

Reinventing Invention: Discovery and Investment in Writing

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This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 1, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom, and is published through Parlor Press.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1 (adobe ebook)

1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.

PE1417.W735 2010

808'.0427--dc22

2010019487

Reinventing Invention: Discovery and Investment in Writing

Michelle D. Trim and Megan Lynn Isaac

PART I: WHAT IS INVENTION AND WHY DO WE CARE?

Invention can be understood as a process of discovery (Conley 317) and creation (Welch 169).^{*} This can mean that you will discover something new about an existing idea or create a new way of looking at something. That seems pretty straightforward on the surface. Writers invent texts the way engineers invent new gadgets. But invention in the rhetorical sense is about a lot more than just coming up with ideas. Invention is also a way to describe what happens when a writer searches for a topic, develops a specific idea about that topic, and then strategizes a plan for fitting that specific idea to the writing situation at hand. In other words, invention is about coming up with something shiny, new, and unique, but it is also about brainstorming, synthesizing, and learning.

You use invention without realizing it every time you solve a problem. When presented with the dilemma of how to complete an assignment after spilling cola all over her new laptop, a student might engage in the following thought process.

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She could begin by brainstorming ideas for actions she could take. Some of those might include:

- Call tech support for help.
- Go use a public terminal.
- Handwrite the essay.
- Ask a friend to loan his computer.
- Request an extension from the professor.

Once she has several possible ideas to work with, she has to evaluate her options to see which might best fit the situation. Her evaluation process might go something like this:

- Call tech support for help. “Not enough time; the assignment is due tomorrow.”
- Go use a public terminal. “The nearest lab closes in two hours; that is not enough time to begin again and complete the essay.”
- Handwrite the essay. “This is possible, but the syllabus says the professor accepts only typed work.”
- Ask a friend to loan his computer. “This might work; Sam is next door and enrolled in a different English class.”
- Request an extension from the professor. “This might work, but the professor has a strict policy on late work.”

Now that she has evaluated her options, she can refine the selection to reflect new ideas. That refinement process might result in the following results:

- Sam loaned his computer, but it did not have the same word processing software on it.
- In discussing the problem with Sam, he suggested combining two ideas by handwriting the essay and submitting it while also requesting an extension.

As with this example, invention activities can and do occur at any stage of the writing process. Writers can brainstorm ideas, hone in on a topic, and refine that topic continually, no matter how much drafting, researching, or revising has already occurred.

The first two aspects of invention—brainstorming ideas and developing a workable topic—seem to be the areas of invention that challenge students the most. Unless the professor assigns a specific writing prompt, college students most likely will be expected to develop writing that reflects their—not their teacher’s—ideas. This can be scary. Students in our first year writing classes remarked that they liked knowing what the teacher wanted. For example, Alice¹ writes, “. . . I never know whether the teacher is going to like the topic I chose, which scares me a lot.” Jared indicates that developing topics from scratch seems too challenging: “I have trouble thinking of my own ideas but when I am given ideas and examples it is a lot easier . . .”

It has been suggested that part of the reason why first year college students struggle with invention may be due to widespread standardized testing practices that require students to respond to a pre-formed writing topic in limited ways (Hillocks 64). Such experiences rarely offer students the opportunity to develop a writing topic, let alone forefront their own interests in that topic. They also do not challenge students to think about how one kind of approach to a topic fits some writing situations better than others. For instance, a student wanting to write about date-rape prevention would likely formulate a very different means of constructing his argument for his sociology professor than for his fraternity newsletter. Likewise, a student writing to local businesses about why they should support Autism research would construct a personal essay on the subject very differently.

