

## Learning to Write by Learning to Learn<sup>1</sup>

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*Toby Fulwiler became interested in writing to learn—the basic principle of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement—as a young professor of English at Michigan Technological University in 1977, when he attended an NEH Summer Institute on “Writing in the Humanities.” He and department chair Art Young created a model writing-across-the-curriculum program at Michigan Tech, demonstrated that writing can help students learn in any discipline, and began giving workshops on writing-across-the-curriculum techniques around the country. Those workshops, and the articles and books written by Toby, Art Young, and others, have touched large numbers of teachers in every discipline. Today, Toby teaches writing and directs the writing program at the University of Vermont. His most recent book is When Writing Teachers Teach Literature, co-edited with Young. He has also written The Working Writer, Writing Across the Disciplines (with Young), College Writing, and Teaching with Writing, and edited The Journal Book. His email address is <tfulwile@moose.uvm.edu>.*

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## **I. Learning to learn**

We both tell the same story: How, when as first-year teachers we met our first classes, we worried about the same things: "Am I prepared? Do I have enough to say? Will anybody listen?" Questions that all circled around our more fundamental question, "Can I teach?" And we both found relief, at the end of those first classes, that we had managed to keep their attention for most of the period and still had material we hadn't covered—a start on the content of the next class. In those early classes and, actually, for much of our teaching lives, we worried more about our needs as teachers than their needs as students.

*John—You know it's the same day every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—you get to class on time, you sit near the front & plan today to really pay attention to what he says, but pretty soon you're drawing cartoons in the margins and realize you haven't taken a note in twenty minutes.*

Their needs, as students, being to enter the community of literate learners to which we now comfortably belong. Their needs to become comfortable and confident speakers for the new knowledge they daily encounter, to tell us and each other back, that history means this, geology this, literature that. At the same time, they're being asked to sit quietly, take good notes, care little about classmates sitting to right and left, speak up when questioned, write when tested—being shown their own words are not theirs at all, and our lectures, long answers to questions no one had asked.

*Jose—Another C on a test I really studied for. I really don't get it—I studied the text, studied my lecture notes, and even memorized some good quotes to throw in. When we get the exams back, it says at the bottom, "competent, but no evidence of original thinking." What does she want, anyway?*

They need most their own words and questions, not ours. In spite of all we know and wish them to know, in spite of all we tell them carefully and cleverly to think and take notes about, and in spite of all the texts we require to be read, reviewed, and remembered, their best learning happens in their own words, in spite of our needs and illusions as first or fifteen year teachers, not by copying our notes and memorizing profound quotations, when and where do you make these ideas your own? When do you put the ideas you receive into your own language? Where, in a copybook, do you argue and rebut and critique and retort and test what you hear against what you know?

*Molly—The only class where I actually know the other students is my writing class. It's fun sharing papers in my group and I really like hearing theirs as well. I don't mean it's fun only in the social way either, because we really give each other good ideas and help each other out. I like a class where I can talk about ideas and have fun at the same time.*

Students talking to students makes a difference. Saying back, discussing, trying out, re-saying—often, at first, wrongly—aloud in fragments to seat-mates, aloud asserts to classmates—three, four, five times—challenges, and proves what has been heard, read, copied. Their talk helps our authority become (sometimes imperfectly, but always personally) theirs. Small group talk, by the way, runs the world—groups of people in small rooms clustered around tables—exploring, questioning, answering—in corporations, universities, government. We do

our students no favors when we do all the exploring, all the questioning, all the answering. We encourage a mixture of learning opportunities for our mixed sets of students, each of whom learns differently.

*Brenda—I never really never feel comfortable talking in a large group. Blame it on shyness, some weird hang-up of mine or whatever, but I really do not do well in large groups, in ANY of my classes. I do think I do well in small-group workshops, though, or working with one other person.*

Authority is what authors have and students need more of, but can only get, finally, by writing. What many inexperienced writers do not understand is that the act of writing is often the business of taking the half thoughts that run around your mind and fashioning them into full thoughts. Remember E.M. Forester's question? "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Putting down one idea suggests another, and that another, until the words you write help tease out of you the fully-developed thought you want—which is usually better or more complete than the half thought you started with. And there don't seem to be any shortcuts—without writing down the half-thought, the full thoughts seldom come—and if they do, not as completely as had you written them out. It's in the writing that students learn what they have learned.

