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# Low-Stakes, Reflective Writing: Moving Students into Their Professional Fields

Joyce Neff, Garrett J. McAuliffe, Carl Whithaus, and Nial P. Quinlan

## Abstract

This study examines low-stakes, written commentaries from a graduate counseling course to better understand the role writing plays in the transition from being a student to becoming a professional practitioner. The cross-disciplinary research team used methods from Grounded Theory to analyze 60 commentaries and found that: (1) low-stakes, reflective writing revealed changes in self-awareness from Situational Self-Knowledge to Pattern Self-Knowledge (Weinstein & Alschuler, 1985); (2) low-stakes writing provided evidence of students connecting personally to learning and then connecting learning to professional practice; and (3) low-stakes writing encouraged the instructor to make mid-course adjustments to his teaching methods. This study provides empirical evidence that low-stakes writing-to-learn both supports and records the transition students make from *hoping to know how* to *knowing how* to imagine themselves in their professional field.

## Keywords

low-stakes writing; writing-to-learn; counselor education; writing in the disciplines; transitioning into a profession; reflective practice

## Introduction

Low-stakes writing—freewriting, journal-keeping, reflective commentary—has a wide-ranging history. Boice and Meyers (1986) locate its intellectual roots in the automatic writing of surrealism, hypnosis, and early psychotherapy. Within composition studies, low-stakes writing can be traced to the early work of Elbow (1973) who promotes it as a technique that helps the writer begin the journey toward “rational” discourse, i.e., the formal, logical texts required in many college courses. But what is the role of low-stakes, reflective writing in the pre-professional classroom in a field such as counseling, which depends more on talking than writing? And how might we know whether reflective writing prepares students to be better professional practitioners?

Elbow (1981) defines freewriting as “the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all-around practice in writing that I know” (p. 13). In “Ranking, Evaluating, Liking,” Elbow (1993) discusses both freewriting and

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quickwriting as “evaluation- [;]free” writing—that is, assignments that the students work on and use to learn about writing, but assignments that are not graded. Describing low-stakes writing as a way of preparing students for future “writing tasks that involve more intellectual pushing,” he argues:

Students have a better time writing these unevaluated pieces; they enjoy hearing and appreciating these pieces when they don't have to evaluate. And *I* have a much better time when I engage in this astonishing activity: reading student work when I don't have to evaluate and respond. And yet the writing improves. I see students investing and risking more, writing more fluently, and using livelier, more interesting voices. This writing gives me and them a higher standard of clarity and voice for when we move on to more careful and revised writing tasks that involve more intellectual pushing—tasks that sometimes make their writing go tangled or sodden. (p.199)

Britton (1993), in his research on writing as a means of acquiring knowledge about a discipline, values low-stakes writing as a vehicle for retention of content, fluency with language, and connections between personal experience and new knowledge. Fulwiler and Young (1986) extend low-stakes writing into all disciplines. Yancey (1998) explores writing and reflection in her discussion of how students move from *hoping* to advance to disciplinary knowledge to *knowing how* to advance to disciplinary knowledge: “Not all accounts of writing processes are equal, of course. Some students seem to know their own processes, can mark them in a way that teaches. Others begin more tentatively. They don't seem to know how to talk about their own work, or perhaps they are only beginning to know it” (p. 27). Yancey's scholarship is informed by Schon's (1983) concept of reflective practice, which Schon bases on Dewey's (1938) characterization of it as “an active,

persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (p. 9).

Reflective practice opens individuals to new experiences and allows them to define unclear situations, consider alternative solutions to problems, and hear feedback on previous decisions and actions. In the field of counseling, professionals use reflective practice to draw on their experience, to construct “informal theory,” and to comprehend problem situations, rather than merely to apply previously learned methods to unambiguous ends (Foley, 2000). In the professional world, reflective practitioners are usually flexible when faced with the uncertainty of complex decisions. They are not rule-bound and can consider multiple factors. A specific dimension of reflective practice is “reflection-in-action,” which is most simply defined as reacting to inconsistencies or “surprises” in a problem situation by rethinking one's tacit assumptions and reframing the situation into an action experiment in which possible solutions are tested (Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998).

