

Notebook – February 2012

From the Director

Debra Lohe, Ph.D.

Laurel Richardson describes writing as a “method of inquiry,” a “way of finding out” something, not simply the vehicle with which we communicate something we’ve already figured out. An extended passage is worth quoting: “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, however . . . not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined.” [1]

According to Richardson, then, writing is for *learning*, it is the very act of learning, not simply its product. In this issue, we take as our theme Writing to Learn, which has been our programming theme all year in the Center. And it sounds really nice, *writing to learn . . .*

. . . But the reality is that most of our students – and a few of our colleagues – see writing as something else: writing to get a grade, to get in (to college or to a job), to get by, to get tenure, to get respect

In this issue, our contributors provide all sorts of strategies for getting students writing – and for using writing as a way to *think*, not simply to *tell* what they think. They encourage us to engage students in all “patterns of knowing,” to provide them opportunities to experience writing as a form of connection, to others and to themselves. They ask us to imagine writing to learn as also an opportunity to learn to write, to create opportunities for students to write collaboratively, to offer feedback on writing in more personal ways. They beg us to assign writing as a creative act, an act of creation – during which we are creating a voice, an identity, a scholar, a self. As you read, I invite you to consider your own assumptions about writing – *Do you experience it as a mode of discovery? Joyful? Personal? Mindful?* – and to imagine new ways of structuring your students’ experiences with writing, as well.

[1] Richardson, Laurel. “Writing: A Method of Inquiry.” The Handbook of Qualitative Research 2nd edition. Eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln. Sage, 2000. 923-948.

Center News: In January, we welcomed Michaella Hammond as our new Assistant Director for Instructional Design. We are delighted to add her expertise with online teaching and her great enthusiasm for the mindful integration of technology into teaching. She is already making contributions to the CTE, and I know you’ll enjoy meeting her.

Reminder: We are still accepting applications for both CTE Faculty Fellows and CTE Innovative Teaching Fellows!

CTE Staff Corner

Voice Lessons: Personalizing the Writing Process

Michaella Hammond, M.F.A. Center for Teaching Excellence

As an educator whose composition classes have shifted to online and blended learning environments, I strive to keep students' voices front and center. Two particular tools – [Jing](#) and [VoiceThread](#)– assist anyone who teaches writing to engage learners more actively in the revision and self-evaluation stages of writing.

Jing allows users to make a short video of one's computer screen. More and more I find myself providing feedback to student writing in video form. Not only do many students prefer the personalized, visual approach to writing feedback, but the 5-minute time limit forces me to keep my comments focused on higher-order concerns. To see an example of how I approach video feedback, please click [here](#).

Alternately, VoiceThread hosts student "conversations in the cloud." I have used a free VoiceThread account to assess students' prior knowledge of course objectives and then again at the end of the semester to see what students say they have learned. I still have students fill out [self-evaluation forms](#) at the end of every major writing assignment, but VoiceThreads have encouraged more students to investigate how their writing process has (hopefully) evolved throughout the course of the semester. For an example of how VoiceThread works, please view photojournalist Michael Forster Rothbart's interactive photo installation, "After Chernobyl: Would You Stay?": [VoiceThread](#) (once in VoiceThread, click on the arrows to advance the slides)

Ultimately, I use these two technologies to personalize and humanize online learning environments; however, they are adaptable teaching strategies for almost any discipline that employs writing in the classroom. The beauty of "rewindable education" is that students may revisit digitized writing lessons throughout the course of a semester and even beyond the scope of the class.

Columnists

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who Is the Fairest of Them All?

Benjamin de Foy, Ph.D. Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

Go back in time one thousand years and ask somebody what they looked like. They will look at you bemused: How should I know? Ask the people around me! What was true for physical appearance before mirrors was just as true for personality before the age of diaries (1). But now we have mirrors and diaries, we have introspection, and we feel very sure that we are experts about our own selves. Improving upon ourselves is done with our writing. Just as a basketball player improves his game with a good coach, a writer improves by receiving criticism.

Ideally, professors toil over student papers providing insightful feedback. Equally ideally, students then pore over the comments to improve if not this essay, then the next. When we rewrite we learn to write: which also means doing several iterations of grading. Sounds like death by a thousand small paragraphs, right?

A bit of crowd-sourcing can come in handy for this situation. Have every student essay be critiqued by 5 peers, using both comments and numerical grades. The students then revise their draft and re-submit for a second peer evaluation. They also evaluate the comments they receive with a numerical grade and have the opportunity of responding to them. The SWoRD system (2) puts a smooth interface to streamline this whole process and has been extensively evaluated. Research suggests that comments from 5 peers are as reliable and as useful as comments from a single expert grader (although the students don't believe this: anxiety about their grades coming from their peers is the main sticking point, but it is abated by the possibility of appealing to the professor for a grade review).

