

FLOW

Foreign
Language
Opportunities
in Writing

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TURNING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS INTO CENTERS OF WRITING

Abstract

Asking a student to write a paper without the opportunity to TALK about the writing beforehand is like asking members of an orchestra to perform a concert without any instruments. Writing Centers exist to TALK to writers. Individualized writing consultations invite students to think critically about their ideas, to become agents of their own writing and to learn what it's like to have a conversation about their work in progress. But what if your school has no Writing Center?

Providing a learning environment in your classroom that engages your students with ideas and gives them opportunities to talk with their peers about their writing not only fosters their desire to succeed but helps build their confidence. As teachers it is our responsibility to offer our students numerous opportunities to talk about their writing before they write, to practice their writing before being tested, and to move comfortably and confidently through the complex process that is writing.

This article aims to share several of the myriad activities, occasions and kinds of writing I invite my students to participate in throughout the semester: low-stakes writing, personal response papers, creative writing exercises, writing workshops, grading and grids, class presentation ideas, collaborative writing activities and writing through revision.

1. Introduction

If there is one thing I have learned over the years as a professor of writing it is that students need to talk to others about their writing, at each step in the process. Another's ears, eyes and voice add to the notion that what is being written will be read, that there will be an audience. To this end, we need to invite their thinking to enter into disorder, encourage them to explore and discover, and allow them the freedom to create plenty of healthy tension before they attempt order. Working through a paper is anything but seamless. Writing is thinking

made visible and if thinking is messy, well then, so is writing, each step of the way

Writing Centers allow for collaboration and conversation to occur, one on one, face to face, at any point in the writing process, but what happens if you don't have a writing center or space devoted to writing tutorials on your campus or at your school. For me that is a question with an easy, straight forward answer – turn your classroom environment into a center of writing. It seems to me that if we require writing from our students then it is our responsibility to mentor the process numerous times and in various ways. That it is up to us, as their teachers, coaches and guides to offer them multiple opportunities to talk about their writing, to practice their writing before being tested on their writing and to move comfortably and confidently through the complex process that writing is.

To this end, I am happy to share with you a myriad of my best practices, writing activities that have worked over the years with my students individually or collaboratively, both in and out of class, and thereby turning the classroom environment into a center for writing. As we all want to ensure that our students have enough time to write and revise their many papers, and learn from each piece, consider the spacing of assignments as this will be central to the overall design of the course, or each project.

2. “Low stakes” writing or *safe writing, writing without borders or limits of worries of being graded or criticized*

To begin, I require both “high-stakes” and “low-stakes” writing throughout each semester. Let me briefly explain what I mean by these terms: ‘High Stakes’ writing is something all of us value and as such, we apply a grade. Examples of ‘high stakes’ writing in my classes are certain in-class essays, the final exam, 1st typed revisions, and their research projects. My goal in requiring this kind of writing is to measure my students’ progress in learning and their mastery of a subject. With this said, however, I see “high-stakes” writing as the result or end product of a writing process with numerous stages. These pieces evolve from free-writing exercises, creative writing exercises, collaborative brainstorming exercises, group presentations, peer-review evaluations, “discovery” or preliminary drafts, and multiple revisions.

“Low stakes” writing is safe writing, writing without borders or limits of worries of being graded or criticized. This kind of writing is also called ‘free’ writing, or ‘discovery’ writing, and can be used to help students warm up for or get more out of discussions, lectures, their readings; can happen at any point in the class period; and provides students the opportunity to think BIG, to explore

feelings, to take risks and to ease the terror of filling up a blank page. I truly believe that the first and most basic step to improved writing, and to breaking or preventing block, is through *freewriting*: just take 10 minutes to write without stopping. The idea is *not* to produce a polished piece of writing, but to get in the habit of writing without censoring or editing. Never stop to look back, to cross out something, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word to use, to even think about what you are doing. And especially never stop to think about grammar; treat grammar as a matter of very late editorial correcting.

The only rule in freewriting: do not stop writing. This is difficult for writers as it goes against the grain of how we are accustomed to writing. We struggle with both our critical and creative selves simultaneously and thus edit as we write. In freewriting, we want instead to release and unleash our initial, raw and unshaped thoughts on paper. There is garbage in our heads when we work through any kind of project, and it is best to get it out early so that it will not infect everything else up there. Elbow (1973) urges all writers to embrace their garbage, because if dealt with early, it can safely be put in the trash can. In fact, a person's best writing is often mixed up with her worst.

