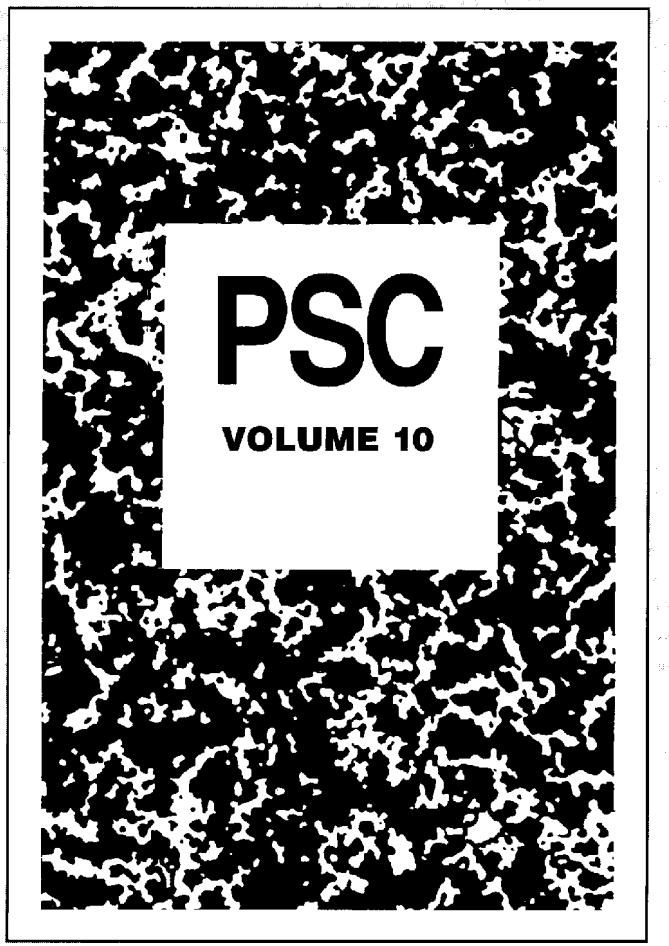
Writing across the CURRICULUM

USING WRITING TO ENHANCE THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE



Plymouth State College Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum

Volume 10

Using Writing to Enhance the First-Year Experience

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Editor's Introduction

In the Summer of 1998, the Task Force on the First Year Experience published a report of its year's work studying the experiences and attitudes of first-year students at Plymouth. The report included a number of recommendations for how the college might improve the academic experience of first-year students. The Task Force discussed these at Faculty Day that August, initiating a year of college-wide focus on the first year.

The theme of the recommendations in that report is that the College needs to find ways to forge stronger connections with first-year students. Faculty need to be concerned not just with the academic development of these students but with the whole student.

In early fall of 1998, as the Editorial Board of the PSC WAC Journal met to decide the theme of this issue, it occurred to us that this was the perfect year to focus the journal on first-year students and writing. What better way to get in touch with the whole student than through writing? The articles in this issue speak to the fact that many faculty are already using writing to enhance the first-year experience, and will, we hope, inspire others to do the same.

Plymouth State College Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum

Volume 10, August 1999

Using Writing to Enhance the First-Year Experience

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Where Else

Jean Smith

Sitting next to me, at a round table in one of the gray partitioned areas of the College Writing Center, and housed beneath a green grubby baseball cap was a doe-eyed, unshaven first-year student. After we introduced ourselves, and exchanged a firm, reassuring handshake, I asked John how I could help him. He said, on a loud inhale of breath, that his eight to ten page paper was due at eleven o'clock the next day. He had to change his topic because someone else had chosen the same one. He was especially annoyed over this because he had done a lot of reading for it, and now it was of no use to him. He had had a hard time finding articles for his second choice topic, which was something to do with trees in Maine, and the subject did not excite him in the same way.

All this information was anxiously spewed forth as if some inner floodgate had suddenly been released. I asked if he wanted me to read his paper. His chin went down, and the oval face disappeared into the peak of his cap. He mumbled a reply saying he hadn't written it yet, but was seeking help in getting the paper started. He added reluctantly, "I've never written a research paper before." His level of anxiety at that point, I felt, was tangible.

I encouraged him to talk about what he had read. As he spoke, it was clear he had a good grasp of the research material, but he didn't know how to get it down on paper. Thoughts of how to fill eight to ten pages with writing were overwhelming to him. His

words, like a needle stuck in the groove of a broken record (remember those?) kept harping back to the number of pages.

