Chapter 10. A Transition

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Reflect Before Reading

What do you know about your FYC students' experiences with writing in elementary and secondary school? Have you ever noticed that your students' previous writing experiences and what they "understand" about writing interfere with what you are attempting to teach them about writing? What assignments, if any, do you have your students complete that help them understand writing (and themselves as writers) differently?

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Every morning, right around 8:15 a.m., I walk briskly along a long, curved stone path to a pair of tall, large glass doors on a 210,000-square-foot building where approximately 1,500 people scurry about from conference room to conference room, coffee corner to coffee corner, and printing station to printing station. Following suit, I too make like the busy worker bee that I am and head to my second-floor cubicle space in one of several global Human Resources departments of the world's largest inter-enterprise software company.

Currently, I work as an HR Business Partner (HRBP) associate, supporting numerous senior-level HR Business Partners in the North American region of my company responsible for the various corporate functions of the organization. To succeed in this position, I have to have a solid knowledge foundation for many concepts, especially workplace motivation, employee engagement, leader-member exchange, team member exchange, change management, and executive coaching—all of which I've come to grasp as a result of my current work on a master's degree in Industrial-Organizational Psychology (IOP). A real mouthful of a title, right?

Chances are, you've probably never heard of this field. Furthermore, I bet you're wondering how one ultimately ends up in this area of psychology. For me, it's not too long or mysterious of a story. Intrigued by the intricacies and oddities of the people I encountered over the course of my first eighteen years on this spinning playground we call Earth, I decided to attend a mid-sized public university in the middle of western Pennsylvania to receive my bachelor's degree in psychology. As a psychology major, I was introduced to dozens of appealing topics on the science of human behavior; however, only one made sense to pursue in terms of real-world applicability. In other words, there was only one branch of

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psychology where I could apply the concepts I learned and eventually pay off my ever-increasing student debt.

As an HRBP associate and Master's I/O student, I spend a fairly significant portion of my time researching, debating, and discussing ideas related to performance appraisal, leadership development, job descriptions, training programs, statistical analyses, organizational development, and so on. But the majority of my time is allocated to writing. Whether it's a long email to a manager, a midterm exam, an executive summary, a presentation, a blog, or a term paper, I find myself fully engaged in writing on all of the topics mentioned earlier on a daily basis. Thus, it seems relatively fair to conclude that the ability to write is a pertinent and imperative skill one must master in order to be a successful, highly performing individual in not only the classroom but in the workplace as well. I could say that my ability to write effectively and well so frequently came only as a result of the four years of college and year and a half I've spent so far in grad school; however, that's not really the case. In fact, I've been writing from as far back as I can remember.

It was in the second grade that I wrote my very first book. As a classroom activity, each student was instructed to author and illustrate his or her own short story so that it could be published into a small, hardback keepsake. Before beginning the assignment, our teacher welcomed us to the basics of writing: that is, every piece must have some sort of a beginning, middle, and an end—the rest was up to us. Although my story was brief and my writing skills as a second grader were not quite up to par, I was still able to write authentically and creatively. I wasn't forced to comply with narrow guidelines, and I was free to communicate my imagination in a manner that I chose, within reason.

As I continued my way through elementary and secondary schooling, those relatively simple rules of writing evolved into something more complicated and restrictive. From sixth grade language arts classes and on, almost every English-class-related writing assignment required us to use a standard writing model—otherwise known as the five-paragraph essay.

Drilled into my head year after year, the process of writing five-paragraph essays consumed not only the ways by which I conceptualized writing, but it also prohibited cultivation of any other stylistic and organizational abilities. The five-paragraph theme essentially coerced my thoughts into a set-up that didn't allow much room for creativity. In fact, the "recipe" went something like this: introduction with a catchy attention-getter and concise three-part thesis statement, followed by three body paragraphs each with a topic sentence, thesis-supporting analyses with complementary quotations, transition sentences between paragraphs, and a conclusion that summed up the main points and restated the thesis. Besides its obvious restrictive nature, the five-paragraph theme had many additional limitations. First-person pronouns and a personal tone were unacceptable. Paragraphs could include no more than eight sentences, but no fewer than five, and the number of "to be" verbs was limited. The thesis statement had to be three-pronged—no more, no less—the goal being to convey some overall

point with only three "strong" points to develop, or grade points were deducted from the overall evaluation of the paper. An example of such a set-up stands out clearly in my mind.

