Using Writing in the Adolescent Psychology Course

by Wendy J. Palmquist

Early September, the first day of classes. I am in my Adolescent Psychology class, and they are writing. Only for five minutes, and I have given them two starting points. First, I asked them to write about any incident from the memories they have of adolescence, and then to try to write a definition of "adolescence." They are writing and thinking and creating and analyzing. Much to their surprise, they are finding out that they have something to say about both topics. I am at the front of class, having one of those moments of insight. Here I am, with writing happening in my classroom, and I am dealing with a classic case of writer's block about the book chapter I have agreed to do on using writing in the course on adolescence. Perhaps there is some logic to this. I suspect the writer's block I developed along the way comes from my not doing enough writing in the past. Knowing I have writer's block is one reason I am open to ideas that will help others do a better job writing and help me do a better job myself.

Snodgrass (1985) noted that the traditional use of writing in psychology courses is to evaluate students. We ask them to produce papers and exams and give them a grade, treating the papers and exams as proof of how well they have mastered the particular content area. She asked that we consider writing as something more, as a process that can be an important tool

for learning, for gaining skills in analyzing, creating, and problem solving. McGovern and Hogshead (1990), in a special issue of *Teaching of Psychology* devoted to the use of writing in psychology courses, came to a similar conclusion, that most writing in psychology classes is done for assessment of students, but that it can also be used to promote learning, facilitate analytic and creative thinking skills and problem solving, and of course to further develop writing skills.

The Writing Across the Curriculum program here at Plymouth has made many of us familiar with the idea that writing can be used to develop thinking. Using writing as a process, not a product, can add to the strength of a course. Fulwiler (1986) argued that writing is more than a basic communication skill. The process of writing is a thinking process; the writer may find new meanings and new directions while composing. In 1987 he pointed to the theories of psychologists like Vygotsky on the relationship between language and symbolizing reality and the role of language in constructing an understanding of reality. Fulwiler noted that this is what happens in the process of composing, and writing becomes something more than a basic technical skill. By asking our students to write, we are asking our students to think.

Of course, the kind of writing Fulwiler (1987) is talking about is not the traditional kind of writing for a course, the production of answers to exam questions or traditional term papers. These traditional forms of writing do not ask the student to generate new ideas; they ask the student to communicate what information they have learned, or are supposed to have learned, to be graded by someone who already knows the information. It is instead expressive (or personal) writing that Fulwiler is most interested in, writing

done to explore ideas, to find out what the writer is thinking by actually writing it down. This is writing for discovery, and may or may not be perfect communication when it begins. It is finding out what you think when it appears on the page in front of you!

Recent research by Astin (1993) supports the importance of courses with writing. In looking at all the factors of a college environment, trying to find the variables "that matter," that have a positive impact on student development, Astin found that courses emphasizing writing were high on the list. He found that besides leading to strong self-reported gains in writing skills and ability, such courses had strong effects on "self-reported growth in general knowledge, critical thinking skills, public speaking skills, and Overall Academic Development" (p. 377). Wade (1995) has listed writing as an essential ingredient in teaching critical thinking skills.

Types of Writing

I find both traditional and expressive writing important in my courses. I have not abandoned the traditional writing of essays on exams, and I still ask for a written term project (though not the traditional term paper). Counting actual written words, though, I think I now ask my students to do more expressive writing than traditional writing, because there are many ways to bring it into the course, and I can build on these writings to make a more interesting class session.

Freewrites and Journals

I use freewrites, timed focused writing assignments, at the beginning of each class period. These are meant to generate ideas, and digressions are encour-

aged, as the student explores an idea triggered by the topic of the day. I give the class about five minutes for writing, then use another five or more for talking about what was written. I ask my students to keep their freewrites in a journal, which I collect regularly, so that I can read and react to what they have written. This is not a graded writing assignment; freewrites are for thinking, and serve as a means of establishing a dialogue, with the self and with me.

Topics used for freewrites can vary considerably. I use them to solicit comments about (and problems with) assigned research readings and the text, for reactions to various theories presented in the previous lecture, as a gauge of level of understanding, and for coming to a deeper understanding of material by applying it to one's own experiences (or for some, the experiences of their own children). The goal is to get the students actively thinking about the material, to take them out of the passive responses of reading, listening, and memorizing. As noted in Palmquist and Shelton (1991), sample topics include:

-What is adolescence?

-What one physical change of puberty do you most vividly remember?

-What don't you understand about the hormone cycle underlying the physiological changes?

-React to Piaget's theory (or Erikson's theory, or Kohlberg's theory).