I said, "We need to prioritize. Let's focus on getting your ideas down on paper. I know that right now you will not believe this, but experience has taught me when writing papers that if you just make a start on the writing, the number of pages takes care of itself." I got no verbal response; he simply tipped the peak of his cap further up off his brow, exposing the dark even arch of his eyebrows, and looked skeptically into my face.

I began by explaining that he needed an introduction, middle, and a conclusion. I spoke about freewriting, and how it was a useful tool in unraveling the solid mass that information has a knack of becoming when it is trapped in your brain. "Try it," I encouraged, moving my elbows from the edge of the table and laying my back against the support of my chair. He began writing. We collaborated for a while, freeing up more ideas. He wrote some more. The conference ended when he had a rough draft incorporating an introduction with a main idea and middle, and he was confident about the content of his conclusion.

Driving home that night my mind was full with thoughts of John and his predicament. Memories of my fledgling first weeks in college, and my anxiety and fear over my inability to write papers, came flooding back to me. I smiled reminiscently to myself, as John's voice etched with anxiety and frustration echoed perfectly my own tender beginnings. I recalled, only too well, how debilitating I found the length of a paper when I had no clue how or where to begin. What is interesting to me, as I look back at myself, is that I remember thinking I was unique. I believed, because I had not been in education for so long, that I must be the only student on campus who didn't know how to write a paper. It had been over thirty years since I finished high school, or secondary school as it is called in Scotland.

The circumstances of my life opened a fantastic window of opportunity, one I never imagined I'd have. I was born in Scot-

land, left school at age fifteen, and went to work in a textile mill. I served a four-year apprenticeship and did the same job for twenty-seven years. I entered college in September of 1995, the same month I turned forty-seven. I had applied to study at Plymouth State College because I needed a student status in order to live with my husband, also from Scotland, who had moved to New Hampshire in 1991. The only writing I had ever done, with any regularity in my life, were keep-in-touch letters and occasional postcards to family and friends. My education was so far behind me I couldn't remember how I knew the things I did.

I felt bombarded and afraid of the plethora of academic papers listed on my syllabi. There were two research plus two compare and contrast papers, journal entries in response to readings, response writing assignments, and a presentation. I didn't know how to compare and contrast. I wasn't even sure if I knew what it meant. I'd never read textbooks before, and I found them slow reading and the content intimidating. It amazes me now when I look back and realize that in the beginning I had no clear idea how I was going to meet my course requirements.

Eleanor Clough, my art teacher, announced in class that students having problems writing a response paper she had assigned should go along to the College Writing Center in the basement of Mary Lyon. Up to that point I didn't know there was a Writing Center. The assignment for my art class, I thought, was great. We had to visit the Karl Drerup Art Gallery. Back then, it was in the first and lower floors of Hyde. I remember descending gingerly down its totally unpractical, but hip, spiral staircase. We had to browse the exhibits on both levels and write a one-page response on the piece of our choice. I enjoyed the experience enormously, and found it easy to scribble down my thoughts on the exhibit that particularly moved me.

Later, I took my paper along to the College Writing Center, and introduced myself to Nancy Hill. Fair-haired and petite, Nancy was one of the professional members of staff. She asked me about

the assignment. We talked awhile, and I showed her what I'd written. My sense, from our conversation, was that if I was satisfied I'd met the requirements of the assignment then that was all right. I headed back up the basement stairs and out into the daylight. I remember the sense of relief rising within and settling over me like the warm sunshine; my face lifted symbolically toward the blue of the sky, my eyes scrunched protectively against the glare. I muttered to myself, "Thank you God, thank you." Knowing there was a place on campus where I could get help with my papers made a world of difference.

When our assignment was handed back, Elenor Clough was very encouraging in her response. She asked if I'd mind her showing my paper to the faculty member whose work I had enjoyed. Imagine my pleasure on realizing that my response, handwritten on a small, yellow Depot Office notepad would mean something to someone else! It was an unforgettable and rewarding experience.

I hadn't signed up to take composition my first semester, and so finding the College Writing Center, I came to realize, was crucial for me. I entered college as an undeclared, undecided student because, quite simply, I hadn't a clue about what I wanted to do when I was finished, or where my abilities lay. I felt stupid answering, "I don't know," to people's obvious and interested queries about what I was going to do after college. College education, all aspects of it, was a vast unknown. It felt like an open-mouthed being that was ready to devour me and I was teetering on its steady bottom lip peering anxiously and unseeingly in.