Without practice doing invention, you may find yourself struggling to meet the demands of your college writing assignments. More than half of the students in our composition classes remarked that they didn’t have much experience devising topics in high school. For example, Liz writes, “. . . we did not have a choice about what to write about.” Josh explains, “Oftentimes we would have a list of a few topics that everyone had to choose from.” With similar past experiences, students may feel antagonized by a professor’s resistance to such tried and true topics as “steroid use” or “stem-cell research.” A student may perceive herself as reliable and responsible when she chooses a standard topic, but her professor may label it trite and tired. Learning to re-imagine writing as an opportunity to create something original rather than as a duty to respond predictably can be challenging. Students are often accustomed to being rewarded for following directions precisely, and thus are conditioned to fear breaking the rules. When college in-

structors introduce changes to the set of expectations student writers have about the composition process, it is not unusual for them to react with disbelief and dismay.

Even more perplexing, professors may insist you develop more than one workable topic for a particular assignment. For students accustomed to responding to a single prompt or who expect to be rewarded for producing the right answer, the idea that invention is a process including experimenting with and refining ideas can be frustrating. Instructors hope students will think broadly, creatively, and playfully as they craft approaches to a writing assignment—in part because they believe that investing time in invention helps prevent problems during the later stages of the writing process. Students are busy and often value efficiency. They often want to hone in on a topic immediately, proceeding directly to the drafting stage of the writing process. The problem is that the lack of a “Plan B” may lead to various forms of collapse as the project develops. Just as avid hikers spend time studying a topographical map and evaluating several different routes to the summit before they hit the trails, you will find that energy invested in the invisible stages of writing pays dividends later on.

Lack of experience selecting writing topics isn’t the only challenge you may face when it comes to invention. Not being excited by one’s writing often results in less successful writing (or as writing process researcher Janet Emig argues, less successful learning). Once the opportunity presents itself, invention is the key to identifying writing topics that both satisfy the writing situation and reflect your interest and investment. That is just one reason why many professors disallow those tried and true paper topics; they want their students to write about something that interests them now, not something they have written about since high school. Furthermore, professors want students to learn from their writing rather than circumvent new learning by rehashing a comfortable topic.

While invention skills may be rusty for some, the good news is that they only require practice to become just another part of everyday writing. In order to help our writing students practice their invention skills, we have developed some invention exercises that work well for different kinds of invention tasks and at different stages of the writing process.

PART 2: PRACTICING INVENTION

Writers can engage in a variety of invention activities when confronted with a writing task. The key is to develop a practice of invention that works, not to wait for inspiration to strike while staring at a blank screen until the wee hours of the morning. Some writers become so accustomed to writing first drafts that are “good enough,” that they may skip aspects of the invention process beyond selecting their first idea for a topic. Others rely on ancillary sources to provide topics, such as a teacher’s example or a list of common debate questions and oral presentation topics on the WWW. One of our students stated that she often relied on Facebook quiz topics for ideas. In a pinch, these methods might help a writer squeeze by, but in the long run, writers need to trust themselves to generate topics of importance to them with whatever resources are available.

It is not that teachers mind students working together to develop ideas or to use television, the Internet, or even the lyrics of their favorite song as inspiration for a writing topic. In fact, teachers would likely applaud these activities. Many writers have in their minds an image of the inventor—someone like Thomas Edison, for example—who toils alone until that great idea hits him like an act of nature. This image is a romantic one, but it isn’t very realistic. Invention, as writing scholar Karen LeFevre argues, is “a social act: one in which individuals interact with society and culture in a distinctive way to create something” (121). It is not a solitary experience. In terms of invention, this means that writers should not see invention as something they go off and do by themselves, free of the influence of the world around them. Writers’ ideas are always already impacted by the context and the culture in which they live. The key is not to try to develop an idea that is perfectly unique, but rather to uniquely develop a topic in response to a specific rhetorical situation—that is, for a specific audience and with a specific purpose. Think of how a music lover might build her playlist on her computer. She might have all the same songs as her best friend, but his process for surveying an album, evaluating choices, and selecting tracks to include will be very different. Both friends are part of the culture that decides what music is good, which songs are worth buying and listening to, but they also have their own tastes and their own way of enjoying the music they decide to play. Some songs are perfect for working out while others can only be appreciated after a particularly

unpleasant break-up. While listeners might agree about the genres of these kinds of songs, their own choices in similar situations may be very different.