*Lucille—I think that we are very closely linked to our texts. It comes from inside us and is part of us. I feel that my writing is definitely a part of me and that is why I am often very self-conscious about it. I'm not always pleased with my writing and I wish I could be better at it. I don't think I'm that BAD of a writer, I just know I can, or wish I could be better at it. It is the same way with me as a person—there is always something more I can do to help others in order to make me a better person—sometimes I just need a swift kick to get me going.*

Writing also tells writers when they're not making sense of. A writer's text reveals what's missing in the learning, the flaws in flawed arguments, the halfness of half-conceived thoughts. The fragmented thoughts and missing information are just as important, demand attention, and become what good authors focus on next, the writing revealing the malady, the need for continued writing also suggesting the cure.

*Jason—I say to myself, "Can this be done? Well the only way to know is to write it and see. Like all writers, I am still searching for a voice, a place to call home.*

The phrase "writing to learn" is the foundation of writing across the curriculum. It means simply that the best way for students to learn history or chemistry or business is to write history, chemistry, and business as often and in as many forms as possible—but always first to themselves to make sure of their own understanding. Later, of course, they must write to you. If you want students to learn your subject in the most thorough manner possible, you will add writing to your course at all those points where their understanding is most required and crucial. Provide your students with chances to explore their understanding in their own language, see if they think it makes sense, then ask them to communicate it to you. Writing and thinking honestly for themselves is the necessary precursor to writing and thinking effectively for you.

*Neil Postman: "Writing gives birth to the grammarian, the logician, the rhetorician, the historian, the scientist, all those who must hold language still so they can see what it means, where it errs, and where it is leading." (Amusing Ourselves to Death.)*

How do students learn to be grammarians, logicians, rhetoricians, historians, and scientists? They have to move from a state of not knowing to a state of knowing, move from a position outside these professional communities to a place inside. With these students who are

first learning your discipline, share how you learned to write, talk, think, how you entered your community. Make time to explain the tacit ways that community works. Tell your own first awkward stories, share copies of your work in progress—your own drafts in rough and developing states—share with them that you too were once a novice, that you're still a learner.

*Raphael—Last semester I learned that I need to put the primary load on students. Instead of standing in front of the class, I try to get class discussions going. If they don't get going, I have students write on the topic and read their responses. I try to get the students more involved with each other. I know that group work failed somewhat because I didn't give the students a chance to get to know each other before throwing them into groups. I'm trying to ease into group work a bit more this time.*

The emphasis on the value of each learner's own language developed from the research conducted by James Britton, Nancy Martin, and their colleagues at the London School of Education, whose research revealed that most language used in school was for examination rather than exploration. They categorized the language as 1) expressive (personal language to explore—informal conversation, journals, notes, first drafts); 2) transactional (language to convey information—oral reports, research papers, critical essays, and most "school writing), and 3) poetic (language used aesthetically such as poetry or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech). However, Britton and his colleagues suggest that the expressive—language for the self—is basic, the matrix from which transactional and poetic language must grow and develop. What they found in schools, was that teachers did not encourage nor value expressive language, orally or in writing.

*Marc—I used to write more for my own enjoyment than for anyone else's. But once I got to high school, I stopped writing for me and began writing to please each particular teacher. I would find the formula they approved of and write it for them.*

Other influential research for the development of language for learning grew from early work done by M.L. Abercrombie who found British medical students performed better when allowed to make collaborative diagnoses. And psychologist Carl Rogers who developed an influential client-centered group counseling method, believing that his clients were the best solvers of their own problems. Their work was applied to classroom learning by Kenneth Bruffee, who argues that students must develop collaborative learning communities, using their own talking and writing to find, extend, and communicate their learning—the same model we use as through department subcommittees, workshops, task-forces, panel presentations, colloquia. Our own speaking, listening, reading, and writing advances our knowledge, so too must students' language advance theirs.

*Don Murray: "Process cannot be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage."*

When students attend to the processes of writing and learning, they learn the difficult and messy journey, from discovering to drafting to revision to editing to—finally—final draft. However, when they attend only to the products of writing and learning—studying, for example, only published texts, listening in lectures to the elegant end products of someone else's trials and errors—they are kept from learning the magic of learning. That's natural since professional writers spend most of their time smoothing over the trail, obliterating the missed turns and exploratory forays they undertook on the way to constructing their text. The problem with

hidden processes—students will try to construct the appropriate looking texts without really exploring, analyzing, thinking critically about the material they encounter:

*Robin—You have the due date looming over you so you latch on to the obvious and easy things first, you drop in some notes, and then go into the text and find only what you need—"This quote matches what I want to say, this quote doesn't." So you copy every quote out of the text, put them on a couple of sheets of paper and stick them in where they'll look good.*

Process classes strive to make the journey understandable—to provide some maps and equipment. There is a simple yet important good result that comes from process instruction: Inexperienced writers learn that they have a process—one that may be less than efficient, but the faults are in their habits or their lack of practice and not in them as humans as they too often have come to feel:

*Mia—My right foot is a half-size larger than my left foot. For a long time, I thought that this meant there was something very wrong with me. When I learned that it is normal for one side of a person's body to be larger than the other side, I felt so much better! This is the way I felt after our class discussion on the writing process. I have always felt that I wasn't very good at it, because it is such a struggle for me . . . Maybe there is hope for me after all.*

Some students in our classes will already know how to work in groups: they know that they need a focused task or else daily talk may overwhelm learning through talk. They can tell you that some students get bossy or too quiet in groups, so groups have to have instructions on member roles: how to keep track of time, how to collect material and report back to the class (have a group historian and time-keeper, for instance). And students know that they have to do

their part—if they haven't read assigned material, they'll not be able to join the discussion.

Students know too that in groups they can solve problems they can't solve singly—whether the subject is math, history, or public administration. They know in groups they can't sit back and let the teacher present information to them—to accept or reject— instead, they have to jump in and be active.

*Jason—Group discussion (in our group at least) is going well, although sometimes it is hard to decide what to discuss, or to stick to the story.*

*Mia—Groups would work better, of course, if everyone would get more involved. Some members are always coming to class unprepared. If they haven't read the work it is hard to discuss.*

*Robert—The group discussions work very well and class discussions stimulate new ideas. Personally I feel like my first paper was an accomplishment—and my group gets part of the credit.*

All of us, no matter how good we are, need to keep growing as writers. And as instructors we can encourage our students to do so as well. None of us can learn to do everything all at once, and few can attend simultaneously to organization and evidence and clarity and disciplinary conventions. In fact, there's no reason to pay attention to wordy constructions or inappropriate punctuation until what is needing to be said is said—is explored, examined, understood, rethought, figured out finally with a reader in mind. We erase many of those lower order errors in our writing, just by returning to our drafts and rewriting to get the larger conceptual matters straight, sometimes by simply cutting out the passage in which the offensive

language occurred, sometimes by simply re-reading our first draft and now noticing (Oh, I left out a word). Why not encourage our student writers to do the same?

*Cal—The paper was due today, so I started it right after supper last night, figuring I had plenty of time to type up five pages. But nothing seemed to work until I finally read chapter twelve again—then it clicked—then I saw why my argument went in a circle. But it was already midnight and I was really tired and so I just put together what I had and went to sleep.*

We all learned to write differently and also the same. As children, we were immersed in language, liked to talk, be talked to, wanted to enter the discussion, sometimes interrupted (often not raising a hand) got frustrated if not understood, saw others looking at words, paper, texts, that unclear code, that powerful one. We started memorizing words, began to break the code, pushed our way in (I know, I know what this means!) and did this both alone (paging through a first book *Gregory the Terrible Eater* or *Green Eggs and Ham*) and together, that is, found we were no longer alone. We had spoken and printed words, had other worlds, pushed our way into a textual conversation going on before us, that will go on after us. We write to learn about social work, nursing, music, whatever. Sharing letters, sharing drafts, capturing fears hopes conflicts and agreements, we cover our subjects, meet our needs, meet their needs—belong together.

*Sue—Our texts are "safe" when we do what we know we've gotta do to get a good grade, rather than approaching a paper creatively. Regardless, you must make your point, but a safe paper is one you write, stylistically, for others, not yourself. I hate safe.*

Sometimes we don't invite our students into our discussions because we're scared, have just barely arrived here ourselves, feel like we have to save face, be the authority, never show that

our authority is surprising to us, and rarely acknowledge that what we're doing most is worrying about our effectiveness as teachers and our mastery of our own field—again, worrying more about our own needs, not those of our students.

*Tina—I am in front of a large group of people who expect me to say something but I have lost my voice. I can't reach for the glass on the podium because I don't want them to see that my hands are shaking. I can't move to the blackboard because sunlight pours through the windows and I remember that I don't have any slip on and my skirt is sheer. My knees are knocking and the one that was broken locks into place and I know if I walk it will be with a limp. The limp is most noticeable in my cowboy boots because the heels are hollow, so you hear the limp more than you see it.*

## **II. Writing to learn**

We don't think teachers have to limp through the curriculum in hollow-heeled cowboy boots. Consider some of the following suggestions for providing students more opportunity to use writing for learning in your class—that is, writing for *them* not you, to clarify their thoughts to themselves, not to you, writing you don't grade, maybe don't see. Try the ideas that best match your personality and suit your purposes:

- Start, end, or interrupt your classes by asking your students to write about the subject of the day. Tell them to keep their pens and pencils moving, not to worry about false starts, digressions, or the mechanics of writing. Writing fast and freely, trying to answer questions or solve problems, turns off the editor and critic in your mind and lets you focus

on larger ideas and relationships. Good questions include: What did you learn from reading the chapter assigned for today? What is your opinion, belief, insight, or objection to the ideas discussed in our last class? What questions do you have so far? This technique, called freewriting, can be done daily to engage students in your class by using their own language.