My subsequent visits to the Writing Center were my lifeline during the semester, I didn't appreciate it at the time, but there were things I had to unlearn. I had many misperceptions. One was my belief that when people physically wrote something on paper it was automatically not just word but form and grammar perfect. It was at the Writing Center I was shown, literally, that writing is a process and that a draft has no relation whatsoever to the cold air

sneaking in under the door.

Both Roy Andrews (the director) and Nancy would show me actual drafts of papers, some they had worked on: three and four drafts with parts circled, notes suggesting changes or different word choice in the margins, paragraphs or whole chunks of writing crossed out, and I remember how this amazed me. Here it was before my eyes, and each draft was one step closer to the writer's final one. It took time for me to realize and understand that what goes spoken through a writer's head can be unclear and confusing to the reader. Once I realized writing is a multi-layered process, I felt the first tentative stirrings of ability.

The Writing Center became a place I felt comfortable doing my work. I went there to write journals, freewrite ideas and begin drafts, or read. In the fall of 1995 the center was literally a hallway in the basement of Mary Lyon. From the bottom of the echoing stairs, where the banister disappears down into the false floor, you look left into a long narrow room with many doors. Roy's office, a small room offering privacy to consult in, and a tiny cluster with two computers along the right side comprised the College Writing Center. The rest of the doors remained locked and their interiors a mystery that I had neither the time nor inclination to ponder. The hallway was furnished with a cast-off, dull orange, simple tweed-weave sofa and a deep, seventies green, box-shaped armchair, the kind that welcomes a weary body and claims your rear as its own when you occupy it.

My inability to write papers scared and silenced me. In using the writing center I was acknowledging that inability, and at first I found that difficult to come to terms with. The learning experience of those first tentative visits to the basement opened me up to the realization that to do the required writing for my classes, I had to jettison my negative feelings and concentrate on what I needed to learn. Each time I entered the building I was reminded of the time I went to the hospital to give birth to my daughter. On entering the hospital I knew I had to leave my modesty behind. The moment I

entered that clinical domain I was resigned to subject ing myself to the unmentionable. I felt alone. vulnerable. and afraid of the unknown. One week later I left the hospital with my precious bundle of joy, my ordeal behind me, and mentally picked up my modesty where I'd left it on the hospital doorstep.

That was my attitude as I started using the College Writing Center. There were thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and emotions I had to put aside in order to go forward. I rationalized that if individuals knew everything, there would be no requirement for this educational establishment I'd committed myself to for the next four years. It was the combination of Roy and Nancy's professionalism, nonjudgmental and non-directive philosophy they used while working with me that helped me to realize being ignorant didn't mean I was stupid; yes another misperception. This approach made it easier for me to cast my inhibitions aside, as I had my modesty all those years ago.

The wide-mouthed being of my imagination, that I was sure would swallow me whole, didn't seem so daunting. The more I embraced my ignorance the freer I became. I felt questions were forever on my lips, I realized how stimulating and positive they could be. There was much I needed to learn, and so much that was new and exciting.

I have worked at the College Writing Center as a writing consultant for two years. Students like John make me realize how ordinary and typical my experience as a first-year student was. The negative connotations of the word "ignorant" can hinder and silence the inexperienced. We each have to find a way to overcome that negativity. After all, where else but in a seat of learning can you say "I don't know how," and in response get all the help you'll ever need.

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Emotional Landscapes of the First-Year Student or What do they write about when they can write about anything?

Martha Holmes
JoAnn Marchant
Meg Petersen

What do first-year students write about when they can write about anything? The answers to this question can reacquaint us with the first-year experience and the themes which dominate that experience—loss, overwhelming change, redefinition of self, new perspectives on significant relationships, and more global social issues. We can learn much about our students' culture from the stories they tell (Newkirk 106). Knowing our students **and** their concerns can also inform our practice, helping us to relate our material to the emotional landscape they inhabit.

In JoAnn Marchant's composition class, students are allowed to choose the topic of their five-page weekly papers. At the end of the semester, as they were preparing their final portfolios, we asked students in both of her sections to look back over their writing and to tell us what they had written about and why. Even though they were told that their responses would not affect their grades in the course and that they could respond anonymously, they seemed to take the task very seriously. They wrote thoughtful and detailed responses and many chose to include their names.