3. Personal Response Papers

I want to engage my students as writers and as thinkers. This can happen by inviting students to write on issues that matter personally to them, especially in sharing with me their relationship with writing. This can happen, successfully I might add, when you try to keep them constantly thinking about their voice, their style, and their work in progress. To this end I offer **“personal response writing” activities**. Some of my questions pertain to such aspects as their own revisions, taking a critical look at their sentence structures and sharing with me their frustrations as they work through their research projects. Asking them to write about their own writing works and keeps them engaged with the act of writing for themselves. I also use personal response papers rooted to the text we are reading or film we are viewing at the time. These are papers that do not have to adhere to formal rules of composition. I do, however, ask specific questions. These personal response writings begin the first day of class when I ask them to email me a letter once they have completed answering the following:

- a) Take time to reflect on your relationship to writing. What adjectives come to mind when you think about writing, either for school or for pleasure? Describe the ideal writing situation to yourself (either real or imaginary). Consider time of day. Location, ambient noise and all the

important accessories (if any) that should be near you when you write. One good solid paragraph will suffice.

- b) What goals have you set for yourself this semester pertaining to writing? What do you consider your writing weaknesses? Strengths?

4. Creative Writing

I like offering my students **creative writing activities** because my students *like* these assignments. What I try to affirm through these is that everyone has a strong, unique voice; everyone has creative genius inside them; that writing CAN be an art form, that writing creatively can help students carve out an authentic voice or identity; and mostly that writing can and should be fun. One of our favorites is writing a Bio-Poem (Bean, 2001), about one of the characters in the work of fiction we are studying. In this way, they can express what they see as significant or meaningful dimensions to the fictional character:

Line 1: First Name

Line 2: Four traits that describe the character

Line 3: Relative of (brother, sister, etc)

Line 4: Lover of (list three THINGS or OBJECTS or PEOPLE)

Line 5: Who feels (three items)

Line 6: Who needs (three items)

Line 7: Who fears (three items)

Line 8: Who gives (three items)

Line 9: Who would like (three items)

Line 10: Resident of _____

Line 11: Last name

Please try it. It works.

5. The social aspect of writing

Each class period I am thinking about the social aspect of writing. In fact, few things in my classes make me smile with as much delight as when small groups of students work together. To this end, I include several opportunities for students to learn collaboratively. These include peer-review in-class workshops, take home peer review evaluation guides, group presentations, discussion groups and collaborative papers. Each has succeeded because it gives students the opportunity to become actively involved with their peers and to understand

writing as a process, often a complex and difficult process. A good small group task, like good writing assignments, needs to be carefully designed; students should be clear as to the purpose. They should be given to students in a handout, and should specify question/problem to be addressed, the time limit and the final product.

6. Peer-review / peer-editing

Most of my students have never shared their writing with a peer, but eventually they learn that it is their peer who helps them gain a sense of audience. Writing becomes a public act. Giving students practice in *analyzing writing and talking about their writing* is something all of us strive for, and through peer reviews, students can do just that. They can spot a colleague's weakness long before they can spot one of their own, and when papers are returned to the original writer, writing strategies might need to be defended, questions might need to be fielded and various problems in the writing, such as weak thesis statements, confusing paragraphs, or vacuous sentences might need to be addressed.

We start with a directive approach, at the level of structure, NOT the level of language or grammar. These comments are used to help guide the writer through her first typed revision. Other single-peer editing guidelines focus on grammar and style. Others ask each writer to answer editing questions and work through their paper with a new set of eyes. This exercise is successful, but only when students have completed peer reviews and understand their value. Peer readers are asked to look at structural and language features, such as topic sentences and unity of ideas. I frequently will have students peer-review each other's preliminary draft over the weekend and then in the next class, take 15 minutes to talk with each other about structural and organizational strengths and weaknesses.

Two-peer editing, like single-peer editing, encourages a helpful and non-threatening atmosphere in which students are free to talk about their writing. After learning the process, students are able to discuss what led them to write about a certain topic. This approach, however, invites TWO reviewers so I know that each student's essay will get a closer examination than with just one set of eyes. This approach also gives students a positive attitude about revision as there is the increased likelihood that each paper will receive quality response and quality guidance.

7. Writing workshops – group response activities

In-class workshops allow me to be flexible and to deal with the writing problems that warrant attention immediately.

Here is an example of a “whole” class exercise: I distribute *a handout with select sentences that I have removed from each of their essays that demonstrate one or more of my “personal horrible”*, for example, fragments, run-ons, vague assertions, non-specific pronouns, etc. Here groups are assigned several sentences each, charged with diagnosing what is wrong in the sentence and offering advice for improving it. Students are less skillful here and this provides me with the opportunity to model how one can transform a poor thesis, or a poorly constructed sentence into a good one. Sentence combining exercises are also excellent for in-class work: there is no one way to write a sentence and the students love being challenged to find multiple answers and appreciate the learning of rhetorical devices such as the negative inversions that surface as a result of sentence combining exercises.

We also spend a great deal of time discussing the features vital to one’s writing success: introductions, conclusions, general comments on how to write about literature, specific comments on how to write literary analysis paragraphs, and how to prepare outlines for in class essays.