Given these favorable accounts of reflective practice and low-stakes writing in the published literature, our research team explored their connections within a professional preparation program, namely counselor education. We began with two questions: What does written, low-stakes commentary reveal about becoming a professional in fields that aim to produce better practitioners rather than better writers? What is the pedagogical value of low-stakes, reflective writing in a pre-professional program? To answer the questions we analyzed written commentaries submitted by students in three sections of a graduate course called Counseling Skills. The commentary assignment posed open-ended questions as a warm-up for later, graded tasks such as analysis of counseling interviews. In the following pages we explain the study's design, define the core categories that emerged during data analysis, and discuss the implications of low-stakes, reflective writing for professional education and for critical pedagogy.

## Methodology

Our research team was composed of two composition specialists (experienced in Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines), a counselor educator, and a practicing counselor. The 60 written commentaries were randomly selected from students enrolled in three different sections of a graduate, pre-professional, counseling skills course. Thirty of the commentaries came from the beginning week of the semester and thirty from the last week (hereafter called “Early Commentaries” and “Late Commentaries”). The instructor of the three sections drew on Schon’s (1983) notion of reflective practice, Belenky et al’s (1986) connected teaching, and Freire’s (1976) critical pedagogy, in his decision to incorporate low-stakes, reflective, writing-to-learn into his syllabus. Students emailed their reflective commentaries to the instructor in response to the following guidelines:

In your commentary, be self-reflective and honest. The content will not be graded for any “correctness.” Rather, your honest and open effort to confront the material and to integrate these approaches to helping will be evaluated. Remember, learning to be a professional helper requires self-awareness, open-mindedness, appropriate self-disclosure, and authenticity in interpersonal relationships. I will read them before class and occasionally discuss the issues that you bring up with the whole class. You will be anonymous, however. Submit your commentaries in this order, designating them as “a” through “d:” (a) your written personal reactions about the previous class session and about your general learning so far, including your discoveries and your concerns. The commentary material is confidential. Only the instructor will read it; (b) written “nuggets” from the readings: key ideas, uncertainties, and disagreements from every reading (e.g., a thought from each major heading). Recommendation:

During or after reading, pull out key ideas, or speculate on issues that come up. This is your chance to actively confront the material, emotionally or intellectually; (c) your responses to any assigned activities and exercises from the books. See the weekly assignment sheets, which will be handed out at each class, for specific assignments; (d) brief written comments on your home practice sessions, if assigned; these should be based on the format of the feedback sheets in each chapter, as appropriate. (Counseling Skills syllabus; emphasis in original)

The four researchers used procedures from Grounded Theory to analyze the commentaries. Grounded Theory, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for sociological research and for the “discovery of theory from data” (p. 1), requires a specified set of procedures for discovering conceptual relationships. The procedures include movement through what Glaser and Strauss (1967) call “open,” “axial,” and “selective” coding, until the emerging categories become fewer and the final core categories become more inclusive. The dimensions and properties of core categories are further tested through theoretical sampling, a process that involves reviewing data “on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 176). Theoretical sampling provides a means of checking for confirming and disconfirming evidence. The methods of Grounded Theory leave a paper trail of memos, matrices, and other graphics, which document the researchers’ back-and-forth movement between data and theory. Grounded Theory helped our interdisciplinary research team create a shared language that allowed us to work across the borders of our separate disciplinary modes of inquiry.

After each of us completed an individual round of open coding, we convened to discuss our codes and arrived at 11 working categories for the first set of com-

mentaries (Early Commentaries) and eight categories for the second set (Late Commentaries). We met bi-weekly over 12 months; our analyses moved from coding to working definitions of categories to checking the theoretical relevance of the categories. We kept minutes of each meeting and periodically reviewed those minutes as we balanced the descriptive and theoretical components of our progress. Once the three core categories emerged from the data, we compared Early Commentaries to Late ones.