In looking at their responses, we chose to consider only their individual weekly papers. We omitted the research and collabora-

tive papers because their choice of topic on those assignments was somewhat restricted. We assigned their responses to broad categories that emerged through our careful reading of their answers. We found that their writing mostly focused on self-defining experiences, change, perspectives on relationships, social concerns, and loss.

These categories are by no means discrete; there is considerable overlap. Anything which is loss is also change; many times perspectives on relationships involved loss, and self-defining experiences often centered on significant relationships. We tried to use the students' explanations as a guide to the main focus of each piece.

As might be expected, many of the first-year students' pieces centered on themselves. They wrote about experiences which they felt defined them as individuals. College seems to afford them a vantage point from which to look back on significant events in their lives. In this new environment, they are free to re-define themselves, sifting through past events and deciding what really matters to them. They identify key events in their lives. As one student reflected in her explanation, "it was a very important event in my life and I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for that [theatrical] audition." Sometimes a piece about a particular experience can crystallize a series of incremental changes and come to represent greater change. As one student commented on her paper about attending her first Phish concert, "it almost resembles me growing up and finding something new about myself."

Of course, change itself was a major theme. In coming to college, many students have left behind all that is familiar to them — family, friends, community, or even culture. This change is so overwhelming that, as one student put it, "the first week of school, the only thing on my mind was the change in lifestyle that hit me so quickly, [that] I decided to write about it."

It is hard to overestimate this change. They are unfamiliar

with the culture, with the language, with the customs of the college environment. They lack past experiences of coping with this sort of change, and may not even know anyone who has. It is as if an atomic bomb has gone off in their lives and often they write simply to get back on their feet and re-orient themselves. "I wrote this piece as a means of settling into my life here," one student wrote. Another wrote, "I had a lot going through my head about college. I felt if I wrote it down, I could organize my thoughts better." Sometimes they wrote to reassure themselves that they would survive this change. One noted, "I wrote it to convince myself I could accomplish my goals, even in a new environment."

Often students used their writing to reevaluate significant relationships in light of this change in their lives. They looked back at the relationships which affected them and made them the people they are. As one student explained it, "I wrote about [Jerry] because he had such an impact on my life and how I viewed people."

They often looked back on relationships with the quality of nostalgia that comes out of feelings of loss. Loss itself was a surprisingly frequent theme in students' writing. The majority of these pieces centered around the death of a friend or family member. Perhaps the loss of so much in their own lives brings other losses to mind for them. Themes of loss also permeated their pieces about relationships and significant life events. Writing is a way of working through these feelings: "There is no way to get me to talk about things like [my grandfather's death] so I wrote about it," said one student. Writing also provided them with a means of memorializing those who have been lost to them. Several pieces were written as celebrations occasioned by loss or "a tribute to the person who died."

Newkirk notes that some critics believe that too much openness in topic choice and the concomitant focus on the self leads to an "individualism" which is "isolated, solipsistic, focused on purely personal gratification and success, oblivious to the communal

responsibility" (92). While initially almost all of JoAnn's students found personal concerns completely absorbing. as the semester progressed many were able to move beyond themselves and express their concerns about the wider world. They wrote about domestic violence, sex education, crime, the elderly, homelessness, incivility, prejudice, cruelty and media depictions of women and fashion. For several students, these concerns grew out of personal experiences. They were able to connect their experience to its more global implications.

One student traces this process for us: "It's a story about an old farm that had been abandoned. It captures loneliness until something/someone changes to see the beauty inside. I've seen a lot of beautiful things destroyed bccausc no one cared enough. It's not just a house or farms. I am also talking about people." One student moves from her experience working in a nursing home to "the elderly and all the respect I gained for them as precious individuals." Sometimes the concerns were more local, but no less global in their implication: "After the elections for senate and class officers I began thinking about how many people associate power with a position. So, I decided to write my thoughts on the subject." Some students assert a sense of social obligation, "I know a few people who have been caught stealing, so it has been my job to tell them it's not worth it."

Reading JoAnn's students' rcsponses has reminded us of how our lives arc a continuous process. Revisiting the themes that resonate with first-year students has helped us to realize that when we write about the things that most concern us, we often return to themes of change, loss, identity—that these arc essential parts of shaping words on the page and shaping our life experiences with those words. Maybe our first-year students are just closer to this truth.