8. Group presentations

Asking students to collaborate and present their findings to the rest of the class benefits everyone. I sometimes prepare topics or furnish the questions for small groups to consider for their presentations for class. Sometimes the students are asked to lead discussion instead, or asked to share historical or cultural information that can put a work in context. (Vera, for example, in my current English Composition class, researched Locke and Rousseau to add to our discussion of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the role education plays for both Victor and his creature). Class presentations are central to the sequencing of assignments as *frequently the questions presented are the essay questions*. As a result, the essays, whether at the “discovery” level or later, are greatly improved when the students have had an opportunity to talk through the topic and broaden their ideas through the help of their peers. Additionally, as presentations are structured like essays, students are prepared with framing devices, vocabulary, and textual narrative.

Over the years I have found that as a result of the many group collaborative activities I have built into my classes, students are less anxious about their

writing, encounter less block, understand the role audience plays in their writing, recognize that quality writing comes from multiple revisions, and gain the ability to critically self-evaluate.

9. Collaborative Research – Writing Assignment

Alongside group oral presentations, I try each semester to have groups work on a collaborative writing project. In one of my literature classes, *Hot and Cool: Jazz and Literature*, the final project was a collaborative research – writing assignment. I wanted my group of 20 non-Anglophone freshmen to work together to explore a topic relevant to the course but one that would not necessarily be covered in the class. After brainstorming various topics and potential ideas, the class chose to interview members of the American University of Paris community on their musical tastes. At this point in the project, they divided themselves into small working groups of 4 students, determined the distribution of labor on their own, designed their particular interview questions and set forth to find answers to their groups' queries. The editor of our campus newspaper *The Planet* came to class, and gave an entertaining presentation on interview techniques and the power of the question well phrased.

Selfishly, for me, this project was ideal. This was NOT a writing class per se, but any occasion I can find to have my students write, I will take it. Through this project, my students were able to work through the stages of the writing process in and out of class. And because they were the owners of the project, from beginning to end, I had a rapt audience. For all of us, the collaboration was successful and the final project – a 1000 word article published in *The Planet* – was phenomenal.

10. Responding to Student Text

Responding to students' papers, whether they are drafts, revisions, or final papers, is perhaps the most demanding aspect of my course. On average I take from 20 – 30 minutes on individual first drafts of essays (longer with research paper drafts) as I find myself making more suggestions and raising more questions than I do on the final papers (on these I make more evaluative remarks). When I read a paper, I consider certain aspects before I make a solid evaluation of what problem(s) precisely the student is making. Once I have diagnosed the student's writing problems, I try to craft with care my responses (several examples have been included). My handwriting is difficult to read, and

for that reason I type my comments to each student, or at least try to several times each semester.

I believe that students learn best when my comments are facilitative, directive, corrective and evaluative. I want my students to do more than merely fix their mistakes; I want them to think critically about their writing. To this end, my comments include the following:

1. I write a letter to the entire class that speaks to the global strengths and weaknesses of the classroom set of papers: structure, grammar, process of revision, general comments about the grades I have assigned and formatting features for future papers.
2. Assessment grids frequently accompany student's papers.
3. Typed comments: Sometimes the questions I ask are meant to challenge the student on particular points: "A good point you raise; but do you think Stanley's triumph is long or short term?" When the student needs explicit advice, I offer it. For example, I might suggest to a student to omit a sentence, change a word, or move a paragraph around. Of course, these are always accompanied by an explanation (Is the word/sentence to be omitted redundant, irrelevant, repetitive? By moving paragraphs around, will the argument gain clarity?)
4. I have various approaches to dealing with grammatical errors and stylistic clumsiness. With my non-Anglophone writers, especially those in foundation level classes, I *look for patterns of error* and note the two or three most common patterns in the summary contents. In this way, the students are not overwhelmed with the many errors they need to work on, but with a few at a time. I will also *note errors once or twice* and then instruct the student to find subsequent examples. This approach I find encourages certain students to be closer, better readers of their own texts.
5. The closing comment: I follow a predictable pattern in my closing comments. I always address the writer as "Dear so and so," and then begin with praise for something that has been well done. Then I turn my attention to the essay's themes and ideas, often asking students to consider certain points more thoroughly. Then I move through the structure of the essay, from the introduction to the conclusion. I also use this opportunity to stress certain grammatical patterns that need immediate attention. The closing commentary is my favorite part of responding to students' papers as I enjoy encouraging my students to note the skills they do possess, to consider their strengths, not just their weaknesses. Any sign of improvement or growth in one's writing

always prompts me to end my comments with something like “Great” or “Bravo!”