### Codes and Categories

During axial coding, the research team combined and refined the 19 open codes into three core categories: self-awareness, connections, and teaching methods. Below are definitions for these core categories followed by examples.

*Self-Awareness: Student is attuned to her/his inner states and behavioral tendencies.*

The low-stakes assignment that generated the commentaries asked students to report their “written personal reactions about the previous class session and [their] general learning so far, including [their] discoveries and concerns.” That open invitation was intended to increase self-reflectiveness, which is a key characteristic of effective counselors (Wampold, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that one of the major themes to emerge in the low-stakes writing was *self-awareness*. In the Early Commentaries we see examples that demonstrate *self-awareness of anxiety*:

- » “I find myself very nervous and self-conscious.”
- » “I am nervous about dealing with clients in ways that are effective and helpful.”

Other Early Commentaries show *self-awareness of doubt and negativity*:

- » “I am definitely not a quick thinker. I am having problems standing back and observing.”
- » “I am the world’s worst listener.”

Some Early *self-awareness* Commentaries seem *neutral*:

- » “I guess that...I’m used to being a blunt person.”
- » “I realized that I would have asked mostly questions that gathered information.”

In the Late Commentaries *self-awareness of anxiety* continues, as in “I am extra anxious that I made a bad impression.” *Self-awareness of doubt* continues as well: “I do not feel prepared to handle clients that might be very angry.”

Neutral reflections continue in the Late Commentaries also:

- » “I became aware of how strong my maternal feelings are.”
- » “I am not one who likes the pieces. I like the whole picture.”
- » “I am a pretty open person and am willing to share easily.”

It is noteworthy that a new dimension of *self-awareness* emerges in the Late Commentaries, a dimension we called *self-awareness of positive transformation*. Some examples are:

- » “I have learned so much from this class [;] ... my patience has grown. I am so much more aware of myself and how I am responding to other people.”
- » “I feel that I listen more effectively.”
- » “Being assertive is an issue that I have had difficulty with all my life [...] ... I find that I have grown in my ability to talk to people.”

In sum, the commentaries are replete with statements of analysis of the “self,” but the focus of that analysis moves from *hoping to advance* to disciplinary knowledge to *knowing how to advance* to disciplinary knowledge. This focus parallels Yancey’s (1998) description of how a companion piece of writing can work as an important tool for reflection-in-action, which leads toward *self-awareness* (pp. 31-37).

*Connections: Student links him/herself to classmates or to the field of counseling.*

The Early Commentaries that evoke the connections category refer to links or associations made in the classroom, ones that allow for a more personalized and comfortable atmosphere. Some examples of connections statements from the Early Commentaries are:

- » “I am glad that [names familiar students] are there so I don’t feel alone.”
- » “I thought knowing everyone’s background was really helpful.”
- » “Prior to the start of the semester, I thought that it might be beneficial for me to have familiar people in my class.”
- » “I like how the tables are set up – it makes the room feel more personable.”
- » “Opening himself [the instructor] for the first interview was smart. It allowed us to ... feel a sense of connections to the teacher through his sharing a personal part of his life with the class.”

In contrast, Late Commentaries coded as *connections* are characterized by links being made between course experience and learning that could be applied outside of the classroom, as in the following:

- » “This has helped at work but especially with my friends and families [...] ... My communication with all the different people in my life has dramatically changed....So now my patience has grown and I think that is a direct result of having to listen to the client to paraphrase, summarize or reflect what they have said to me.”
- » “I do see myself in an interview now being more intentional, I can slow down, think clearer, and attend to my client. I can listen, feel empathy and follow his or her story better now than when I first started this class.”
- » “Learning these skills has made me much more aware and in tune in my everyday work. I think I

had the skills all along but needed a guide in how and when to use them.”