We were also struck by the incredible amount of energy that students invested in writing about these issues. Knowing what first-

year students care about could become a powerful tool in bridging the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar material that we introduce to them. Subjects not inherently interesting or compelling to first-year students might be framed in terms of loss, change and identity. Whatever our discipline, understanding first-year students' perspectives on their world can only help us to help them learn.

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The Making of Writers

Meg Petersen

"All in all I do not think I am a good writer,
and I hope to get better,
but the chances are very slim."

—First-year student

Students don't begin their first-year composition class as blank slates. They come instead with a full history of writing experiences behind them which have shaped their attitudes and expectations. Sadly, most students don't begin their composition class eager to write. They begin instead with trepidation, apologies and anxieties. Most lack confidence in their abilities and have little expectation that composition will be a pleasant experience. I have asked my composition students, every semester, as one of the first exercises for the class, to write about their writing histories. In this very open-ended writing assignment, I ask them to reflect on everything they have done or had done to them which has helped form their writing and their views of themselves as writers. I ask them to think about things that helped and things that hurt them as writers. Semester after semester, the responses are strikingly

similar.

Most of the students who write about their earliest memories of themselves as writers tend to remember writing as a positive thing. One student writes, "I learned to write at an early age because both of my parents are teachers and love their jobs very much. . . my parents would show me letters, ask me to read street signs, menus, and anything else they could find. I used to love this as a child, learning to sound out words, then to copy and write them out." Another remembers, "As soon as I could write, I would tell tales about things that I have done or pets that I have owned. As I grew, these stories became more imaginative and enjoyable." Many built a firm foundation for loving to write in the early grades, "I remember little [about grades K-4] but one thing I do remember is writing pieces about my life, for instance how my vacation was, or a significant family event and so on. I always loved writing these pieces because when I sat down and thought about what I wanted to write, the unforgettable memories came back."

Unfortunately, not all students had these positive early experiences. One student recalls only being constantly criticized for his messy handwriting. And even for those who had a good start, things often turned negative shortly thereafter. As one student puts it, "When I was younger, I sort of enjoyed writing, like writing letters to my parents and stuff like that. Now it's the complete opposite. I really never write unless I have to, including writing about myself." What happens to so totally turn off writers like this one?

Students speak forcefully and clearly about the things that discouraged them as writers. Almost all of these factors involved their losing control over their writing: over its form, its content and the evaluation of it. The factor mentioned most often was their teachers' tendency to stress form over meaning. Matters of length, footnotes, citations or the five-paragraph form were given more emphasis than the meaning the student was trying to communi-

cate. In this era of state-sponsored testing, we may begin to see even more of this type of response. This student's experience is typical, "I remember one year in high school I had to do a research paper that had to be ten pages and everything had to have a certain format. We had to have footnotes, margins, underlines, the whole nine yards, plus it was the lamest topic. . . . I knew the teacher wasn't really going to be correcting my writing, but the way I had followed the directions and if my paper was long enough." Another puts it more simply, "I can't stand constantly writing three or five paragraph essays—and furthermore you can't write what or how you want to, or even what you think is good. You have to write what the teacher wants."

Most students rebelled against assigned topics, although a few said that they felt lost when told they could write about whatever they wanted. Many did not appear to trust this freedom and felt that the teacher had a hidden agenda. Assigned topics robbed the student of ownership over the most fundamental element of writing—the content—and they resented it. Most students echoed the student who wrote simply, "I really despise having to follow a structured topic."

Our writing is, above all, an expression of ourselves and criticism of writing tends to cut deep. Students handed over these bits of themselves, often after working long and hard, only to face harsh judgments of their work and, by extension, of themselves. Poor grades on writing hurt. After working hard on a paper, one student reacted to a poor grade in this way, "I felt like nothing. 'Why couldn't I write?' I thought. Was I different from everyone else?" Another wrote, "All I wanted was someone to tell me what I needed to do to become better. I knew I could write well, but I hadn't perfected it yet. I knew I still had a long way to go. . . . I just needed someone to show me." Another spoke for many when he wrote, "it wasn't the grades that really hurt, but the lack of confidence that the teacher had in me. This really gave me a complex about my ability. . . . To

this day I still don't like to write and feel that my writing is well below average for a freshman in college."

People react strongly to this kind of assault on their self-esteem. Students used terms like "hate" and "despise" to describe their feelings about writing. One said, "I would become so discouraged and frustrated by [writing assignments] that they would make me cry." Even students who learn to get by on these types of assignments are left bitter and discouraged. "I got used to the proper way to write an English paper. I still didn't like them and had no fun doing them, but at least I got better grades. I really, at this point, started to hate writing." Their relative success did not increase their confidence. As one expressed it, "Although I learned this method, I was still a terrible writer."

