

Connecting with First-Year Experience through Writing: Interviews of Dick Hunnewell and Kate Donahue

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In the summer of 1998 after a year of hard work, the Task Force on the First Year Experience published its recommendations for how the College might improve the academic experience of first-year students. The theme of the report is that faculty and staff need to make stronger connections to first-year students. The Task Force argued we need to be concerned not just with the academic development of the student, but with the whole student. It struck me that a powerful tool by which we can do that is writing.

Those of us who have been a part of WAC these past 15 years have discovered that use of WAC techniques provides us with a view of student experience we would otherwise miss. This is particularly true of informal writing-to-learn, student-response techniques, such as freewrites and journals. I wondered whether the Task Force on the First Year Experience had made use of such data and I wondered whether the group would agree that there is a natural mesh between the ideas put forth in its report and WAC techniques. I decided to interview each of the co-chairs of the Task Force, Dick Hunnewell and Kate Donahue, and see what they had to say about all this. In retrospect, I believe they would have talked

willingly on the subject even if I hadn't bought them lunch.

Kate pointed out to me that an important source of data for the Task Force was, in fact, informal student writing. Sally Boland and Ginny Barry had been given the task of surveying students to learn about their experience of the first year. Sally and Ginny decided to do this with freewrites which they administered in class to their first- and second-year students. The students were asked to respond to several broad questions:

What works well for first-year students'?

What doesn't work well?

What might be changed to improve the first year?

How was your first year, good or bad? (This one was asked of upper-division students only.)

Although the samples used were small, Sally and Ginny were able to discover several trends in what students said: most first-year students found faculty accessible and knowledgeable and found the campus manageable and friendly. On the other hand, they were finding the work load challenging and were having trouble managing their time.

Dick shared with me that in his own classes he uses informal writing techniques to get to know important facts about his students as people and as learners, facts he might not ever learn without the techniques. On the first day of class he distributes 5 X 8-inch index cards and asks students to write brief answers to questions, such as "What brought you to Plymouth?" "What experience do you have with museums?" "Who is your hero?" and "What else would you like me to know about you?" "Do you know what we mean by learning styles and, if so, which works best for you?" Students' responses reveal a great deal about their personalities and learning styles. The exercise takes very little class time and the products are easy and quick to read.

As Dick described this experience, I thought about some of the similar writing techniques I have used in my own classes. I

have sometimes asked IAC students to introduce themselves to me in freewrites. The interests and experiences they reveal help me understand them as people and help me to discriminate them from one another. (At my age learning their names is challenging, but it's much easier when I have some personal information to pin the name to.) Usually I ask that my IAC students be my advisees and before advising appointments I return to the freewrites and review. I find advising goes much better when I can relate to the advisee as an individual with a unique set of academic and personal interests and qualities.

I've had similar luck with journals in a variety of courses. Many times the primary purpose of the journal is to give students a chance to practice reasoning in the manner of the discipline they are learning. But often I ask students to relate what they are learning to past experiences and observations they make outside the classroom. Often these entries are the most satisfactory of all in that they reveal to me how the student is integrating academic learning and personal experience. I think this relates to the Task Force's advice we take a holistic approach to students. I also find myself often making a personal response to this kind of journal entry, maybe sharing a bit of myself with the student. With this sort of informal writing, I can forge a connection of the kind the Task Force is advocating, and I can do it in an individual way, a way that would otherwise be impossible in large classes.

Informal student writing is also an excellent way of assessing whether students are learning what we hope they are in our classes. Both Dick and Kate spoke of doing this. Shortly before the first exam in his survey of art course, Dick has students do a written exercise in which they practice comparing one work of art with another. The exercise does not end there, however. Dick also has them write about what the experience was like and asks them how he could help them do better on such an exercise. The responses are revealing. Dick said, "What I think they got and what they

actually got are sometimes very different. Discovering this gives you humility.” It also gives you good ideas about how to teach more effectively. In some of his courses, Dick now lengthens each unit, spending more time helping students develop the critical skills they need. This, of course, means covering less material, but Dick wisely recognizes what he wants the students to take away from the course are critical skills. Once they have these they have the means to learn material on their own.

Kate has long been using the WAC technique of helping students develop their writing process by breaking long writing assignments into stages, requiring a topic statement, then a first draft, then a final draft. Now she has added an additional stage to the process: students are asked to write her a letter midway between choosing the topic and submitting the first draft. In this letter students are asked to tell her how the project is going. She responds with suggestions for how to proceed, often suggesting references they may have missed, for example. Again, I think this is an example of building a connection, this time between the student writer and a mentor. Kate points out that this process approach has the added benefit of defending against the modern problem of students down-loading whole papers from the internet. When you have to report on the process as it is occurring, you can’t get away with that.

I came away from my lunches with Dick and with Kate filled with enthusiasm for the use of informal writing to forge connections with first-year students. There seem to be many different ways to do this. None of them take much time and effort, and each allows you to get to know your students as individuals. And then when you are done you can have lunch with charming and interested colleagues and talk about it—and that is a great pleasure too.