- Ask students to talk to each other—to seat-mates, in small groups—after they've written something, to share their opinions, discover who their classmates are, to solve problems you might otherwise solve yourself for them—doing for them, in the bargain, favors. Fifteen minutes of class time invested in private student writing, then collaborative talk, changes your class by inviting all of your students into the conversation and by suggesting that their ideas are worth expressing and sharing—only in small groups will everyone have a chance to talk in a non-threatening manner. It's a good idea to have students talking to each other after freewriting.
- To keep student abreast of assigned course reading, ask them to keep journals instead of giving quizzes. Journals reveal the movement and growth of a writer's mind from day to day, week to week (small loose-leaf notebooks work well). Respond to selected entries and ideas—not style or mechanics—in a friendly voice; and grade them only quantitatively. Journals are good places in which to write informally in class, good places to keep freewriting.

- Write letters with your students. Personal, informal, non-graded letters that begin, Dear Toby or Dear Wendy, assume or create a friendly, equal stature between writer and audience, allowing the writer to share ideas and problems honestly. In small classes, ask for a letter from each student every Friday; read them over the weekend and write one collective letter back, that you deliver (Dear Classmates) on Monday. Invite comments on lectures, readings, discussions, personal issues related to your class material. Write back using passages from their letters to you, answering those you want, asking new questions yourself, allowing the back-and-forth nature of the letters to help broker your weekly class meetings. Letters are journals with an audience.
- Don't grade writing-to-learn activities (in-class writing, freewriting, journal and letter writing) in the conventional sense; if you want your student learners to be honest and free to take risks, count their informal writing as done or not done—they must be free to sometimes be wrong without being clobbered for it. They will consider it purposeful, not busywork, if you use what they have just written as the basis for further class discussion or to help them find paper topics.
- Write some of your assignments with your students to find out how interesting they are and to demonstrate that you remain a learner yourself. If you ask students to write in class, be sure to write with them and sometimes to share what you wrote—watching you write too gives credibility to the value of the writing.

### III. Learning to write

We think students need to learn to write first for themselves—to sort out their own thoughts; next they need to learn to write for a wider, more public audience. The following ideas will help students improve their ability to communicate when they write formal papers—critical essays, research papers, lab reports, book reviews, and the like:

- Make writing assignments to students that you would like to do yourself, that are interesting, and to which you do not already know the answers. Put samples of excellent student writing on projectors for class critique (friendly) and discussion. Talk briefly about ways previous class writers have approached and succeeded at a class assignment.
- Revision is, in fact, the key to all good writing, theirs as well as ours. Revision is "a way to open up material and draw more edges into the material, as opposed to sanding the material down so that you end up with something smooth, polished, and featureless" (Clayton Eschelman). Build serious writing assignments around revision; comment on papers with that in mind; withhold grading until you both call the paper done.
- Don't be the sole reader for student papers. Every classroom contains other potentially interested readers of each others writing and learning—the other students in the class. Set your class up so that students have regular opportunities to share drafts—one day with seat-mates—the next with out-of-class study groups. Reading papers aloud helps both writer and reader.

- Make student learning part of the course content: publish student writings in a mid-term class "book" through a local copy shop. Instead of grading this work A-F; base the grade on willingness to publish (S/U—it's in the packet or not) and let students experience the real evaluation of being read by other knowledgeable, critical, interested readers.
- Include student voices in all classroom conversations: discuss the class written books in small groups, discuss the class book as a whole class, as preparation for end-of term projects, write letters to each other about texts in the class book, review the class book in a lecture—pointing to the accomplished disciplinary aspects of what has been said, what needs to be said further or differently.
- When you read early drafts of student papers, comment on conceptual matters, but don't comment at all on the spelling, punctuation, or grammar. When you read later drafts, comment on whatever needs attending to. When you read final drafts, comment finally—the student is through with writing the paper and you should be through making rewriting suggestions.

These practices allow our students to learn in their own words to see what they think and what they know and what they don't; they also allow our students to communicate this full or partial knowledge to us and so enter in to our disciplinary conversations. Their learning, like our teaching, is an amalgam of thoughts, voices, and influences, braided together to create new and important understandings. And they must do the braiding, yes, with our help but for themselves.

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