- » “I do notice myself integrating these skills into my daily life.”

Some *connections* are linked to a specific course activity. For example, a student makes a link to the written commentaries:

- » “Having to write [the weekly commentary] has helped me explore myself as a person, student, and future counselor.”

Or students make a link to the counseling interview transcription assignment as in the following:

- » “It [the written transcription of and commentary on the interview] caused me to look critically at my own style and hopefully develop some new thought patterns by having to write everything down.”
- » “It was good to hear that others in the class were feeling the same about how revealing personal recording and transcribing is. It really does put you in touch with self.”

Or the student makes a link to feedback from fellow students:

- » “My classmates helped me to understand myself, them, and others, especially my clients, in a more productive way [...] ... I feel I listen more effectively and am able to help my clients with their issues.”

*Teaching Methods: Student considers the format of class sessions and instructor’s style and/or makes suggestions regarding the teaching method, the instructor, or specific activities.*

Commentaries that we coded as statements about *teaching methods* covered several domains: *surprise*, *discomfort*, *positive response*, and *critique*. *Positive response* and *critique* are represented in both the Early and Late Commentaries. However, there is no evidence of *surprise* or *discomfort* in the Late Commentaries. In

the Early Commentaries, *surprise at teaching methods* includes encounters with the unexpected:

- » “I’m used to a lot of theory...and this seems to be the exact opposite.”
- » “This course seems much different from undergraduate studies. The student actually participates.”
- » “I am used to a much more structured set up...to getting a syllabus at the beginning and going over the whole class structure and expectations.”

*Discomfort with teaching methods* is expressed in:

- » “At first I was intimidated by the long syllabus.”
- » “I was a little overwhelmed as I first glanced at the syllabus.”
- » “This was all new to me and I find myself in unfamiliar territory.”

*Positive response to teaching methods* is represented by the following:

- » “I enjoyed your technique of having students interview the professor.”
- » “How wonderful it is to be actively involved in your own learning process.”
- » “I am very excited about this class in the ways of content, student make-up, and format.”
- » “I appreciate the fact that our readings are done prior to each class so that class time can be devoted to putting the information to work.”

*Critique of teaching methods* in the Early Commentaries includes analysis of instructional activities in a positive way and suggestions for change, as in:

- » “A simple lecture on that information would not have had the same impact.”
- » “I would also like [the instructor] to go over the material in a lecture format, and then proceed with group activities.”
- » “...it is more important to practice the counseling skills than to just read the textbooks.”
- » “This course does not strive for you to understand definitions and concepts, but to actually utilize

the concepts and skills in class and on audio and videotapes.”

In the Late Commentaries, as in the Early Commentaries, the *teaching methods* category includes both *positive comments* and *critiques*, but as might be expected, there are no examples of *surprise* about or *discomfort*:

- » “Of all things in this course, the hands-on experience and practice sessions we’ve seen have been the most helpful. This has been the most student-oriented class I’ve ever taken. You definitely geared the class toward helping us learn the proper steps and techniques of a good interview.”
- » “I must say I will miss this class a great deal. I feel I benefited greatly from the hands on experience that I received in this course, and I must say it was nice to put the things I read about in class books into action. I look forward to the opportunity to attend other classes like this one where I can practice skill sets on becoming an effective counselor.”
- » “Since this is our final commentary, I really wanted you to know how much I’ve enjoyed this class. It certainly has been challenging - no doubt about that - but it has also been very rewarding. As other people have mentioned, I do notice myself integrating these skills into my daily life... All in all, this has been one of my all-time favorite classes.”
- » “This has been an exceptional course for me. Just by writing these commentaries have helped me in a deeper sense than just being a “student.”. Having to write ‘Part A’ has helped me explore myself as a person, student, and future counselor.”