Typically, I take part as a student (I let the class know this): I submit an essay for the assignment, grade just a few papers, and receive feedback on my comments. Alternatively, I could give instructor grades for the assignments or leave some iterations to be entirely peer reviewed. So here we have a good mirror on the wall, to help everyone improve both their writing and their reviewing skills. Whether you want to be the jealous queen, Snow White, or one of the dwarfs is up to you.

1. "Orality and Literacy," Walter J. Ong, 1982.
2. SWoRD, Christian Schunn and Kwangsu Cho, <https://sites.google.com/site/swordlrdc/>

Writing to Learn: An Expression of All Patterns of Knowing

Deanne Marie Mason, Ph.D. Nursing-Madrid

Writing is an act of creation; to capture intangible thoughts and lay them to paper, concrete and whole. Just as an artist must move beyond technique to create beauty, so must the writer.

Nursing theorist Barbara Carper identified fundamental patterns of knowing: empirics, ethics, personal knowing, and aesthetic (1978, pp. 13-23). These patterns of knowing regard the relationships between science, the facts of the physical world, art, and the interpretive existence of the human being living in a physical world.

To write, one must begin with an empirical pattern of knowing. The use of observation and the ordering of thought leads to *what* will be captured with the writing. Empirics also address knowledge of mechanics, structure, and form.

Ethics involves responsible, open-minded judgment and reasonableness in evaluating content. Intellectual doubting is part of appraising quality. As Peter Abelard stated, "By doubting we come to inquiry; and through inquiry we perceive truth." Which sources to include, or not include, are part of ethics as well.

Personal knowing directs *how* the writing is created. The motivation and act of writing should be harmonious; if not, there is loss of meaning, independence, and self-confidence to the work. A disconnect occurs when the writing and the writer are divided; the work should be driven from the inner self rather than an imposed discipline.

Expression of the personal self must be revealed, on some level, for the writing to resonate to the reader.

Practice and experience assist in the development of aesthetics. Beauty depends on the imagination and resourcefulness of the writer in the pursuit of perspective - the development of a subjective sensitivity to individual differences. Technically well-executed papers may not be aesthetically pleasing. However, aesthetically pleasing papers usually display characteristics of empirics, ethics, and personal knowing. Beauty is not necessarily displayed in the act of creation, but is revealed upon completion.

An approach to improving student writing should include encouraging engagement in all patterns of knowing. Thus, moving beyond the empirical and ethical patterns to include personal knowing and aesthetics may lead students to connect more to the writing and themselves.

Carper, B. A. (1978). Fundamental patterns of knowing in nursing. *ANS: Advances in Nursing Science*, 1(1), 13-23.

A Bridge to Deeper Learning

Lynda A. Morrison, Ph.D. Molecular Microbiology and Immunology

The Edward A. Doisy Research Center, seated at the entrance to SLU's Medical Complex, affords a spectacular view of the Grand Bridge construction project. We've watched workers tear down the old crumbling edifice, reclaiming what they could and hauling in an amazing variety of new materials. The underpinnings of the new bridge have risen slowly, some workers handling bulldozers and others cranes. They plug in steel girders and rebar, and cement mixers rumble up to fill in around. A collaborative effort helps the bridge take shape. In the end, we'll realize the engineer's planning and the architect's vision. We'll be able to interpret the current jumble.

Components of an effective writing exercise rely on just as much active, constructive, and ultimately reflective process to support learning. Presenting students with a data set or problem to write about requires an active, analytical response. That response can start with an outline onto which students add substance step-by-step. The central theme, problem or moral dilemma must be clearly defined in a hypothesis, thesis statement, or revelatory scene. This must then be tested or solved in subsequent sections. Students can be encouraged to work cooperatively on each portion. Creating a Google Document may allow students to build or peer-edit collaboratively. Increased clarity of thought, sound logic and persuasive argument all grow out of the writing exercise, whether it be a scientific paper or a creative piece. Iteration helps refine both the work and the learning, and thus you may wish to require several drafts. The time between drafts allows a chance to reflect and move beyond summary to linkage and interpretation.

Embedded within 'writing to learn' is the added benefit of learning to write. As teachers, we experience the spectrum every year: some students excel at expressing their thoughts on paper, while others struggle. Within the writing to learn exercise we must stress the basics they (should) have already learned about writing, such as thesis statement, topic and concluding sentences, transitions, grammar, punctuation, and active voice. Even effective scientific writing incorporates these elements. All students can

derive extra benefit from writing to learn when we ask them to pay attention to the writing itself within the exercise.