In eleventh grade, I was enrolled in an Honors English course that focused its curriculum on reading and writing about several of the American classics. For one assignment, I remember we were told to read Arthur Miller's famous play, *The Crucible,* and write a five-paragraph theme essay to support a given prompt. Following the assumed format, I concocted a three-page, double-spaced paper detailing three specific catalysts (mass hysteria, superstition, and revenge), that sent the Salem witch trials into a downward spiral for numerous women of the small Massachusetts community. First, I started with a catchy introduction about Russia's communist regime, which then bled into the history of Salem and a clearly-defined relevant thesis statement. This was followed by three individual paragraphs identifying the aforementioned catalysts, and then a short summary decorated with a final, memorable closing sentence.

About a week or so later, I received my grading rubric that included five major measures (introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion, and mechanics/format). Underneath each heading were various additional criteria including "thesis statement (No 'to be' verbs), body paragraphs have minimum four sentences/max eight sentences each, restated thesis in conclusion, interesting clincher sentence, no more than ten 'to be' verbs in the whole paper, no fragments, no run-ons or comma splices, no first or second person, and no slang/vague language or contractions." Pretty restricting, right? Students couldn't break or bend the rules. We weren't allowed to step outside of the box and take risks. And worst of all, while seven-some-odd years were spent nailing this structure down pat, the opportunity to become familiar with other styles and ways of writing that I would need to succeed not only in college-level writing, but for my career, was never offered.

As a result of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), with its emphasis on AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) and its standardized tests of writing, teachers in the state of Pennsylvania were forced to spend a disproportionate amount of time teaching the five-paragraph theme essay to ensure high scores on the PSSA writing tests. In turn, my classmates and I rarely wrote outside of this standardized type of writing, so other kinds of writing such as poetry, autobiography, play writing, and fiction fell by the wayside.

By the time I was ready to graduate from high school, I had become a master of the five-paragraph essay. I felt comfortable—maybe a little too comfortable—that I possessed all of the skills that would be necessary from there on out as a writer because to the best of my knowledge, being a good, competent writer just meant executing that genre. If I was able to force my thoughts into a structure that matched what I had been trained to do time and time again in every English class I'd come across since the beginning of middle school, I'd be set for life.

However, as my first semester of college-level English approached, and the professor for the class, Dr. Kerr, began emailing course materials over the summer, it

became evident that I was mistaken about being well-prepared for writing in college. As I glanced over the syllabus stretched out across my laptop screen and read the course description, "a study of the field of composition," I panicked. Literacy? Social constructions? Discourse communities? This course sounded nothing like all the other English courses I'd encountered throughout the years, and I was deeply concerned that the writing skills I'd possessed would be no match for the work of the upcoming semester. I felt as though the minimal exposure I had to other writing forms outside of the five-paragraph theme and my lack of authenticity as a writer would put me at a disadvantage. However, throughout the semester, these new concepts and others became much clearer and proved extremely beneficial to my overall understandings of writing and to my identity as a writer.

The assignments for this first-year composition course were different than anything I'd done previously. For the very first one, we were asked to keep a log of all the times we used writing in our daily lives over the course of a week. Not realizing just how frequently this would be, I pushed the task off to the side with little regard. But, then, as I found out, we do indeed write a lot—evidently more than we think. Whether it's text messages, emails, papers, or lists, writing is a tool we utilize every day, and we take it for granted. This was just one of many assignments that spoke to the importance of writing and its significance in countless other aspects of life. This assignment showed me that even though I'm not a novelist or any other type of writing-related professional, I am still very much a writer whether I realize it or not, and I will be using writing for the rest of my life. This notion, or conceptualization of myself as a "24 hours a day, seven days a week" writer, is what gave me the confidence to know I can write any genre that comes my way.

