

THE DANGEROUS METHOD, OR “CAN PROCRASTINATION EVER BE A GOOD THING?”

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We tell it to our clients all the time: *Don't keep putting that project off! You need to get started on it now!* That essay you slap-dash together at the last minute, literally printing off your first (and final) draft as you're rushing to class on the morning the project is due, will, nine times out of ten, not make the grade in any sense of the word.

We've all been there. Peter Elbow even has a word for this last-minute process - he calls it "The Dangerous Method": Rather than writing a rough draft, then revising, then editing - a process that can take days, weeks, months, or years, depending on the scope of your project - when writers write by the "dangerous method," we try to get our drafts right on the first try. We want our ideas to magically come together, free of problems with organization, development, spelling, or mechanics; thus, there is no need to move ideas around, to dive back into our research to find more support for our claims, or to do more with proofreading than running a spell-check.

It actually is possible to write this way. But before you throw your hands up and cry "hallelujah," thinking you never again need to get started on a writing project weeks in advance, let's look at what Elbow says makes The Dangerous Method work (and then consider why it is "dangerous"):

There are obvious attractions to a writing process where you...try to get your piece right the first time. You don't have to make such a mess with raw writing, you don't have to write in the dark without knowing where you are going, you don't have to engage in extensive revising -- just a little tidying up, perhaps, at the end... If you want to use this one-step writing process, the main thing you must learn to do is what writers have traditionally been advised to do: get your meaning clear in your head before you start writing. (In effect you are stuck with two steps again: figure out your meaning, then write.) 39

In other words, making your first draft your final draft is not an invitation to put off doing anything with your

writing project until the last minute. The Dangerous Method is dangerous because it demands you be clear enough about what you want to say that you can in one draft convey your meaning clearly. Anyone who has ever written a single page, only to discover that the well of words has dried up and you have no idea where you want to go from here, will understand the "danger" of such a one-shot writing process.

But let's consider the value of The Dangerous Method, now that we have acknowledged its risks - and the caveat that it is not permission to be a slacker. Imagine your instructor assigns a 10-page research paper due at the end of the semester. During the first few weeks of class, you start perusing the library databases for books and articles. As midterm approaches, you start blocking out a few hours each week to read the research you've collected. You aren't trying to draft yet, although you might be taking a few notes, perhaps cutting-and-pasting interesting sections of the articles into a Word document to refer back to later, when you do start writing and need evidence to support your claims.

Strangely, you find yourself thinking about your paper at odd times. When you're in the shower. When you're out for a run. Maybe you have a commute into campus in the mornings, and you start shutting off the radio as sentences and paragraphs seem to write themselves in your mind. You don't put pen to paper (or hands to keyboard) yet, but you're starting to feel ready - a little nudge in the back of your mind that's pushing you to start writing. You resist - except for the ten minutes you spend jotting down a rough outline of how you think your ideas might come together.

By now, the end of the semester is rapidly approaching, and you have less than a week before this paper is due. At long last, you sit down; you take out your notes and outline; you begin writing. You jump into the middle of what you think you want to say; halfway through that, you think of a terrific introduction; as soon as that's finished, you refer back to your rough outline and see a section you've completely forgotten about, but now remember is pivotal to the argument you want to make; you write

that section, and it seems to flow right into the conclusion you could not have imagined until you sat down and started writing, yet now seems to obviously be the point you were all along hoping to make. You type the last word. It's two o'clock in the morning, but you decide to stay up just a little longer to read back through what you've written. You fix a comma here, change passive to active voice there.

Boom. You're finished. The draft is done, and it is *good*.

The danger of The Dangerous Method, again, is that this doesn't happen - that you become tangled in your own ideas, and having left yourself so little time to complete the project, do not have the luxury of walking away from a draft and coming back to it with fresh eyes, to engage in global re-visioning ("vision" meaning to see, "re" meaning to "see again"). Nevertheless, let's suppose the scenario I outlined above plays out perfectly. How is that possible? Can procrastination on a writing project ever be a good thing? Could we teach our clients to make it a good thing?

The answer is simply: yes. It comes back to creativity theory. Ronda Leathers Dively relates the four steps in the creative process, first identified by the creativity theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, as:

- *Preparation.* The writer begins to explore ideas, through research and/or conversation, gathering facts, considering viewpoints, defining concepts, etc.;
- *Incubation.* The writer's unconscious mind begins to operate upon the research gathered during preparation, making connections between ideas the conscious mind would not be capable of;
- *Insight.* Also known as the "Eureka!" moment, the writer becomes consciously aware of the connections between her or his ideas, and suddenly knows what she or he wants to say;
- *Verification.* The writer begins to write, and discovers that some of her ideas can be defended and developed, while others need to be discarded or revised; depending on how successful the initial insight proves, the writer may cycle back through the entire process - for instance, when you realize your argument makes no sense, or you disagree with what you at first thought you agreed with, cannot find enough evidence to support your claims, etc.

What Dively's research tells us is that sometimes, avoiding writing can be exactly what our brains need to chew over what we have been feeding them via

research. "By defining incubation as 'the passage of time that results in progression toward creative vision or the solution to a problem,'" Dively says, "we leave ourselves and our students open to the possibility of subconscious or peripherally conscious cognition" to stimulate creativity (39).

For those writers who cannot break the habit of writing only under a tight deadline, Elbow and Dively's work taken together offers a strategy for making The Dangerous Method work. The trick is not to avoid *thinking* about your writing even if you are avoiding the writing itself. Simply put, you have to fill your brain up with good stuff if you want good stuff to come out once you do start writing - and the more time you give yourself to puzzle over your research before you start writing, the more likely it is that you will be able to synthesize what Bradford Berry calls "old viewpoints, familiar strategies, and common techniques" (Dively 45) into something creative and original that *you* want to say. Moreover, saying it may not feel nearly as laborious as it can when slogging through draft after draft, revision after revision. In other words, the "freshness" of our ideas, before we have wrestled and re-wrestled with them on the page, is a joy all writers can appreciate, a feeling creativity theorists call "flow," or, as Dively describes it, "that feeling of lost time, of being utterly lost in one's work" (45).

Tutors are also writers. We know that to be in "flow" is a goal all writers set for themselves. The truth is no paper ever writes itself, but if we teach our clients to start reading and researching early; to think about what they are reading and researching often, even if that thinking happens on a walk, or in the car, or in bed late at night; to jot down ideas and roughly plan out organization before they start writing, the paper may feel like it writes itself. And The Dangerous Method may turn out to be not so dangerous after all.

Works Cited

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