*Critiques of teaching methods* in the Late Commentaries include suggestions, analyses of particular instructional activities, or mixed or negative comments on those activities:

- » “I would like to reflect on the whole [previous] session. Contrary to what it may seem by the other commentaries I did really enjoy the class. Did it challenge me, maybe not as much as I or you would like. Was it thought provoking, undoubtedly yes. It caused me to look critically at my own style and hopefully develop some new thought patterns by having to write everything down. I still stand steadfast in saying that I believe we may oversimplify what counselors do by the way we broke things down.”
- » “Going to the 5 stages felt rushed at first. We probably should have had the reading assignment without the commentary. It didn’t flow at first.”
- » “First of all, I would like to state that I prefer to get reading assignments ahead of class rather than receive lecture then read materials. I find the former to facilitate better classroom participation, and better practice sessions.”

### Significance of Reflective Writing for Professional Education

Low-stakes, reflective writing has ramifications for professional education. As discussed below, the writing reveals changes in student self-awareness from Situational Self-knowledge to Pattern Self-knowledge, which is an important concept for practitioners (Weinstein & Alschuler, 1985). Furthermore, an instructor can make mid-course adjustments to his or her teaching methods because the writing uncovers movement (or the lack thereof) on the part of the students from personal learning to practitioner knowledge.

**Self-Awareness.** Comments about *self-awareness* shift in three major ways from the Early to the Late Commentaries. First, statements alluding to anxiety and doubt, while still present, are much less prevalent in the Late Commentaries. Second, we observed a trend toward students expressing positive transformations. Third, Late Commentaries coded as *self-aware-*

*ness* reflect greater complexity and sophistication than do Early Commentaries so coded.

**Decreased anxiety and doubt.** In the Late Commentaries, students seem to move toward greater confidence in their potential to do the work. They are apprehensive about specific elements of counseling rather than their general abilities, as in this comment: “It is difficult to know which one thing to pick to focus on [in a counseling session].” Thus students move away from general anxiety and doubt about their learning capabilities to specific concerns about the requirements of professional practice. A general sense of having the potential to learn the work prevails. This shift might be expected, given the experiential and supportive teaching approaches that the instructor applies. For example, weekly student performance of skills is followed by corrective feedback and further practice. Thus one student expresses a sense of empowerment, self-appreciation, and potential in a Late Commentary with these words, “I can fit the field and the field can fit me.”

**Positive transformations.** A second notable shift in the Late Commentaries coded as *self-awareness* lies in student tendencies to reflect positive transformations. In the Late Commentaries, students mention that their patience has grown, that they are more aware of how they respond to others, and that they now talk less and listen more effectively. These transformations are artifacts of the course process, which encourages successful performance as well as increased self-awareness through writing and talking and then encourages changing emotional and behavioral tendencies. These recursive activities are likely to be central to the transformation.

**Increased developmental complexity.** An additional important development around *self-awareness* emerges in the Late Commentaries as the complexity of student self-knowledge increases. *Self-awareness* comments become more abstract and attuned to general personality patterns in the Late Commentaries. These shifts parallel those that Weinstein and Alschuler



(1985) found in their Self-Knowledge Development Theory, which plots the evolution of self-awareness from Situational to Pattern Self-Knowledge. Our research team suspects that the Early *self-awareness* Commentaries represent Situational Self-Knowledge, which Weinstein and Alschuler (1985) describe as a person identifying a single emotional state that refers to one condition or situation, exemplified in comments like, “I find myself nervous” and “I feel unsure about my presence in the Counseling Program.” There are no references in the Early Commentaries to general patterns of thinking and/or feeling.

By contrast, Weinstein and Alschuler’s (1985) Pattern Self-Knowledge lies in the individual’s awareness of her or his stable, cross-situational tendencies to react in a certain way to a class of situations. Weinstein and Alschuler (1985) describe Pattern Self-Knowledge as an ability to “see beyond the moment, generalize across situations, more accurately anticipate [their reactions to] events, and systematically modify their pattern of perceiving and responding to those situations” (p. 21). In the Late Commentaries, students are inclined to note such behavioral tendencies, as in “I became aware of how strong my maternal feelings are” and “When I’m nervous, I tend to ramble on and on.” These utterances demonstrate awareness of broad, cross-occasion patterns.

