking place, where new avenues and approaches to old problems give some insight that is revealing and rewarding. These ideas, sparked by the combination of literature and a lively response can produce the kind of paper I will look forward to reading.

As an observer I find that students experience frustrations, initially, in this writing-to-learn process. Accountability is uncomfortable. Yet students say writing to learn develops "a clarification of self." Because writing requires engagement, students overcome passivity and begin to connect experiences. Consequently they begin to think more deeply. Writing helps them to define what they know and what they need to know and to clarify concepts. Students learn self-discipline, open-mindedness, and an ability to find central ideas. They become better readers, better listeners, and they develop confidence in their learning ability.

Writing to learn forces teachers to reexamine their concepts of learning. They lead the students into doing the exploring, into making discoveries for themselves. The process changes the nature of study questions and analysis, and as the students' creative energies are channeled into useful skills, the dialogue and exchange that occur vitalize both teachers and students.

Most importantly, writing to learn educates the students into the kind and quality of work that utilizes their experiences, their creative abilities, to evaluate what they study. Not only does their writing improve, but they develop skills which they can use in other areas of their lives.