When students ask what they should write about, writing teachers often respond by asking about their interests. Teachers might ask you, “What do you care about?” or “What makes you mad?” Traditionally, teachers might guide you in a prewriting activity like freewriting or clustering. These approaches can help you generate that first initial idea for a topic, but they may not work for everyone. Sometimes writers need help remembering what areas of study they find exciting and what issues stimulate their thinking. More often, writers can feel constricted by the academic setting and automatically eliminate ideas or approaches that don’t seem conventional. You may expect a teacher to value a dry piece of writing because it fits the assignment, despite the fact that you have no interest in producing or reading it. In fact, some of you may never expect to enjoy the topics of their writing. It does not have to be this way. What seems like a dull and prescribed research assignment, or even specific prompt, can actually be an opportunity for creativity. And, if writers find the results of writing about an uninteresting topic to be boring, readers will likely agree.

Considering your individual interests while also engaging with others in a group environment can make for a fun and dynamic invention experience. The following activity builds on this idea by beginning with individual responses before juxtaposing them with those of classmates. The goal is both to spark interesting ideas that might not have been considered otherwise, while also learning how different people, with different experiences can resolve invention activities in unexpected ways.

Classroom Activity 1: Brainstorming as a Group

While on the surface the following activity may appear like a survey for finding the perfect blind date, it works best if you try to take the questions seriously. The questions can be modified to fit a specific writing situation or left more general, as we suggest, to fit a more open-ended writing task. One of the important elements of this activity is to share your responses with others—a friend, your writing group, a Writing Center consultant, etc.

Step 1

Respond in writing to the following questions.

1. What new place would you most like to visit?
2. What form of technology or invention do you value most?
3. What famous person (alive or dead) would you most like to meet?
4. What is your favorite astral body? (planet, moon, star, etc.)
5. What hands on skill would you like to learn (sailing a boat, making stained glass windows, etc.)?
6. What two qualities do you admire most in a leader?
7. What profession is the most rewarding?
8. What law would you change and why?
9. What one thing should all children learn?
10. What is the most unjust event in history?
11. What historical incident would you most like to witness?
12. What is the most important book written in your lifetime?
13. What is the highest honor a person can achieve?
14. What difference in people do you find most troubling?
15. What product would you take off the market if you could?

(You can add other questions to this list, because the exact formulation of the questions is less important than their potential for stimulating your thinking in unexpected ways.)

Step 2

You should individually compose answers to the questions being careful not to share your ideas with others (yet).

Step 3

You should share your responses to at least three or four of the queries that you found most provocative, paying attention to the responses of others. (Recording the answers as lists helps you focus on the range of your peers' responses).

Step 4

Writers should spend a few minutes listing what top five answers particularly grabbed their attention or seemed most compelling.

Step 5

With others, discuss the individual lists.

Step 6

With others, generate a list of ten possible paper topics based on either the individual lists generated in step 4 or the discussion of the lists in step 5. (It is a good idea to generate more than ten rather than discarding ones that group members find especially exciting.)

Step 7

You may select one topic from the list or lists to develop for the writing assignment or use the topics as a jumping off point for inventing another topic idea altogether.

Responses to Invention Activity 1: “Brainstorming as a Group”

Although our writing students generally found this activity to be interesting and new to them, the same invention activity will not work the same way for every writer. If we return to the original description of invention from Part 1, we see that invention incorporates both discovery and creation. Discovery in this instance is a singular experience since it depends on what writers already know about themselves. In other words, when we discover an idea that we want to explore further, what we are really discovering is our interest in that idea—not the subject matter itself. You create a topic when you fit that interest to the writing task at hand. Since every writer encounters a writing task with a unique set of attitudes and experiences, it makes sense that he or she would generate different topic ideas even when applying the same invention tool.