Contributors

Writing to Learn Self-Representation

Rebecca M. Aldrich, Ph.D., OTR/L. Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

It's a familiar refrain: Facebook, Twitter, and cell phone texting are collectively ruining student writing. As writing becomes more casual consequent (or perhaps concurrent?) to communication technologies, specters of writing "fails" seem increasingly benign. Why learn to write well when writing "good" is acceptable? Isn't idea quality more important than communication style? Rather than blaming technology for perpetuating these assumptions, we may harness it toward a more positive end. Over 1,550 people belong to the Facebook group "I judge you when you use poor grammar", and Internet memes negatively immortalize careless auto-correct texting errors. By highlighting these phenomena, we can use popular technology to underscore writing's importance. I tell students that *all* writing is self-representation: that the content and style of *what* students say in any arena engenders value judgments about them—just like what they put on Facebook. Likening acts of writing, such as academic emails, papers, and clinical notes, to social networking self-displays may motivate students to hone their writing skills. While not a cure-all, locating writing to learn—and learning to write—within social identity may at least renew discussions of writing with technology-oriented students. All that remains is finding a fitting #hashtag for this strategy...

A "Wisdom Interview" Reflection Paper

Gregory Beabout, Ph.D. Philosophy

During SLU's commencement exercises several years ago, the speaker challenged the new graduates to take up a quest for wisdom by having a conversation with their grandparents. That struck me as good advice, so I have turned it into a writing assignment.

In "Historical Introduction to Philosophy," we examine the texts and arguments of Plato and Aristotle about what makes for a good life. For this class, I have the students pick a person to interview, one whom they "consider to have acquired wisdom about life" and is at least two generations older than the student and/or is more than 60 years old. Many choose a relative, especially a grandparent, while others pick an older priest or former teacher.

I suggest a series of questions for the interview: *What has life taught you about what is important? What do you think college-age students need to learn about how to live? What do you wish someone had taught you about life when you were around age*

20? *If you could pass on wisdom to a college-age student, what would you want to teach about life?*

The assignment is to write a two-part paper, first summarizing the interview, then reflecting on and evaluating the proposed wisdom. My experience is that almost all of the students take the assignment seriously. In many cases, this is an occasion for an adult-adult conversation across generations, opening up a dialogue that allows the student to consider one's life from a different perspective. Many students discover unexpected connections between the content of the interview and the course readings about the pursuit of an excellent life.

Writing to Learn – In Praise of Pointlessness

Vincent Casaregola, Ph.D. English

“What’s the point?” This is the question we so often ask of a piece of writing, whether it be ours or our students’ work. We obsess, not without reason, on “making a point.” We are focused on outcomes, on goals, on achievements, as we should be at least “up to a point.” Yet, in constant motion toward the direction given by such points, we forget that writing may be something other than a vehicle to get us from “point A to point B.” In transit, always aiming, we may fail to attend to both where we are and how we are. We may fail to be mindful, and yet mindfulness is the condition in which we learn. Writing to learn is really a way to use language to develop awareness and intensify consciousness by careful and deliberate reflection. It is not a matter of “telling” what we know, but of making it possible to understand what we know by representing it back to ourselves. To become a more self-conscious learner, a more reflective learner, and to achieve a meta-cognitive awareness of our learning, we must engage in writing that explores what we are trying to learn and that also reflects upon the learning process itself. This seemingly “pointless” writing is not without purpose, but it does not have a direct external goal of proving ourselves to others. Both kinds of writing, the “pointed” and the “mindful,” are equally necessary processes in academic work. By balancing these in counterpoint, we deepen our awareness of *how* we learn, and this will make us, ultimately, even more accomplished at demonstrating to others *what* we learn.

Keeping It Simple: Before and After

Zachary A. Schaefer, Ph.D. Communication

One of the most frequent writing assignments I use in class is a one minute paper at the beginning of a lecture and then the same assignment at the end of a lecture. Although this is not a groundbreaking pedagogical technique, it fulfills several classroom goals. The students are able to see what they know about a subject both before and after the lecture. This helps them understand the connection between reading, lecture and discussion, and the repetition of key concepts. This writing tool also allows introverted students to express their thoughts. From a teaching perspective, this two part exercise helps me see where I need to make improvements in my lecture to better help students learn the material. In addition, the first one minute essay allows me

to determine who reads the assigned homework and who does not. Finally, the students enjoy these assignments because they say it helps them “remember the material” and “shape their answers” for essay questions on my exams. This has been one of my most effective teaching tools and I encourage other professors to use this two-part writing assignment.