Many, even the more successful students, lowered their expectations and began to think of writing as a job, as a chore. "It was work. It was an assignment. I was always graded. . . . Eventually I got used to the idea of writing to please other people and I got good at it. . .but it never was much fun." Another student asks, "How creative can you be when you are being forced to write for someone else?" One student expresses the logical end of such treatment, "It's just the same as any other subject–work that you have to do."

Fortunately, for some, writing is able to become much more. I am constantly amazed by how much bad instruction some students can survive and still become writers. Many sharply distinguish the writing they do for themselves from what they do to get grades. In writing for themselves, they discover the power of the written word, its capacity to heal, to help a person reflect on his or her own life. "Writing for myself in my journal is a cathartic experience. I've been writing almost daily for about five years now and I probably couldn't live without it." Another says, "Until I discovered that I could sit down and write for my own personal pleasure, it was just a nuisance. Now I take the time to sit down

and write because I want to." When they write for themselves, students discover whole new meanings and new purposes for writing. "The thing that helped my writing is writing letters and keeping an almost daily journal. . . . I seem to express myself better in writing than in actual talking words. I can get stuff off my chest easier and have them sound how I want them to rather than choking on my words when I'm face to face. . . when someone is writing about something they care about (like me) we can go on forever."

Even those who didn't discover personal writing sometimes discovered meaning in their journalism classes. "During my sophomore year a wonderful thing happened. A friend of mine talked me into joining the school paper. I found a whole new world of writing. Once I was able to write on topics I enjoyed and that interested me, the words just flowed." Journalism class gave these writers readers, and suddenly many things made sense. One student writes that journalism class was the first place where he found "a real use for grammar and all that other technical stuff which up until then had been just for some out of touch English teacher."

Happily, some English teachers did inspire their students to write. Students wrote passionately of teachers who believed in them, who cared about writing and English and who recognized them as writers. They write, "he presented the material with such conviction and enthusiasm. English was Mr. M's life and he made it a part of mine. . . for the first time, I actually enjoyed looking for symbolism and spelling words right as I did so." These inspiring teachers offered "encouragement and not scrutiny." They were "more interested in what you were thinking than the grammatical end of it all." They were "very supportive" and would "often comment on the content of the essay. They gave praise as well as pointing out what should have been done differently." They allowed their students freedom. One student writes, "I had a teacher, Mrs. D., who gave me the confidence to write again. [Her assignments]

gave us the opportunity to use our imagination and explore different types of writing... she always took the time to give positive feedback."

Many of these exceptional teachers also arranged for students to receive recognition and publication outside of the classroom. Many students mentioned being entered in contests or having their papers read aloud as an example of good writing in class. One writes, "[the teacher] suggested that I submit one of my stories to my school newspaper. . . . Thinking my article could help others gave me a great feeling." Another remembers, "My poem had been published and Iwas so proud and happy that my teacher had thought it was good enough for the whole school to read it."

I am always amazed in reading these testimonies at how much trauma and bad instruction these writers could survive. Some survived because they were able to find meaning in their personal writing or in journalism. But many were able to turn their attitudes about writing totally around simply because they just had one good teacher who believed in them and who would take the time to offer, not just criticism, but praise and help in improving their work. Most often one good teacher who took them seriously as writers could turn everything around. Often these attitudes about writing had radically changed by the end of the semester, a reassuring reminder for all of us that the first year of college is not too late to find the teacher that could turn it all around. The hopeful thing for us about all of this is that any one of us could be that teacher.

WAC Methods and Techniques for Classes of First-Year Students

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Connecting with First-Year Experience through Writing: Interviews of Dick Hunnewell and Kate Donahue

Robert S. Miller

In the summer of 1998 after a year of hard work, the Task Force on the First Year Experience published its recommendations for how the College might improve the academic experience of first-year students. The theme of the report is that faculty and staff need to make stronger connections to first-year students. The Task Force argued we need to be concerned not just with the academic development of the student, but with the whole student. It struck me that a powerful tool by which we can do that is writing.