Unsurprisingly, since we did this as a class activity, the “Brainstorming as a Group” invention activity did not generate a paper topic idea in the same way for every one of our students. Some students commented that they found the questions too random and couldn’t see how they fit with the paper assignment. Their comments imply that they expected the activity to entirely lead them to a topic that was

already preformed to fit their interests and the writing assignment. But, here's the thing: this activity was designed to do exactly the opposite. Its goal is not to ask a random question with an ideal writing topic as its answer. The objective of this activity is to remind you of your own passions, interests, and opinions on a variety of real life subjects. That is the discovery part of the process. In jogging that part of our your memories, we seek to pull you out of school mode and into everyday life mode where you can bring one of your interests from life outside of school into the classroom via your writing assignments. As one student writes:

The activity was a great start to open our minds on what topic to write about. It didn't give me a topic but rather sparked certain areas to think about. My answers showed what I was passionate about, things that are important to me, and things I want to do in my life. My own answers showed me personal beliefs and opinions on certain topics. Then listening to other people's answers sparked a whole new way of thinking. Hearing other people's interpretations of the questions and their answers allowed me to broaden my thinking. Different answers sparked different reactions that allowed for topics to debate about. Someone's answer to a question might prompt me to say, "Oh really? That's surprising to me. I thought about it a completely different way," and thus a conversation could ensue. The activity allowed for us to gain our own opinions and then react to other people's opinions. (Cabbie)

Other students amiably completed the questions but did not initially realize that they were inventing a paper topic by doing so. For example, one group of students found that they all enjoyed answering the question about their favorite astral body. Discussing their answers to this question led them to a debate on space exploration. That then led them to a debate on funding such space-related projects—the pros and cons of which formed the nexus of their group argument project. They formed a topic that explored the funding of agencies like NASA, arguing for continued monetary support while acknowledging the unavoidable economic constraints. Despite the seeming lack of successful

topic generation by the invention activity, this group used the activity to arrive at a topic that they probably would not have selected otherwise. They discovered their shared interest and conflicting views on funding for space exploration and shaped that interest to fit their writing assignment.

Similarly, Emily writes that the activity,

“ . . . encouraged my creativity, and sparked my curiosity, but it did not help me to select a topic It did however guide my entire group to the decision to write about something with a more objective feel. We immediately all decided we wanted an issue with concrete sides and arguments that could be supported by evidence instead of opinions (like which invention is the most important). The activity also steered us to choose a broader topic, instead of concentrating so much on the answer. For example, in response to my answer about which law I would change we thought of immigration from Cuba as a possible topic.”

Like many other aspects of the writing process, the success of invention strategies cannot always be measured by the ‘product’ (in this case a clearly stated topic for a writing assignment). Sometimes, the most successful invention activity is the one that gets you thinking so that ideas are more accessible and easier to formulate. As Mary states, “[b]ecause this activity asked such broad questions, we were able to get ideas from our classmates’ answers and from other ideas that occurred as a result of the questions of the activity.”

Individual Activity: Brainstorming Based on Interests

While Activity 1 asks you to interact with others about your ideas and responses, answering the same set of questions can be equally helpful when you are working on your own to generate a writing topic. In this case, writers can work entirely alone by looking at their responses and then spending time freewriting or clustering in response to any one given answer. You may also interrogate a specific answer to flesh out your revealed interests more fully. Using the reporter’s 5 W’s and an H is one way to do this. See the following fictional example.

Oscar decided that he wanted to develop a paper idea based on his answer to the question about a leader’s qualities. He believed that

a leader should be open-minded and have integrity. In order to try to see how these ideas could become a topic, he had to ask himself the following questions:

1. Who did he have in mind when naming these qualities? Oscar did not have a specific person in mind when generating this answer.
2. What kind of leader needed these qualities? These qualities might have applied to any leadership position, but Oscar was thinking of the recent undergraduate student government meeting he had attended.
3. When would these qualities matter the most? There had been some student protesting lately over the school's policies regarding its observation of certain religious holidays. That kind of conflict seemed to need leadership from a person with these qualities.
4. Where would a leader like this exist? Oscar did not have a specific place in mind, but he wasn't thinking of someplace unknown or unfamiliar.
5. Why this answer? Oscar assumed that the recent happenings on his campus combined with the discussion at the last student government meeting had triggered this response. The current president was stepping down due to problems with academic achievement, and the representatives had to decide if the current vice president would take her place or if there would be an election. Oscar was concerned that the vice president seemed to see only one side to the current problem and tended to make fun publically of the opposition.
6. How would these qualities take shape? Oscar believed that an open-minded leader would listen to all sides before responding and that a sign of integrity would be when she/he treated constituents with respect, no matter her/his side on an issue.

In this instance, Oscar discovered that he wanted to write about the need for a leader to be open-minded and have integrity. The assignment had asked students to make an argument that was supported by examples or reasons. Specifically, after the above exercise, he dis-

covered that he wanted to argue for the importance of these two qualities above all else and connect that argument to times of conflict and disagreement. He decided he would use examples from the current undergraduate student government dilemma in order to make his points clear to his readers.

Group Activity 2: Inventing for Genre, Audience, and Purpose

Although we think strong writing often develops out of a writer's own interests, we also like invention activities that help writers think about the rhetorical context of a writing task. Good writers, whether generating a text about how to fund NASA or the most significant qualities demanded of a candidate for student government, also think about who will be reading their text, why, and what kind or genre of text will best communicate the necessary information. Some college writing assignments state the audience, genre and purpose of the task absolving you from having to make too many decisions, but others don't. Invention activities that encourage writers to think about rhetorical context are helpful because they forefront these concerns and remind writers that the invention process goes beyond selecting a topic—it includes developing that topic according to the writing situation.

Inventing an Audience

This activity works well either in a group or as an individual writing activity. Begin by reading the following scenario:

Imagine a friend asked you to move his car for him from one side of campus to the other. He had just discovered that the parking lot where it was located was being closed for a special event, but since he had class, he did not have time to move it himself. While moving the car, you leaned over to adjust the sound system and didn't notice that you were coming up on one of the college's many pedestrian crosswalks. You hit a pedestrian as he entered the walkway. The man's leg was broken. The man also happened to be the college president. The police cite you for reckless driving, and in two weeks, you will be called to appear before the campus Honor Board for possible further sanctioning.

Develop a plan for responding to each of the following five writing activities:

- Write a letter to your parents informing them about the situation.
- Write a letter to a close friend from high school informing him or her about the situation.
- Write a letter to the college president about the situation.
- Write a letter to the Honor Board about the situation in preparation for the upcoming hearing.
- Write a letter to your insurance agent explaining the situation.

Then, select one plan to follow and write the letter using the plan you devised.

Next, you might join a small group and share your different approaches with each other, discussing the following topics:

- What strategies did the writer employ to make this letter appropriate to the audience?
- What purpose does this letter serve?
- What strategies does the writer employ to further its specific purpose?
- How does each writer portray himself or herself?
- Which letter seems most likely to be successful?

Finally, each group might analyze the writing strategies that enabled each writer to address her/his audience and purpose effectively.

Inventing a Genre

Like the previous activity, this exercise asks you to work in a group from a shared prompt to develop a range of different texts geared toward varying rhetorical contexts, but this activity asks writers to complicate the task a bit more by writing not only to different audiences with different purposes, but in a variety of short genres.

Consider the following scenario:

On the first Monday of every month at 7:00 p.m., the campus residence halls test their fire alarms. No one is required to exit the building during these regularly scheduled tests. Last Monday (the third Monday

of the month) at about 7:15, a candle was left unattended on the sill of an open window in a residence hall. Apparently, a billowing curtain was ignited, and the fire quickly spread. When the two students who shared the room returned and discovered the fire, they pulled the alarm in the hallway, but almost no one in the residence hall paid any attention, mistaking the alarm for the monthly test. The fire department arrived quickly but was forced to spend significant time helping to evacuate the building before they could turn their full attention to controlling the fire. No one was injured, but damage to the building was significant.

