

Writing and Learning: What the Students Say

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What students say about writing to learn is not always what teachers most want to hear. One, for instance, said he wanted to drop his English class. Yet when his counselor asked him why, he unintentionally revealed his teacher's success with writing-to-learn strategies: "She makes us think too much."

By now, the reader is familiar with writing-to-learn strategies and knows one of their primary functions is to stimulate thought. Writing and thinking may be hard work, but I've talked with many students who accept the challenge: "How can you learn if you don't write?" was one student's comment. She was hardly alone in her opinion, yet her rhetorical question is worth noting because of who she is: not an honors, or college prep, or even an average student, but one labeled "alternative," her school's euphemism for students who are unable to succeed in advanced or average classes. Writing to learn is democratic and does not discriminate on the basis of ability. Students from a variety of backgrounds, students good, mediocre, and poor, those who resist learning as well as those who don't, can all respect teaching which challenges them to think about and respond to their school subjects, and which encourages them to express themselves.

In the course of talking with eighty high school students from twenty writing-to-learn classes, I heard this theme often. Students appreciate teachers who assume the best about them and respect what they have on their minds. Said one group about the duo which taught their two-segment humanities course: "They trust us. Other teachers expect you can't handle it, but [these two] don't treat us like kids." That students can willingly accept the challenge of learning is strongly implied by these words spoken by a senior in a psychology class: "Writing makes you commit yourself more than talking does. If you write it down, you're committing yourself; there's more pressure to tell the

truth." When students speak of committing themselves and of responding to the "pressure to tell the truth," they are in effect voicing their openness to the kind of teaching and learning espoused in this book, the kind that, as one student put it, "gets students to think, as opposed to having the book do it for them."

My object in this chapter is to discuss the results of interviews I conducted with nineteen groups of students from twenty classrooms in which writing-to-learn techniques were being used. The subject of the interviews was writing and learning, and my hope is that hearing what they have to say on that subject will help teachers understand students' educational values. This book is written by teachers and represents their beliefs and hopes, their goals and ideals. But this is only one point of view, one already well-represented in the popular and professional press. Students, too, respond to and think about school and learning. They have their own opinions, beliefs, and values. Though these may not be as well-articulated as those of teachers, they deserve a hearing. This chapter attempts to provide that hearing and in so doing to open the book's perspective to include both sides of the teaching-learning process.

Ranging in size from three to eight, most groups I interviewed consisted of three or four students. All had experience with the techniques described throughout this book. They were selected for the interviews by their teachers, the chief criterion for selection being willingness to talk; I wanted no one in an interview who didn't want to be there. All groups included male and female students, and most had representatives of low, average, and high ability levels. It is not only the successful or able student who speaks here. One teacher, for instance, requested participation from a senior who knew he wasn't going to graduate but who was willing to discuss his writing.

My initial object in conducting the interviews was to determine how successfully the writing-to-learn pedagogy was being implemented in high school courses, and thus my chief questions had to do with what strategies were being used on a regular basis and whether students had any difficulty with them. But I soon discovered implementation to be a minor question; in fact, there was ultimately little question at all: as students talked about their writing, it became evident that writing to learn was being widely used. At the end of the chapter I have listed, for those interested, the interview questions, with my reasons for using them. But, as in most successful interviews, the questions served mainly as a starting point, prompting students to disclose their perceptions of the value and purpose of writing and learning and teaching. For this reason, I am presenting the interview data in terms of the topics which

dominated the responses, rather than classifying it according to the questions themselves.

Over thirty topics were raised during the interviews, but these can be arranged in three general categories:

1. The teacher and teaching
2. Writing and learning
3. The learner

The Teacher and Teaching

Students talked about their teachers primarily in response to the question, "Is there anything unusual or different about this class?" although the topic came up throughout the interviews. Eleven of the nineteen groups mentioned teaching methods as one respect in which writing-to-learn classes are different from traditional courses, and most groups made some reference to teachers' attitudes, personalities, and styles. It should come as no surprise that students feel the teacher exerts considerable influence on writing and learning. One group from a junior English class made this clear in a discussion of two contrasting kinds of writing, used in the course: the traditional "theme" and the less traditional "course journal." The teacher imposed fairly strict criteria of correctness on the theme, and a paper weak in organization or argument would be returned "with a big *REJECT* stamped on it." Though they felt such methods helped them improve their writing skills, they made it clear that the authoritarian approach inhibited thinking and learning. In the less traditional journal writing, however, with the teacher maintaining a benign distance, students actually felt encouraged to think.