-What do you remember about striving for independence? Have you completed the process?

-What was going on in your parents' lives when you were 14?

-Recall one incident during adolescence when you conformed.

-Be an anthropologist: what are your observations

on this culture's preparations for sexuality?

-Describe the achievement that made you the most proud during adolescence.

-Write about when you first had an alcoholic beverage.

And, at the end of the term:

-Match your own adolescence to what we have studied this semester. How do you match/not match the theories and research? (I give 10-15 minutes.) (Palmquist & Shelton, 1991, p. 165-166).

Students often have a lot to say about these topics (some even go back and add more later). After the writing time is done, I ask for volunteers to get the discussion started. For certain topics I quickly go around the room and ask everyone to make a short comment. Using freewrites means everyone has had some time to think about a question and get some thoughts collected (not to mention getting a little more writing into every day). They also serve to keep the students current in the reading, since the daily question potentially could be on any aspect of the current material. (Confessions of neglect are common with this technique and profuse apologies and excuses for why the reading wasn't done...then some ideas on the topic anyway).

Another expressive writing assignment is an academic journal kept outside of class, with observations, comments, and reactions to the class material as the students read it and as they see examples of it in "the real world." Fulwiler (1987) places the academic journal between the diary, a collection of subjective expressions, and the class notebook, full of objective topics. Fulwiler has commented that "any assignment can be made richer by adding a written dimen-

sion which encourages personal reflection and observation" (1987, p. 17). Just a few examples that I've seen in Adolescent Psychology journals are reactions to the readings written while the student is reading, observations of "mall rats" used to support class material on peer group interactions at different ages, or recollections of family events directly related to some course material on family interaction. Journals and freewrites can be very similar in specific chosen topics; in fact, I sometimes find students have already written about a freewrite topic in their out-of-class journal and refer back to that writing while they are completing the freewrite.

The success of academic journals has been more varied than the success of freewrites; some students produce wonderfully rich journals, some do the bare minimum. Perhaps because most of the students are still adolescents themselves, sometimes they get overly personal, turning the journal into a diary. These students have to be guided gently back to "academics" and objective interpretations. An interesting problem has developed on our campus recently; as more instructors in many disciplines ask for such journals, the students find less time for any one. Partly in response to this, and partly to make the assignment more structured, I now ask for one entry per week, after several years of the less specific requirement "several times a week." Students seem to like this amount of structure, and can write more if they find they have more to say. Many even title the entry "Weekly thoughts" or such, and do seem to be more reflective in what they write than students were with the more ambiguous assignment.

Assessing freewrites and journals when I collect them is reasonably objective but time-consuming. I

have the students submit both to me in the same notebook or folder four times during the semester, so each time I get about 4 weeks worth of work. I read each entry and typically make a brief comment on each, reacting to the content, not judging the writing ability. Some entries get longer comments from me, if the content makes me think, gets me going. I've gotten ideas for class discussions, and for topic expansions from the kinds of things students have written about in freewrites and journals. The actual "grade" is based on whether the material substantially meets the assignment (most of the class freewrites are there, and there is outside writing done about once per week) or minimally meets the assignment (missing many freewrites, and/or no outside writing). The student who fails to submit a collection of entries for a given time period receives no credit for that period, and I will not go back and read them if they are included with a later submission.

Major Paper Assignments

When I was an undergraduate I had my share of traditional term papers. I chose (or was assigned) a topic, went to the library and did my research (usually at the last minute), and cranked out my eight to twenty pages (often late at night, correction fluid all over my hands). I learned how to use the bibliographic tools of the library very well, gained odd nuggets of knowledge about various topics in psychology (and other fields), and learned to like coffee. When I started teaching, I taught as I was taught, and assigned traditional term papers. I assumed my students did much the same as I did, learning more or less the same kinds of things I did.

After my first few years of teaching the adolescent psychology course, I started looking at the traditional term paper more critically. I knew I wanted them to write but, based on what they were submitting, I wasn't satisfied with what they were learning. Then I discovered the ideas incorporated in the phrase "involvement in learning." For several years it was a "catch phrase" at conventions on higher education, stemming from the 1984 report *Involvement in Learning*, from the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (National Institute of Education, 1984). Letting students mix their own specific interests in various "hot topics" in adolescence with the research they were reading and hearing about seemed like a good motivating force. First I tried requiring a "clipping file" from local newspapers and magazines, leading to a paper on images of adolescence in the public eye. The files that I got were usually sports reports, crimes, and accidents. Even if this was the reality of media coverage at the time, I wasn't satisfied with what the students were learning about adolescent development from writing about it. I returned to the traditional term paper, but I added a couple of more active options alongside it. Eventually these options replaced the traditional term paper entirely.