Those of us who have been a part of WAC these past 15 years have discovered that use of WAC techniques provides us with a view of student experience we would otherwise miss. This is particularly true of informal writing-to-learn, student-response techniques, such as freewrites and journals. I wondered whether the Task Force on the First Year Experience had made use of such data and I wondered whether the group would agree that there is a natural mesh between the ideas put forth in its report and WAC techniques. I decided to interview each of the co-chairs of the Task Force, Dick Hunnewell and Kate Donahue, and see what they had to say about all this. In retrospect, I believe they would have talked

willingly on the subject even if I hadn't bought them lunch.

Kate pointed out to me that an important source of data for the Task Force was, in fact, informal student writing. Sally Boland and Ginny Barry had been given the task of surveying students to learn about their experience of the first year. Sally and Ginny decided to do this with freewrites which they administered in class to their first- and second-year students. The students were asked to respond to several broad questions:

What works well for first-year students'?

What doesn't work well?

What might be changed to improve the first year?

How was your first year, good or bad? (This one was asked of upper-division students only.)

Although the samples used were small, Sally and Ginny were able to discover several trends in what students said: most first-year students found faculty accessible and knowledgeable and found the campus manageable and friendly. On the other hand, they were finding the work load challenging and were having trouble managing their time.

Dick shared with me that in his own classes he uses informal writing techniques to get to know important facts about his students as people and as learners, facts he might not ever learn without the techniques. On the first day of class he distributes 5 X 8-inch index cards and asks students to write brief answers to questions, such as "What brought you to Plymouth?" "What experience do you have with museums?" "Who is your hero?" and "What else would you like me to know about you?" "Do you know what we mean by learning styles and, if so. which works best for you?" Students' responses reveal a great deal about their personalities and learning styles. The exercise takes very little class time and the products are easy and quick to read.

As Dick described this experience, I thought about some of the similar writing techniques I have used in my own classes. I

have sometimes asked IAC students to introduce themselves to me in freewrites. The interests and experiences they reveal help me understand them as people and help me to discriminate them from one another. (At my age learning their names is challenging, but it's much easier when I have some personal information to pin the name to.) Usually I ask that my IAC students be my advisees and before advising appointments I return to the freewrites and review. I find advising goes much better when I can relate to the advisee as an individual with a unique set of academic and personal interests and qualities.

I've had similar luck with journals in a variety of courses. Many times the primary purpose of the journal is to give students a chance to practice reasoning in the manner of the discipline they are learning. But often I ask students to relate what they are learning to past experiences and observations they make outside the classroom. Often these entries are the most satisfactory of all in that they reveal to me how the student is integrating academic learning and personal experience. I think this relates to the Task Force's advice we take a holistic approach to students. I also find myself often making a personal response to this kind of journal entry, maybe sharing a bit of myself with the student. With this sort of informal writing, I can forge a connection of the kind the Task Force is advocating, and I can do it in an individual way, a way that would otherwise be impossible in large classes.

Informal student writing is also an excellent way of assessing whether students are learning what we hope they are in our classes. Both Dick and Kate spoke of doing this. Shortly before the first exam in his survey of art course, Dick has students do a written exercise in which they practice comparing one work of art with another. The exercise does not end there, however. Dick also has them write about what the experience was like and asks them how he could help them do better on such an exercise. The responses are revealing. Dick said, "What I think they got and what they

actually got are sometimes very different. Discovering this gives you humility." It also gives you good ideas about how to teach more effectively. In some of his courses, Dick now lengthens each unit, spending more time helping students develop the critical skills they need. This, of course, means covering less material, but Dick wisely recognizes what he wants the students to take away from the course are critical skills. Once they have these they have the means to learn material on their own.

Kate has long been using the WAC technique of helping students develop their writing process by breaking long writing assignments into stages, requiring a topic statement, then a first draft, then a final draft. Now she has added an additional stage to the process: students are asked to write her a letter midway between choosing the topic and submitting the first draft. In this letter students are asked to tell her how the project is going. She responds with suggestions for how to proceed, often suggesting references they may have missed, for example. Again, I think this is an example of building a connection, this time between the student writer and a mentor. Kate points out that this process approach has the added benefit of defending against the modern problem of students down-loading whole papers from the internet. When you have to report on the process as it is occurring, you can't get away with that.

I came away from my lunches with Dick and with Kate filled with enthusiasm for the use of informal writing to forge connections with first-year students. There seem to be many different ways to do this. None of them take much time and effort, and each allows you to get to know your students as individuals. And then when you are done you can have lunch with charming and interested colleagues and talk about it—and that is a great pleasure too.