This group also felt that, in general and in spite of his *REJECT* stamp, their teacher was "more relaxed" than most, "easier to talk to, to learn from, open to [our] ideas." And they were obviously impressed by his being "willing to change his mind." The effect, they explained, was more open discussion, which they felt gave students the chance to "get their own say." As will become apparent, students felt considerable freedom of expression in writing-to-learn courses, their unprompted testimony suggesting the value they give this. In nine of the interviews, the teacher's attitude was cited as one of the factors contributing to self-expression. One group, for instance, claimed that their teacher's willingness to share his own opinions and recount his own experiences encouraged expression. For another group, the teacher's

encouragement and acceptance of all response stimulated open and imaginative writing.

It was not only the ability to encourage expression that gave the teacher prominence in students' comments. Several groups mentioned that their teachers were able to "come down to [the students'] level." What was meant by this was not condescension, but the teacher's ability to understand the student's point of view when faced with an unfamiliar or difficult assignment. Greatly appreciated were teachers who could see what the assignment required and give adequate directions. Of their sophomore English class, one group said, "It's harder, but the way [the teacher] explains it makes it easier," and "She's down with us kids." As one member of the group put it, "Other teachers don't explain the assignment if I can't do it, but she really helps you do it."

In their comments on teachers, then, students value teachers who encourage them to speak their minds and then listen when they do so. What this suggests, of course, is what will become even more apparent when we consider the learner. In valuing the freedom to express themselves, students imply a willingness to respond to what they're studying and engage in a learning process which demands they be more than passive recipients of another's knowledge.

Writing and Learning

Writing was the subject of four of the interview questions, and thus quite naturally the most frequent subject of student responses. All groups mentioned two or more of the writing-to-learn techniques as typical of the writing they did in class, and most referred to the techniques as one way in which the class was unusual or different. But this is hardly surprising. More significant is what students had to say about the purposes of writing, and how these relate to learning.

The major tenet of the lessons and techniques described in this book is by now familiar to the reader: Writing is not simply a form of communicating the known but of exploring and learning about the unknown. Students' perceptions of the purpose of writing are obviously important in determining whether this principle bears fruit in the classroom. It speaks well for teachers and students that all the groups interviewed mentioned some aspect of learning as a major purpose for writing. And most of them did so unprompted, in response to being asked "why are you doing all this writing?" In only four interviews was the subject of writing as learning first mentioned by the interviewer. Students themselves usually initiated the subject.

Several aspects of learning were mentioned in the interviews. Fourteen groups indicated that it facilitates thinking; five spoke of its power as a memory aid; and several referred to the greater intensity of learning through writing. For many students, writing meant that learning took on an affective aspect: they became more personally involved in and affected by what they studied, finding themselves able to sympathize with other points of view and to "form relationships with" characters in the literature they were reading.

In reference to "writing as thinking," student comments ranged from the simple and direct—"writing makes you think"—to the more subtle and analytical—"[writing helps you learn] because of the questioning process during the writing process and after." "You have all these ideas in your head," commented one student, "but you're not aware of them until you write them down." "If you can write it, you can understand it," said a student from another class. In general, most students revealed a well-articulated experience of writing as a form of thinking. As one student put it, "some people don't even know what they think until they write."

Students seemed aware of writing as a process that both generates and shapes thought. It gets us thinking about the subjects," was one student's way of putting it. Said another, in reference to the topic of a particular lesson, "writing helps you form your opinion of capital punishment."

Other students were aware of the mnemonic function of writing: "If you write about it, you remember it better," suggested one. For students in a foreign language class, writing was a way of using, and through use, of remembering, what they'd learned: "It sinks in a lot better—as long as I put what I'm learning to use, I'll remember it." For another group, writing was a lot of work, but worth it because "we don't forget anything this way."

Students in eight of the nineteen groups were conscious of a learning process that, because of writing, was more intense than in more conventional classes. "I really got into it in detail," was one remark that typified this perception of writing as a more intense form of learning. Another comment on the subject was more graphic: the writing, said one student in a literary origins class, "makes imprints in your brain about the story." Said a student in another group, "It makes you think about [the book], and go into it in depth."

"Learning in depth" was a theme touched on by one group in contrasting writing to learn with traditional composition. A girl in a philosophy elective told how free writing led her to a "deeper level" of thought, where she found that she was "not just exposing truths but

finding them." The formal demands of traditional writing, however, because it made it "harder to structure" ideas, inhibited such depth of thought. A classmate shed light on this predicament when she explained that she finds herself "leaving out lots of ideas" because of the demands of form, and that the results, to her mind, are thus more superficial than those of free writing.