Students in my class now have the choice between completing a community inventory of their hometown as a context for developing adolescents, or investigating community resources and responses to a potential "adolescent situation." In either case they must combine background library research into adolescent needs and problems with what I call "investigative reporting," actually going out and doing inter-

views and observations to determine what is really going on. Either type of papers must include documentation of facts, evidence for conclusions, and some critical thinking in a closing evaluative section.

I developed the community inventory because I place a great stress in class on the important effects of the varying contexts of adolescent development. The inventory is a picture of the settings for adolescents in a given community. I have received community inventories on segments of major cities, suburban towns, resort towns, mill towns, and farm towns. Many students have taken the spirit of investigative reporting to heart; I have been told where to gain access to illegal activity and substances in many hometowns. I have heard from students who have come to understand their own frustrations and/or joys of adolescence, as they have seen that they did or didn't have what they needed. I ask them to be comprehensive, to view the local McDonalds as potential vocational opportunity/hangout/etc. Several students, after interviewing local officials, have made promises to give copies of their papers to their town governments or school administrators (in some cases I hope they deleted their evaluations, though I suspect the towns knew they had problems). One humorous result comes from interviewing siblings; I like seeing the shock in a 20-year-old's paper about how the "younger generation" is behaving!

The "situations" were my first alternative project and grew from requests from students in applied programs for projects that had more "meaning" for them. Adolescent psychology draws students from education and human service programs who intend to work with adolescents. The situation projects were

designed to have the students see how to find resources in a community, and to assess at some level how effective those resources might be for adolescents. They were meant to be done locally, not requiring returns to perhaps distant hometowns. Most students do choose to do their investigating locally, though some choose their hometowns. When I started offering these options fewer students chose the situations, but that has recently changed, as some students find it harder to go back home to research an inventory. Situations include things like 16 (or 13) and pregnant, or alcoholic, or arrested for burglary, or depressed and suicidal, or a runaway, etc. The students do not get to choose which situation they must investigate; situations are assigned randomly. Again, though, I get wonderful investigative reporting. An important point I stress here is that they not pretend to be in the situation ("Don't call the suicide hotline pretending to be suicidal!")! I do ask the college student to look at the resources through the eyes of an adolescent, though ("How easy is it to find the suicide hotline?"). Since I have a small class, taught only once a year, I find I don't alienate the local resources (particularly after I brief the students on courtesy and care in interviewing), though I have worried about that problem. The only awkward development is when students detect that a source is giving entirely misleading information; I had to gently dissuade one student from a major confrontation, by suggesting a more tactful strategy.

In both types of projects the students still have to use the library, find references, and produce a literate product with a references section. They definitely seem to be more involved in these topics than they

were in research term papers. In fact, not only do they seem to be more motivated; most seem to actually enjoy producing the project!

I have found these papers to be easier to grade than traditional term papers. I use a fairly typical approach to grading both kinds of projects, A through F (in point value equivalents), but find they essentially self-sort themselves into grades. The best papers mix the library facts with the community information effortlessly, cover all the areas specified thoroughly, make good evaluations of what it is like to be an adolescent in the community or situation, and draw good conclusions. These students did the work over time and learned a lot about how the experience of adolescence is affected by the community. Even if the writing isn't perfect, when the material is good somehow the writing seems better. I think it is that you can see the thought behind the writing, because the presentation is well-organized, and the whole paper makes sense.

Papers from the middle group of students are missing information, because they didn't do the legwork they needed to do (trying to write about their hometowns from memory), or minimized the library research. These papers are often disorganized, in need of some work on composition skills, and make me wonder again at the circular relationship between good writing and good thinking. The weaknesses in these papers are weaknesses some kind of peer review would probably pick up. I sometimes think these students haven't even read their own papers. The flaws seem so obvious, but I understand that we are all often blind to our own failings. I got more papers like this before I developed a simple handout

listing expectations; though I had been saying the exact same things as were written on the handout, students "get it" better when they see it in black and white.

Rarely do I get a D or F paper. That happens only when a student just doesn't do what the assignment tells them to do (for example, researching adolescent suicide in the library only and not pursuing the community component). I did get more poor papers when I assigned traditional term papers. I think that now the vast majority of the students do get involved in the topics, and it is hard to do a really bad job on something you care about!

