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“Know Thyself”: A Purpose for Writing

Jill VanAntwerp

He was ready for college before he had finished high school. By his senior year, he had drawn away from the interests of his classmates, and did not attend sports competitions or musical performances.

Yet for some reason, he signed up for an elective course I taught, English Literature. He had always been an excellent English student, but I wondered if he would find my class uninspiring since little seemed to excite him at that time in his life. Once the class started though, he seemed to enjoy writing and tackled the assignments with enthusiasm. Although he wrote prolifically and with great talent in his journal and for his portfolio, he often was reluctant to participate with the other students; and when he did participate he, at times, seemed to take pleasure in intimidating his classmates, who were no match for his verbal acumen. Finally, June came and he graduated and headed for college, happy to leave high school behind forever.

Midway through the following fall quarter I received his letter with the University of Michigan return address. He had much to say, but several statements stood out:

“Everything is new! Perhaps this is a search for the springs of this river. Where did this newness—this energy—really begin? Somewhere in Eng. Lit., I believe. Maybe, however, the improved results with writing were a result of a personal development. Maybe it was some transcendence or self-actualization based on an eventual feeling of self-worth. . . . I wonder if Alex Pope refers to this

phase of his life when he tells us to ‘know then thyself’”

There was much more in his letter which I enjoyed—his comments on professors and classes and dorm life and other students—but I kept going back to those four words, “Somewhere in Eng. Lit. . . .” For all of his seeming aloofness at the time, he had gained something important through the course.

My English Literature class had recently been returned to the schedule after having been dropped for several years. It previously had been a semester elective for juniors or seniors, taught by one of the veterans in the department. The course she had designed was not unlike many English Literature classes at the time, a pedantic approach to the literature with a chronological reading of the canon which, in the semester format, had never made it farther than the Romantic Poets. Long, involved tests on the literature, and research papers on British customs of the various eras had taken their toll on the students. When the class was last offered, only ten hardy souls had enrolled for the one section left in the course schedule.

When I became chairman of the department, I decided to design a new course of English Literature. My decision to revive the class was not based solely on a belief that English Literature had a place in the curriculum. I felt that the material fit two criteria for a class I wanted to design for our juniors and seniors: the first was that the literature was rich and evocative and lent

love of English Literature. I had been blessed with teachers who had made the works meaningful for me, and I knew I would not present such beloved pieces as mere specimens to examine and dissect. I wanted to design a class in which students experienced literature and wrote it themselves.

The resulting class was the one in which my correspondent began a period of personal development which, in his own words, gave "improved results with writing" and "an eventual feeling of self-worth." I appreciated his letter, for it verified that the class was having the effect I had hoped it would have—even if it took time for students to appreciate the value of such a course. Over half our students now enroll in English Literature. One reason this class is more viable than its predecessor is that the literature is not deadened by studying it for the wrong purposes. More importantly, the student's writing in such a course takes on a purpose which has real meaning for them. Through their own writing, the students learn more about themselves. I believe two reasons the students write eagerly in this class are: they are not given assigned topics, and they are not given prescribed writing forms which they must use.

It was important, I felt, that the students select their own topics when writing. Equally important, however, but often not considered in a writing classroom, is the belief that students should select their own forms of writing. In an article concerning the teaching of language and literature, James Moffett describes a curriculum which would include all forms of literature and which would ask students to write in many forms: "Professional writing and the students' own productions would be the only texts examined" (157). Moffett suggests that students should not be limited by form when asked to communicate. Neither should the students necessarily write *about* the literature but, in reaction to it. Students' discourses, Moffett feels, should be from their own life experiences: "It follows that students will learn to abstract properly only if they are asked to discourse about some raw material from their own life, for to the extent that assignment topics are preabstracted for them the students are prevented from working their way through the prerequisite stages" (154).

As I selected the pieces of literature from the textbook the students and I would use for the semester, I chose many of my favorites, but I also looked for pieces which I thought would speak to these teenagers. I remembered the warning of Louise Rosenblatt: "No matter how much students are exposed to the texts of the good and

great works that are our heritage, literature will survive only if our literature classrooms have as their first priority engendered in students the capacity for aesthetic reading, as the basis for the habit of reflection on the personal and social impact of literary works." Rosenblatt goes on to say: "More is implied here than simply the avoidance of overemphasis on matters of form, biography, or literary history. Positive efforts are needed to encourage the aesthetic reading of literary texts for personal pleasure and enriched experience" (76). Rather than base my selection on the reputation of a work of literature, I chose pieces which I felt would help students develop in their aesthetic reading.