Develop a plan for how you might craft one of the following:

- Write the text for a new college brochure on fire safety to be distributed to all occupants of the campus residence halls.
- Write a news article for the college paper.
- Write an email from a student whose room was destroyed by fire to a faculty member requesting an extension on a research paper.
- Write a letter from the President of the university to alumni asking for emergency contributions to repair and refurbish the residence hall.
- Write a letter from the Fire Chief to the Director of the campus residence halls.

Next, share your plans with others and discuss the following questions about each of the five writing assignments' situations:

- What purposes does this text serve?
- How does the intended audience for this text affect the strategies that the writer should employ?
- What constraints does the genre of this text impose on the writer?
- What kinds of information does this genre convey best?

In generating plans for these writing situations, you can perhaps see more clearly some of the ways that genre, audience, and purpose

affect how a topic can best be articulated. In this exercise, writers had to decide basic things like length, style of writing (informal versus scholarly), and use of support (reasons or examples). They also had to have an idea of what information, or message, they wanted to convey, what ideas worked to their best advantage, and what ones could be left out. When the audience, purpose, and genre of a text are taken into account at any stage of writing, invention takes place.

Classroom Activity 3: Refining Topics for Research

The following invention activity also aids in finding an initial idea for a research paper, but then goes further by using group work to aid you in developing that idea into a workable paper topic. This activity is especially useful if you are nervous about researching in a subject area new to you.

Writers embarking on a research writing project sometimes encounter two different problems. Either, like one recent student interested in the cognitive skills developed by multiple-player on-line games, they are so deeply invested in their topic, that they have trouble imagining an audience less schooled and enthusiastic than themselves. Or, despite a genuine interest in a topic, like another recent student excited about exploring biofuel alternatives, they have no idea how to begin writing about a subject they know virtually nothing about. These situations are complicated when writers don't have a clear idea of who they are writing for (other than their teacher) or what purpose their writing is intended to serve (other than fulfilling a requirement for a grade.) Are they writing to educate an audience unfamiliar with their topic or are they writing for a community of insiders who are deeply invested in it?

This exercise can help illustrate how writing can be one avenue toward learning and how peers are often a valuable audience.

Step 1

Join together with other students to share a potential research paper topic and a typed paragraph of at least 200 words describing why this topic appeals to you, what kind of text you would like to create, and who would be most interested in reading/seeing it. (One purpose of this step is to ensure that you have the opportunity to engage in some advanced preparation rather than feeling like you are grasping

at straws once you arrive in class. A general rule of thumb says that if writers cannot sustain interest in a topic long enough to write 200 words about it, then it is not the best choice for an extended project.)

Step 2

With others, very briefly share your topic, audience, and text ideas. Afterwards, each member of the group should answer in writing the following set of questions about the topics being proposed by all the other group members. You should expect to spend around ten minutes writing about each of the topics introduced by your fellow writers.

1. What do you already know about this topic? (Simply make a list of facts or claims brainstorming as quickly as possible.)
2. Where have you seen information about this topic in the past? (What kinds of texts have you seen that discuss it?)
3. What should a writer exploring this topic do to make it interesting to you as a potential audience member? (Be as specific as possible and provide as many possibilities as you can think of.)
4. What background information, questions, or facts should someone exploring this topic make sure to cover for an audience already interested in the topic? For an audience unfamiliar with the topic?
5. What kinds of sources or authorities do you think the author should consult while researching this topic?

Step 4

Have everyone in the group give their responses back to the original authors of the topics. Then have everyone spend a few minutes reading the responses they received for their topic.

Step 5

With others, discuss your topics with the goal of helping each other understand how to refine each topic, shape it to appeal to the selected audience, develop research strategies, and account for differences in background knowledge between the writer and the chosen audience.

Step 6

Thinking about the experience of your group, you should reflect on what you have learned about the kinds of things that writers should take into account when developing a topic for a specific audience. You should invite other writers to discuss the activity further, focusing on what aspects of topic generation you found most challenging and/or surprising.