Another group, this one from a junior English class, spoke of the same difference between traditional writing and the more flexible writing-to-learn techniques. One student claimed that because of the formulaic quality of traditional composition, there is relatively little thinking involved; he said he could "dash off an A paper while watching TV," and his tone suggested little respect for the intellectual content of writing so produced. In contrast, he felt he had learned more about say *The Scarlet Letter* through journal writing, which, he said "allows us to get raw ideas down without concern for wording; that way we get better ideas, learn more."

Such comments as these, about the greater depth of learning that can take place through writing, suggest something about why students perceive writing as a mode of learning. They associate "composition" with developing writing ability, not with learning. They have no particular disposition toward seeing themes and essays as having significant intellectual content; they are more concerned with form: with being "correct." They can perceive techniques such as free writing as being connected with learning because when they are not required to be conscious of matters of form or usage they are more conscious of what is going on in their own heads. This, it might be hypothesized, is in part what creates the sensation of "learning in depth." Another factor is certainly the freedom to express one's own ideas and opinions which writing to learn imparts. Students seem less likely to be conscious of "learning" when they are simply repeating ideas dictated by teacher or text. When expressing their own ideas, they seem more aware of the intellectual process. One group mentioned that writing "makes you a part" of what is being studied, and that they learn by being able to express the subject in their own terms.

Most groups, then, saw writing to learn as concerned primarily with learning rather than with developing writing skill. It should be pointed out that nothing in what students said indicated any consciousness that writing was being used in their courses deliberately as a mode of learning. While they were often conscious of their own learning processes, learning theory, in any formal sense, seemed to have no bearing on their comments. Although one student did mention that the kind of writing they'd been doing taps the right side of the brain, such sophis-

tication was largely absent. The phrase "writing-to-learn" was mentioned in none of the interviews. I bring this up to forestall any conclusion that the reason students spoke so often of writing in terms of learning was simply because the connection is suggested by the terminology. Writing-to-learn terminology was as absent from student's vocabularies as it was from the interviews themselves.

Not all students see learning as the primary function of writing. Two groups said that improving writing ability was the chief function, and two others mentioned this as at least one function of writing. But altogether it might be concluded that these groups are the exceptions that prove the rule. And all groups agreed that writing enhances learning.

In this connection, it is worth noting that only two groups mentioned any difficulty with the writing they were asked to do, and in both cases the comments concerned only one assignment. In general, all groups indicated that they had no difficulty with the required writing.

The Learner

Students spoke of many different things during the interviews, but in nearly everything they said, one theme was prominent: themselves as learners. Although I have separated "The Learner" as a topic of student response, during the interviews there was no such separation. Students did not talk about themselves as a topic other than writing or learning or teaching. Rather, their awareness of themselves, of their role in the classroom, was apparent in the remarks on these other subjects.

I include the learner as a separate category for the following reason: Writing-to-learn strategies implicitly place the student at the center of the teaching-learning process. This does not mean that writing to learn is student-centered, and I came to think a better term might be "response-centered": students are required to respond frequently (in writing, primarily, but also in discussion groups and other classroom activities) to the subject being taught. These responses become, ideally, the focus of instruction. James Britton says that an essential part of the writing process is "explaining the matter to oneself." In writing-to-learn classes the same can be said of learning, that an essential part of the learning process is "explaining the matter to oneself." And this is what students are doing when they respond in nontraditional ways to course topics.

Furthermore, explaining the matter to oneself encourages the student to make connections between the subject and her or his own life.

Piaget claims that learning takes place only in relation to the learner's environment, for it is this environment which provides a web of meaning in which new information can be caught and digested.

The process this implies requires the student to participate more actively in education than when he or she is merely required to listen to lectures and discussion, read books, and repeat on tests the information so acquired. It demands, first of all, that students be self-conscious about their learning, aware of their responses to new material, and of how it relates to what they already know. And it requires that they be willing to express those responses.

I asked no question directly related to the learner as the center of this pedagogy. But as I talked with students, I saw that many of them were responding willingly, even enthusiastically, to the role outlined above. This was clear, for instance, in their comments about teachers encouraging them to speak their minds and respecting them for doing so. A remark recorded earlier suggests an awareness of the importance of student response. Speaking of ways in which her philosophy class was unusual, one student said of her teacher that she "tries to get students to think, instead of getting the book to do it for them." Of the same teacher another student said that "you can say anything you want, though she won't necessarily agree." And a third student in the same group mentioned the attribute of "openness: there are no value judgments."

In citing these qualities as differences between the writing-to-learn classes and more traditional courses, these students recognize the role imposed on them by "response-centered" instruction. And another comment from the same group shows the way that role fosters learning through the inner dialogue of "explaining the matter to oneself": "when I read [something I've written] and run into something negative, I'll question it."