About midway through the semester, we began to talk about literacy. When posed the question, "What does it mean to be literate?" I immediately thought of "possessing the skill to read and write." I mean, what else could literacy possible entail? As it turned out, the concept is much more complex. Being "literate" can mean "to be able to read and write," but it can also mean to "have an understanding of." Through a "Literacy Narrative" assignment, I was able to think about and process what literacy is and what it means to me. In my narrative, I wrote about how I first became literate in reading and what that ultimately symbolized. I came to recognize that literacy represented a sense of identity in the world and, with that, a source of power. In my literacy narrative, I wrote, "I noticed that the more words I knew, the more competent I was overall. This competence gave me power and advantages over other students. I sounded more knowledgeable and mature than the others. This sense of maturity, I felt, allowed me to be taken more seriously, and with that, I felt brave and confident to try new things, and eventually land success." To me, literacy not only reflected self-efficacy and knowledge, but it allowed one to be viewed as a well-respected member of society.

In addition to literacy, we talked about discourse communities. When our discussions surrounding this concept began, I had little familiarity with the term or the meaning behind it. To introduce "discourse communities," Dr. Kerr related

a brief story. Having recently taken up an interest in jewelry beading, she joined a group of women who beaded together. New to the trade, Dr. Kerr had to understand the discourse, or language, being used to communicate understandings of beading that were specific to the group. This included the different types of beads and names of techniques. This story helped me to see that I, too, am a part of numerous discourse communities. For instance, at the time, I was an employee at a local pharmacy where I was responsible for tending to patients' calls and questions, counting quantities of medications to ensure that each prescription had the right number, finding and ordering medications, and knowing where products were located within the store. Being an employee there meant being a part of the pharmacy discourse community in which I was literate in the various brand and generic names of medications and the quantity types and knew what effects various medications could have and could communicate these effects to customers. Understanding the term "discourse community" helped me understand that in order to be a fully functioning member of any group, understanding the culture, the norms, and the language (including writing) of the community is absolutely imperative to how well one functions within said community.

In reflecting on all of the assignments and related course concepts from my first-year composition course, it became apparent that the ways in which I think about writing and myself as a writer are much more important than the rules or "typical" conventions of writing.

This course showed me that writing in a single, one-track way doesn't work. As I went further in my field of study and engaged in the nitty-gritty aspects of psychological research, I realized I couldn't apply the five-paragraph theme format to the kind of writing typically engaged in by my professional community. Rather, I needed to approach writing in a completely different manner and be literate in the concepts and discourse in my field. I had to be well-versed in American Psychological Association (APA) format, which required an understanding of how to write a 250-word abstract along with the necessary components of one, how to accurately cite sources and create a reference list for a thesis paper, and how to write in a concise, scientific manner using the correct table formatting and statistical symbols, among many other skills.

An example of this style of writing, along with its respective standard formatting, can be seen from a short excerpt from my undergraduate Honors Psychology thesis that examines gender differences in negotiation/interviewing capabilities:

> In contrast, the research presents only minimal flaws. The mean age of the participants/interviewees in both phase 1 ($\overline{x}$ = 21.23) and phase 2 ($\overline{x}$ = 24.8) are relatively young. Thus, their perceived feelings of job interview anxiety may actually be greater than, say, a sample with a mean age of 40, due to lack of exposure to interview situations which could artificially increase their anxiety significantly. A second drawback of this study was the

> gender makeup of the interviewers in phase 2. Out of the 182 interviewers, 82%, or the majority, were male. Although less than half (39.3%) of the job applicants in the phase 2 sample were female, a predominately male interviewer sample may affect interview anxiety among female applicants, and thus, gender could be a confounding variable that would need more exploring (McCarthy and Goffin, 2004).