11. Applying the grade

Applying grades is not an easy task for me. The grade is a slippery beast, especially with my students who, as freshmen and as non-Anglophones, are just beginning to gain confidence in the language, to use of the language to showcase their critical reading and thinking of the texts, and to understand that writing is a process, an adventure, a journey, one that demands a particular structure . . . just to name a few challenges they face. *The last thing I want is for my students, early in semester, to think they are D writers, when they are simply language challenged and process challenged.* Therefore, I do not give grades to students until I feel they have had the practice necessary to warrant a fair and equitable grade.

My students are aware of when I will apply my first grade, and I explain carefully what grades mean to me and what they should imply to the student. The grade has buried in it a great deal of information about the student’s writing and it is important for them to know the difference between a C and a B paper.

12. Conferencing with students

Conferencing with my students is the most efficient way to respond to the student’s work and provide them with the individual attention they need and deserve. I like it when our meetings are un-scripted, but often I will require students to come in for 30-minute consultations, twice a term at least, and frequently we have a shared agenda – either working on a paper from draft to revision, or from 1st revision to polished revision, or talking about research. These meetings allow me to see each student as a ‘whole’ person and allow my students to see me as a ‘real’ person who has a genuine interest in their growth as a writer and in their ideas.

13. Conclusion

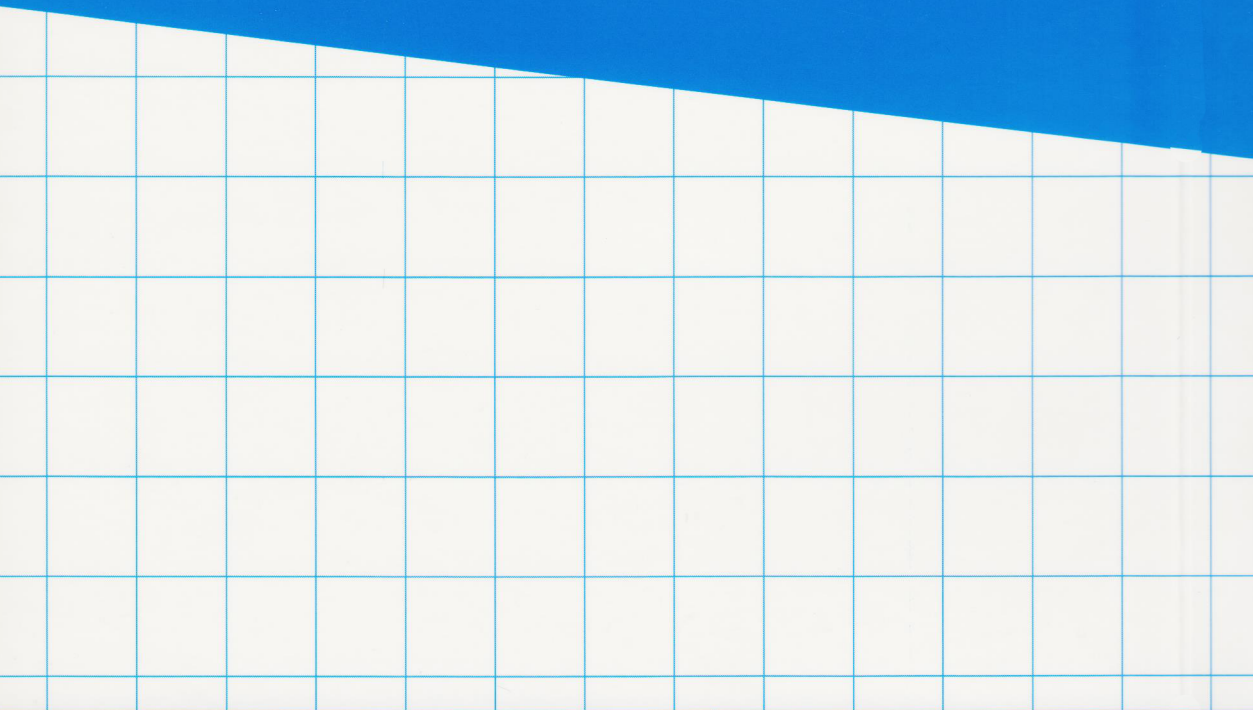
Over the years I have found that as a result of the many group collaborative activities I have built into my classes, students are less anxious about their writing, encounter less block, understand the role audience plays in their writing,

recognize that quality writing comes from multiples revisions, and gain the ability to critically self-evaluate.

Although one of our goals is to improve students' communication skills, writing is more than communication: It is a means of learning, thinking, discovering and seeing. Our goal as professors, whatever discipline we teach, is to encourage our students to write, to think about their ideas and how to express them, to practice their writing, and ultimately to gain confidence with themselves as thinking writers. By adding well-designed writing assignments to a course, we as teachers give students continued practice in critical thinking. We know when our approach is working: the performance of our students improves.

References

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