Thirteen of the nineteen groups made some reference to being allowed or encouraged to express themselves (and by "express" I mean not "repeat information learned," but expressing one's own feelings and opinions). It is difficult to document, or "prove," student's attitudes toward this freedom, since none of the questions dealt directly with this subject. However, inasmuch as the tone of the comment means anything, this interviewer heard considerable enthusiasm for the opportunity to respond openly. One group spoke of enjoying the writing because "we can use our imagination, and we don't have to put down just what someone tells us to." Another group mentioned journal writing as "writing down what you think is important," and "what you need to know." With this kind of learning, they said, "it's all yours—nothing that's ever been done before."

The remarks recorded earlier under "Writing and Learning" show students aware of the learning process, conscious of "explaining the matter to themselves," responding favorably to the process. That they willingly accept the responsibility, and work, of responding frequently, is apparent in the tone of the additional comments quoted above. That tone was occasionally so obvious it could be recorded on paper: "When [the writing] is fun you remember better," and "when it's fun, you're more interested in the subject, and it's easier to associate with it." Comments such as these suggest that learners are as much a factor in the writing-to-learn class as they were in the interview responses.

What the Interviews Suggest

In summary, I would like to point out the implications these interviews have for teachers.

1. Teachers can expect students to respond favorably to a classroom environment which encourages and respects self-expression, and to see this as relevant to learning when such expression is relevant to material being studied. ("Freedom of expression" should not be taken to mean license to say and discuss anything.)
2. Students not only are able to do the writing described in this book, but can enjoy it and find it purposeful.
3. Teachers can expect students to be aware of their own learning processes and to accept responsibility for them.
4. The teacher would do well to run an "active classroom" in which students have many opportunities to interact with each other and the course material. Students respect activities that demand their attention to course material and produce results. Said one student: "Usually when I see a film, I'll just drift off, but when I know I have to write about it, I really pay attention."
5. Students value learning when they can see its relevance to what they already know, and teachers might consider including exploration of such connections as part of instructional units. Testimony to the value of this is given in the remarks of a Washington State History student. Her community had recently been host to Indo-Chinese refugees, and she had heard another student complaining about the number of Cambodians who had recently moved into the neighborhood. She said that she had been studying the attitude of another group of natives (the American Indian) toward another "invasion": the westward expansion of the nineteenth century. She saw the similarity between the two situations

and said this helped her understand the point of view of the Indian then, and of her neighbor now. Thus this student was able to explain what she'd learned in terms of her own life, making the connection with her environment which Piaget claims is essential to learning.

Conclusion

My concern has been to summarize as accurately as possible what a small group of students had to say about writing and learning. I think we can conclude from what they say that students of all abilities can take responsibility for, and find value in, the learning process. In an era of low test scores, and emphasis on minimum standards for competency, and a fear that students cannot learn "the basics," we are constantly pressured to condescend to our students, to "teach down" to them. The failure of high school students to pass literacy tests leads to "basic skills" English courses in which they read books of little literary value, and the greatest writing challenge is to fill out a job application. Student's failure on math exams leads to courses in which they engage in lessons on balancing a checkbook. Such a curriculum assumes the worst about the student. Yet even "the worst" students say they are capable of accepting greater challenges.

Description of Interview Questions

1. Each interview began with two questions intended to determine the student's overall perception of the writing-to-learn class: "Is this class unusual in any way?" and "Has your teacher said anything about trying something different in this class?" I wanted to determine whether students saw themselves as being engaged in a learning process significantly different from what they were accustomed to.
2. In order to determine something about the role of writing in the course, I asked, "How often do you write and what kinds of writing do you do?" This not only prompted descriptions of the learning situation, but helped establish a vocabulary about the course which would facilitate the interview itself.
3. The fourth and fifth questions were: "What do you think is the reason for doing all this writing?" and "Do you think writing helps you learn, and why?" As discussed in this chapter, the sec-

ond of these questions was usually answered in response to the first, and often students would touch on the purpose of writing in their answers to the earlier question about the kinds of writing. These questions were intended to determine whether the theory of writing to learn was in any way realized in practice.

4. The last question also related to the learning process, but with the focus more on the writing techniques than on the process as a whole. I wanted to know whether students were being asked to engage in techniques that required unusual or unaccustomed skills, since this would have some bearing on how they would view the learning process. I, therefore, asked "Do you have any trouble doing the writing?" In asking this question, I could draw on the vocabulary established by the earlier questions about kinds of writing, for instance, "Do you have any trouble with this guided imagery?"