Weinstein and Alschuler (1985) make suggestions for an intentional “self-knowledge education,” one that would use writing to encourage more complex self-awareness in students. Thus, in a course, instructors might ask students to write responses to such questions as, “How do your responses in this situation remind you of responses in similar situations?” and “Would you like to change that type of response?” These questions were common in the Counseling Skills course. In one exercise, students were asked to reflect on and write about patterns of emotional expression in their family and ethnic backgrounds, patterns that affect their cur-

rent ways of managing and expressing emotions. They were then asked how they would like to change such patterns. For example, they were asked to note types of clients, such as child abusers, against whom they might have prejudice and to counter such bias with alternative perspectives, such as, “They were once abused and are also hurting.” Students are thus challenged to see beyond the moment, which is a hallmark of Pattern Self-Knowledge.

Further research is needed to determine the role of low-stakes writing in promoting the emergence of more complex self-knowledge in students. It can be seen here, however, that low stakes, reflective writing provides a means for the instructor to observe student change during a course, and the instructor can share selected Commentaries that model Pattern Self-Knowledge as examples for other students.

**Connections.** Students begin the Counseling Skills course by expressing simple comfort at experiencing the personalized dimension of the course. They describe the support and *connections* that they find with simple, present tense statements about the reassurance that the personalized atmosphere of the early sessions provides.

In the Late Commentaries, the *connections* are of a different order, what we call “learning connections” (as opposed to personal connections), that is, linkages between the course and students’ emerging knowledge. They make overt reference to course content and learning, as in “My patience has grown and I think that is a direct result of having to listen to the client, to paraphrase, summarize, or reflect what they have said to me.” The students are still self-focused, as opposed to focused on the profession. This parallels Ronnestad and Skovholt’s (2003) findings that an individual at the Beginning Counselor stage (one who has just completed a course on helping skills) continues to be concerned more about his or her performance than about the client’s concerns or the details of professional

practice. Such egocentrism is thus to be expected at this phase.

Some students in the Late Commentaries link the interpersonal environment of the course with disciplinary learning, as in “My classmates helped me to understand myself, them, and others, especially my clients, in more productive ways.” Others connect the writing with their learning: “Having to write [the commentary] has helped me explore myself as a person, student, and future counselor.”

Students seem to move from trying to find safety through personal connectedness in the classroom in the Early Commentaries to connecting learning to practitioner worlds outside of the classroom in the Late Commentaries. In a sense, they move from what Maslow (1968) describes as a more basic concern for safety and for belongingness to a desire to express themselves in their emerging work. As Maslow suggests, once their basic needs are attended to, students can take learning risks – especially those that require first critique of, and then changes in, their own current behaviors. The course process is predicated on the developmental principles of support and challenge (Sanford, 1966), which are considered the core conditions for human development. The support of the early personalized sessions continued, but challenge began immediately also, with in-class interpersonal encounters and testing of skills. The Late Commentaries again provide a window into students’ thinking. Their *connections* are now more de-centered. “What is” in the Early Commentaries is largely replaced by “What is becoming.”

**Teaching Methods.** It is noteworthy that students express surprise and discomfort about *teaching methods* in the Early Commentaries, but not in the Late ones. In the initial sessions, a participatory learning environment is worthy of comment perhaps because encouraging student involvement in the construction of knowledge is still a “transgression,” to use hooks’

(1994) term, of normal, teacher-centered, classroom discourse. For some students, such a teaching method breeds discomfort. That discomfort seems to lie in both the newness of the egalitarian, interactive nature of the classroom process and in the course demands. Students are “jolted” out of the more traditional, passive role of knowledge-recipient and into the role of knowledge-creator. And students have the opportunity to express their uneasiness in the written commentary, which allows the instructor to address it accordingly. The absence of surprise or discomfort with experiential teaching methods in the Late Commentaries suggests that students and the instructor have made adjustments.