Student Response to “Refining Topics for Research”

As with all group work, classes using this invention activity will experience the occasional hiccup. You might become frustrated with your topic and toss it out. Although you may perceive the exercise as a failure since it eliminated your topic instead of enriching it, invention is, among other things, a sorting process and figuring out what won't work is a very practical use of time. Even those students who find themselves without a topic when the exercise is completed will have a much clearer idea of what kind of topic might work based on those they have helped their peers develop.

Students who do manage to keep their topic intact over the course of the exercise may have a very different idea of how to approach it after it has been vetted and discussed by their peers. In one recent class, Jessica² began her research assignment intending to write about post-partum depression. Initially, she was frustrated by the responses provided to the four questions by one of her group members, Kyle, because he claimed he did not know anything at all about post-partum depression and answered the four questions with ideas that she perceived to be ridiculously basic and simplistic. Since she had written thoughtfully and at length about his topic, new developments in artificial intelligence, she believed Kyle was being lazy and irresponsible by not providing her with similar feedback. During the small group discussion, however, Jessica realized that Kyle was being honest. Aside from having a vague idea that post-partum depression had something to do with pregnancy, the concept was foreign to him, and he had no idea why it should concern him. Since Jessica had originally intended to write for an audience unfamiliar with her topic, she not only devoted more of her paper to educating her audience about her topic than she had expected, she also shifted her approach to include arguments

about why a phenomenon that only affects women should be of interest to men, even those men who are not themselves fathers.

Group discussion of the topic development exercise also helped our students to see each other as resources. After one student discussed her interest in writing about increased diagnoses of celiac disease, another student volunteered the information that her mother struggled with the condition, and the two students began to discuss the possibility of arranging an interview with the mother. Students also helped narrow each other's topics by pointing out what aspects of a broad field intrigued them the most. Kaleigh's group realized that her topic, animal rights, was horribly large when they recognized how diverse their written responses to her topic were. It clearly would not be possible for her to use the topic without further refinement. So they helped her consider and eliminate different aspects of animal rights (in the food industry, in drug experimentation, and in puppy mills) until they hit upon a focal point that intrigued Kaleigh—the treatment of captive wild animals in zoos and circuses.

Finally, using group work as part of the invention process serves a larger goal in any writing class—it sets you up to be invested readers and editors of each other's work as the writing process progresses. Kyle was a much more enthusiastic peer reviewer of Jessica's paper because it included issues he had raised, and he now saw himself as a genuine audience for the work. Similarly, other students took pride in noticing how their ideas had been incorporated or were able to make very concrete suggestions for revision by reminding their peers of issues that had been raised in the initial invention session.

CONCLUSION

Invention, like every other aspect of the writing process, is neither a single-faceted nor a static skill. Each new writing situation brings a different set of rhetorical challenges that vary from writer to writer. Experienced writers expect that they will have to wrestle and play with ideas before they begin writing. You should remember that the mental calisthenics that precede the production of a string of words are not a waste of time or indicative of the absence of writing talent; they are instead utterly normal and wonderfully useful. Making choices among ideas is a significant aspect of writing. And making choices is impor-

tant—whether the decision is as frivolous as picking which flavor of ice cream to order from a store with dozens of options or deciding which college to attend. But making choices can be fun, too. When you focus on invention by using activities like the ones discussed above, you are able to break down stereotypes about “appropriate topics,” forefront your interests and areas of expertise, and craft texts that speak to an intended audience while accomplishing an intended purpose.

DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the invention process? In other words, what are writers doing when they are inventing?
2. Why might some students find generating their own writing topics to be stressful or challenging? List as many reasons as you can.
3. What are the goals of the group-based invention activities? In other words, what are they trying to help students learn about invention?

NOTES

1. Direct quotes from student work are cited using students' first names according to the students' stated directives to use their actual first names or pseudonyms.
2. References to student conversations use pseudonyms only.

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