I use many classroom methods to engage the students in discussions of the literature that are student-centered rather than teacher-centered. Small group discussions, often with a few prompts, are very effective. Sometimes I ask groups of students to select poems and prepare presentations for their classmates during which they discuss their personal reactions to the poetry. I occasionally provide materials and urge the students to create artwork as a means of reacting to the literature. When done in small groups, creating a poster or sculpture requires significant conversation about the literature. But most often I ask the students to write; I ask them to wonder why the poet or author wrote, to wonder what he or she might have been feeling, experiencing, or thinking. I ask them to relate to the literature by thinking about their own lives and then I ask them to transform these thoughts, ideas, and feelings into writing.

I expect the students to write weekly in personal journals and/or for portfolios. In keeping with our school district's curriculum, I also assign a certain amount of writing to be graded. When I request that a polished piece of writing be submitted for a grade, I urge the students to go to their journals for ideas or their portfolios for pieces in progress. If a student has reacted to a piece of literature by writing in his or her journal about an idea, concept, or issue which came to mind when reading, that journal writing could be a basis for an essay or expository piece for the polished writing assignment. Another student might have written poetry or short stories as certain experiences or feelings were conjured by the reading we did. These pieces, which would be in his or her portfolio, could be re-written for a polished paper assignment. Thus, when I collect polished assignments, the papers I receive cover a variety of topics which have been suggested by the readings assigned. These submissions also represent a variety of forms: essay, composition,

narrative, short story, poetry, drama. Often students write creatively as if in a journal or diary of a character or an author. The students can choose to research for support or development of a topic. Providing freedom in choice of topic and discourse style allows students to examine what is important to each of them individually and to investigate in which form their discourse is best relayed. Some students find that they have a talent in a particular form of writing. By having the literature both as a model and as a springboard for their own thoughts and creativity, they begin to appreciate the effect of literature. "The teaching of literature becomes, then," as Rosenblatt states, "not the inculcation of a rigid set of priorities or hierarchy of values, but the provision of opportunities for the development of habits of thoughtful discrimination and judgment concerning emotionally-laden choices in values" (77).

Moffett described his feelings after having decided on such a curriculum: "I have been through a lot of theorizing to arrive at what should have been the most natural thing in the first place—to let a student of English spend his time practicing the full range of actual discourse and examining the results in collaboration with his peers and a guiding adult" (158).

"I ask them to relate to the literature by thinking about their own lives and then I ask them to transform these thoughts, ideas, and feelings into writing."

The value of personal writing was indicated by my former student, who felt that the class had helped him begin to know himself, as Pope admonished. Myron C. Tuman discusses personal writing in *Preface to Literacy* :

"... we can only know the 'I' that is ourselves as a historical figure—a figure not unlike the authors whom we study closely for years Our 'I' joins with the 'I' of others, creating worlds of possibility that can be grasped only historically by an emerging 'me.' As writers we act, creating what is as yet not part of our

social self. All literate experience is exploratory, directed to that emerging self, offering it a world of new possibilities, including the most valued possibility of all, that of self-knowledge. Nowhere else are the struggles of the self as ever present and as elusive as in our reading and writing of texts" (112).

One of my colleagues, upon hearing of the content and format of my English Literature course, worried that the students would not carry away a sense of the authors of that vast canon nor a memory of which great works are associated with which great writers. Assuming that such a knowledge is important, I have not found that it has been totally sacrificed by this format. My students, in their examination of the writing in our text, are eager to ask me or to use the reference books I provide in the classroom to find what it was that tormented Dylan Thomas, why Keats seemed so taken with the thought of death, why Donne's early poetry is so different from his later writing, or how Virginia Wolfe was able to be so independent as a woman in the 1800s. They care about these writers because they have come to care about their writings, and because they have related the works to their own lives, doing what I imagine Wolfe and Thomas and Pope and Keats would have been most happy to have them do: write in reaction, write in response, write in empathy. My students examine themselves and come to know themselves in a different way. Their writing, then, has purposes more akin to the purposes for writing of the authors they read: self-expression and self-discovery.

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