The comments on *teaching methods* are predominantly positive in both the Early and Late Commentaries. Students express appreciation for being actively involved in learning. Most notably, they comment on classroom process rather than on course content: “Of all things in this course, the hands-on experience and practice sessions ... have been the most helpful.” By the Late Commentaries students’ surprise and discomfort have generally given way to appreciation and analysis of how the *teaching methods* work for their learning.

In the Late Commentaries, students understand the instructional choices and are able to proclaim their preference. In fact, the assignment to do weekly written commentaries is given with the intention that students give voice to their preferences and doubts. They now are able to do so, in a sense putting their name on the world in what Freire (1976) would point to as a way of coming to understand the world through a dialogic process rather than a domineering one. We see students stepping back and recognizing instructional choices and the impact of those decisions on them as learners. No longer are they passive recipients of teacher transmission of knowledge, nor are they ignorant of method. A possible isomorphism occurs through the revealing of *teaching methods*; as in the work of counseling, it is good

to reveal the process to the client so that she or he can take greater ownership of other interactions in her or his life (Rogers, 1951).

One benefit of written commentaries lies in the instructor's use of them to direct course process. Praise for *teaching methods* encourages the instructor to re-dedicate himself to classroom participation and activity. That affirmation can be important, as experiential teaching methods require significant time for group interaction and individual exercises. Thus, the instructor can be emboldened by student feedback to continue such choices. Future research may show whether assigning this type of writing helps the instructor to become a reflective practitioner as well.

No single method or set of approaches can meet all learners' needs. The instructor can see these different needs in Early Commentaries and be reminded to mix methods for efficacious teaching. In that vein, Chickering (1993) has called for a "junkyard curriculum," meaning a combining of many methods, so that multiple learning styles and levels of readiness might be addressed. In fact, research shows that students come to higher education with varying epistemologies and learning styles (Knefelkamp, 1974; Kolb, 1984; Lovell & McAuliffe, 1997). Thus, review of material through lecture and illustration suits the needs of "received knowers" (Belenky et. al., 1986), whereas independent and group analysis matches the readiness of "constructive knowers."

The written commentaries contain no negative comments on the experiential dimensions of the course. It may be that students are disinclined to criticize instruction, even though they have been told that the commentaries will not be graded. It is more likely that students are affirming the predominant value of active learning--critical thinking, try-outs, writing, small-group problem-solving, and similar approaches (Knefelkamp, 1974). Constructive knowers demand such activity because they are ready to integrate ideas

in their own ways; received knowers need it because they must be introduced to the nature of thinking for themselves.

### Conclusion

During data analysis of the Commentaries, one of the questions that emerged was "Is the writing itself significant?" The instructor had asked students to email responses to four questions with the first asking for "personal reactions," a type of writing very similar to Fulwiler's (1982) use of journals to "warm students up" or to help them make the transition from their previous activity (talking, walking, etc.) into the course material. The counseling assignment parallels what Fulwiler describes as using journals to summarize a class discussion or lecture and to make the learning personal. Is it important that the instructor asks the students to take this step in writing? How would the assignment be different if the three "content" questions are asked without the "personal" question?

During the open coding phase of our research, especially of Early Commentaries, we found frequent examples of linguistic features such as "I think I \_\_\_\_" and "I feel that I \_\_\_\_." While some of these linguistic patterns persist in the Late Commentaries, their number is reduced. In addition, "embracing complexity and ambiguity" emerged as a preliminary code, but we were unable to sustain that code as we developed our three core categories of *self-awareness*, *teaching methods*, and *connections*. These shifts in codes may somehow correspond with the learning that occurred in the course. An analysis of low-stakes, reflective writing is one way of capturing that learning. Seeing its embodiment in written form may be significant. Our focus now becomes examining how these findings from a pre-professional course support, contradict, and/or refine our understandings of—and advocacy for—the use of low-stakes, reflective writing as a tool for learning across the curriculum. To address this issue, we need

to extend our earlier review of the major claims about low-stakes, reflective writing-to-learn.