My first-year composition course prepared me for not only a successful career in the field of psychology and human resources, but also gave me the tools necessary for digesting ideas and writing in ways unrelated to psychology overall. For instance, in a sociology course I took during my junior year of undergraduate school, we were required to write weekly journal posts relating to the course material we had been assigned to read. I by no means knew exactly what went into the standard journal post, let alone a well-written one. Not to mention the fact that I had been meticulously groomed to conduct all of my writing pieces in a manner that was consistent with psychological writing, as I had been three years deep in the Honors Psychology program and it was all I had come to know. But fortunately, thanks to the first-year composition class I had taken as a freshman, I held the skills and technique necessary to transition my writing abilities and competently execute the journal posts. Here's a brief excerpt from one I did on the difference between referring to someone as "survivor" or "victim" of sexual assault:

> As we briefly touched on in lecture, it's definitely interesting that we use these two words in our language to discuss the topic of rape. "Victim" and "survivor" clearly have very different meanings attached to them and they most certainly have an impact on the way that we refer to individuals who experienced sexual violence. I think it means that we have to be very careful when it comes to which ones we choose to use in conversation and in general. Personally, I almost feel like I can't use either of the words, but, it then becomes difficult to describe someone who underwent such an awful and traumatic experience and I don't want to discredit that.

As you can see, there's really no set of strict guidelines dictating what you can and cannot write. No penalty against using first person, speaking without colorful word choice, or including direct quotes or numbers to support every last statement. In truth, I was really writing about what I personally felt on the subject and conveying my thoughts in an honest, open manner to try to dissect the ideas put in front of me. This is a much different style of writing than what is used in the five-paragraph theme and even psychological writing. However, because I

was fully equipped with the right tools and understanding of how to transform my writing across all situations, this style was just as easily conquered as all the others I'd mastered before.

Not only did I learn how to convert my writing as a result of this first-year composition course, I began to imagine myself as a writer in a completely new and different way. I was no longer circumscribed by a strict format that required me to write one specific way, using one specific outline, and one specific set of rules. I was able to rediscover my voice and produce the kind of authenticity I had before I was molded into a five-paragraph-theme-making machine. I was able to think about choosing and assembling writing topics, organization, and the rules of grammar in a different way. I saw writing as not only meaningful for how often we use it but for how crucial it is to my literacy and competency within the various discourse communities I'll become a part of throughout life.

More importantly, the course allowed me to gain more strength and power as a writer. I became more versatile in the different styles of writing that were thrown at me throughout college because the first-year composition course equipped me with the right tools (understanding the study of composition, literacy, discourse communities) to do so. Because of that, I feel completely confident in my abilities as a writer and a professional and believe that I will always be able to make the transition to any style of writing put in front of me.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion After Chapter 10

1. What do you know about the standardized testing that your state department of education mandates for public school students? What subjects are tested? In what grades? When during the school year does the testing take place? How are scores reported and used? Is writing proficiency assessed? How?
2. What are some means by which you can have your students articulate what they know about writing and themselves as writers at the beginning of your FYC course? How might these assignments be used to encourage students to rethink their understandings and perhaps revise them as they continue in the course?

Writing Activity After Chapter 10

Write about a time when, as a learner, you had to rethink and revise an understanding that you had. Perhaps this experience occurred when you were an undergrad or later as a graduate student. How was this opportunity to revisit and rethink an understanding presented to you? What allowed you to revise your understanding? How did you feel as you engaged in this process?

Further Reading

Kohn, Alfie. *Schooling Beyond Measure and Other Unorthodox Essays about Education*. Heinemann, 2015.

Ohanian, Susan. *One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards*. Heinemann, 1999.

Popham, James. *The Truth About Testing: An Educator's Call to Action*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.

Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. 3rd ed., Basic Books, 2016.