Case Studies

I have never tried using case studies, but suspect that they would fill many of the same objectives of involvement as the term projects I do use. McManus (1986) presented a model combining "live" case studies (the students actually interact with "real" adolescents for the semester) with an academic journal. Weekly interviews and suggested activities with the adolescent are discussed in the journal in terms of the material in the course. The goal is to integrate the picture of adolescence from research and theory with the realities of a given adolescent. Chrisler (1990) suggests using novels, biographies, or autobiographies as sources for case studies in abnormal psychology; the same materials could serve for adolescent psychology classes as well. Here again critical thinking and integration of a picture of adolescence would be the goal.

Making it work

Assigning all of this writing does raise the issue of

workload. It takes a long time to read and respond to a set of journals or a set of freewrites, on top of essay exams and major papers. Snodgrass (1985) literally referred to having "second thoughts" (p. 93) about all the work involved. She acknowledged that it is very time-consuming, particularly if you really give the students the information and feedback that they need to do it right. Sometimes I find that just looking at the stack of journals waiting to be read is discouraging. There are lots of rewards in the contents, and in the student learning that you can see happening, and that does keep me going, but to be realistic, it is a heavier load. It is something that perhaps is best done only in small classes or with plenty of assistance. My typical class size is around 30, and that has been a manageable size. I don't try the same kinds of writing in my General Psychology section of 80 (though I do include essay questions on their exams, and also require at least 3 written assignments from each of those students, as a firm believer in the value of writing!). Snodgrass (1985) emphasized that the time was worth the effort: "Students learn much more about psychology by using these writing techniques. They are actively involved in the material, and writing forces them to think about it and to relate it to their own lives" (p. 94).

It is also important to be prepared for the reactions of students when they hear the amount of writing in the course. A certain number do leave, because they do not believe the idea that writing is good for them. Boice (1990) has written about resistance to writing intensive courses from both faculty and students. His survey found that resistance from faculty came from several concerns, ranging from the workload to just

plain not liking to write. Classroom observations led him to believe that actually the student response was a primary source of the faculty ambivalence. Instituting a writing intensive course is hard on the faculty member, because students respond with complaints and negativity when they learn about the writing in such a course. His prescriptions for reducing resistance from faculty to teaching such courses thus focused mostly on the part that stems from being uncomfortable with writing. He recommended that classes as a whole talk about writing, including discussing the common fears and maladaptive beliefs about the process of writing, and work on techniques that reduce those fears and beliefs (freewriting is a primary suggestion). He reported students do become more comfortable with writing as they do more of it and begin to value the writing as part of the learning process.

Using a lot of writing in my course has not made it an easier course to teach. It does take more time than it used to take, and the temptation is always there to reduce the writing. The rewards come in reading the writing, in reading the exploration of ideas, and in seeing students get involved with those ideas and with psychology. It helps that we have an active and supportive WAC program, where we can meet with colleagues in other disciplines and hear how writing works in their courses. The newsletter and workshops help reduce the temptation to go back to the old way of teaching the course!

I find it a fulfilling experience to see students learn through writing. I return to Astin (1993), who concluded that three specific types of courses were the part of the curriculum that contributed (among other

non-curricular factors) to the kinds of cognitive growth we want in our students. These are "courses emphasizing science or scientific inquiry, courses emphasizing the development of writing skills, and interdisciplinary courses" (p. 423). I think a good course in adolescent development can incorporate all three of these themes.

0

References

Astin, A. A. (1993). What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Boice, R. (1990). Faculty resistance to writing-intensive courses. Teaching of Psychology, 17, 13-17.

Chrisler, J. C. (1990). Novels as case-study materials for psychology students. Teaching of Psychology, 17, 55-57.

Fulwiler, T. (1986). The argument for writing across the curriculum. In A. Young & T. Fulwiler, Eds., Writing across the disciplines. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.

Fulwiler, T. (1987). Teaching with writing. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.

McGovern, T. V., & Hogshead, D. L. (1990) Learning about writing, thinking about teaching. Teaching of Psychology, 17, 5-10.

McManus, J. L. (1986). "Live" case study/journal record in adolescent psychology. Teaching of Psychology, 13, 70-74.

Palmquist, W. J., & Shelton, L. G. (1991). Teaching adolescent development. Journal of Early Adolescence, 11, 152-171.

Snodgrass, S. E. (1985). Writing as a tool for teaching social psychology. Teaching of Psychology, 12, 91-94.

Wade, C. (1995). Using writing to develop and assess critical thinking. Teaching of Psychology, 22, 24-28.