Elbow (1993) asserts that low-stakes writing prepares students for better high-stakes writing; however, in counseling education the main purpose is not to produce an effective writer, but rather to produce an effective counselor—someone who listens and responds professionally during an interview session. The verbal “text” that the counselor will be producing in actual sessions is not a written artifact, but rather a learned set of responses that low-stakes writing may better prepare the student to articulate. Counseling is largely a verbal enterprise, but it is also a dialogic one. It requires the ability to respond to both internal and external cues on the spot. That process parallels freewriting.

Some of the richest research on the benefit of writing for learning in the disciplines comes from Britton (1993) and Fulwiler (1982). In “The Personal Connection: Journal Writing Across the Curriculum,” Fulwiler says:

What we see in the form of a product (the journal passage itself) is actually most valuable to the student as a process (what went on in the student’s head while writing). Phrases like ‘I guess,’ ‘I think,’ ‘It seems,’ [and] ‘I mean,’ ... indicate attempts to make sense of the teacher’s question through the student’s own language. Other trigger words in this passage are past-tense constructions (‘I agreed’ and ‘I thought’) which reveal the writer testing prior assumptions against both the definition question and what went on in class that day (p. 20).

Fulwiler concludes by writing, “[T]he value of coupling personal with academic learning should not be overlooked; self-knowledge provides the motivation for whatever other knowledge an individual seeks” (p. 30). For Elbow (1993), freewriting and “evaluation-free zones” lead to writing that can later be used for “writing tasks that involve more intellectual pushing.” For

Fulwiler (1982), journals are a low-stakes writing activity that can encourage students to see the relationships between their lives and their courses of study.

In the field of counseling, which is talk-intensive, writing has not often been examined as a vehicle for increasing students’ counseling ability. However, Sprinthall (1994) has presented a model of counselor education in which role-taking (placing students in real roles that require them to put their own egos aside and respond with empathy and intense listening) and guided reflection are central. Sprinthall and his colleagues have found significant increases in ego and moral development to be related to the combination of role taking (as in the counseling practice sessions of the course we studied) and written reflection (as in the Early and Late Commentaries we analyzed). Those findings reinforce Dewey’s (1938) dictum that experience alone can be mis-educative, and that reflection on the meanings and consequences of experience are crucial for deep learning. The current study might serve as a spur for fields such as counselor education to make the written dimension more intentional and explicitly tied to the task of learning how to become a practicing professional (see, for example, Craig, Lerner, & Poe 2012).

Research such as that presented in this article is an important means of increasing our understanding of talking, writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines. We began with an analysis of low-stakes writing in pre-professional counselor education. That study has helped us see how students transform in a pre-professional field. It shows change in self-awareness, in knowing how instead of knowing what, and in the ability to imagine oneself in the field. Writing lets students practice using language for learning and ties into the verbal and lateral intelligences and introspection that are important goals in professional education. Writing lets the writer listen to her/himself. From the instructor’s perspective, writing allows him or her to see the

thinking that students are engaging in, thus providing a feedback loop for pedagogical choices. This was the instructor's original purpose for the assignment, but as a result of our study, he now also sees writing as a possible means for students to learn course content and to write themselves into professional practice. And, when students hear their classmates' writing read aloud, they see connections among themselves.

In sum, low-stakes, reflective writing gives evidence of student movement toward professional practice, provides feedback in the form of dialogue among instructor and students which supports the instructor's attempt to implement critical pedagogy, and pushes students to own their learning (developmental intention). Low stakes, reflective writing in such a pedagogy is a rich resource for all involved. ■■

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