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Using Team Journals in a Large Introductory Course

David Zehr

Introduction

Large enrollments in beginning level General Education courses are problematic. Specifically, when faced with high enrollments, instructors, myself included, often fall into the default mode of lecturing as the primary means of disseminating course materials. Certainly we all lecture at times; its pedagogical and practical value are without question. Nonetheless, an over-reliance on lecturing has certain pitfalls, For instance, it breeds passivity in students. They develop a mind-set of trying to write down everything an instructor says, and then spend time studying it with the hope of simply repeating what they heard on the exams. Compounding this problem is the anonymity encountered in courses with large enrollments. Students typically do not know one another, and when they passively sit through lecture after lecture they fail to benefit from the skills and knowledge that each possesses. Also, professor-student interaction is minimized in such a setting, which inhibits a meaningful give-and-take that would benefit both parties. The end result is sometimes, unfortunately, a group of unmotivated stu-

dents and a professor frustrated and upset by an apparent lack of caring about course content.

While my description above may seem extreme, far too many conversations with colleagues about their classes suggest that it is not merely caricature. That, in part, motivated me to try something new last fall that would invigorate the large classroom experience for both myself and my students. An additional source of motivation came from Bolling's (1994) article describing the use of group journals in an upper-division writing course. Those familiar with the use of journals know that they are usually kept by individuals, privately, and read only by the instructor. This is an appropriate application of the journal technique in certain contexts, but Bolling showed the promise of moving beyond the traditional journal format. Intrigued by Bolling's idea, I modified her procedure for use in my introductory psychology course. By doing so I hoped that students would gain a greater understanding of how peers responded to course materials, a heightened sense of belonging to the class, and an awareness that I cared very much about their reactions to course materials.

Implementation

I assigned students to teams of five and supplied each team with a standard composition book for keeping journal entries. On the first day of class team members introduced themselves to one another and exchanged names and phone numbers. They recorded that information in the front of the composition books. I told each team that I would provide them with prompts for journal entries at various points throughout the semester and that they were responsible for rotating the journal among themselves outside of class. Prompts focused on assigned readings, controversial issues presented in-class, and, when appropriate, current events that related to course materials. For example, one prompt posed the following question:

"Drugs have proven to be successful in treating certain mental illnesses. Their success at altering maladaptive symptoms and behaviors raises an interesting question—even if you weren't diagnosed with a particular illness, but if you could take a medication that would alter your basic personality, for example, improve your assertiveness, make you less shy, more confident, etc., would you? Why or why not?"

Each student provided ten entries in the journal. Each prompt consisted of two or three items per entry. I collected the journal four times over the course of the semester and hence read two to three entries per student at a time.

It is also important to mention that I used the teams for a second purpose beyond keeping a journal. Periodically, team members assembled themselves during class for in-class demonstrations and active-learning exercises. I did this to both supplement my lecturing and to help build team identities.

Given the novelty of the project, I decided to use the group journals solely as a means of adding bonus points to students' final point totals, which, of course, determined final grades (students could earn up to 500 points on four exams and a major writing assignment). Each time I collected the journals, teams received either a check or a check minus for their evaluation. To receive a check each team member had to have the appropriate entries, and the entries had to be more than overly simplistic analyses and platitudes. If a team accumulated four checks, each member earned twenty bonus points toward their final grade. Three checks earned fifteen points, two checks earned five points, and one or no checks earned no extra credit. At the end of the semester I also asked each team member to evaluate the other members of their group. They used a similar check, check minus system to rate the overall degree to which they felt members met their obligations to the team (e.g., cooperation in passing the journal in a timely manner and thoroughness of journal entries). If a member received all checks,

they earned ten bonus points. If they received one check minus, they earned five points, and if they had two or more check minuses they earned no bonus points. I required students to provide written justification for each rating of fellow team members. Any student then could earn a maximum of thirty extra points.

Assessment

At the end of the semester students completed an evaluation form for the group journal project. The first part of the form contained six objective items answered using a Likert-type rating scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The items and mean ratings are found in Table 1. The second part of the evaluation form contained three open-ended questions. Students described what they liked best about the project, what they liked least about it, and last, provided any other comments they deemed pertinent.

Discussion

Examination of the mean ratings for the six evaluation statements suggests that the project did meet some course objectives. Students generally agreed that the journals aided their thinking about course materials, taught them the importance of behaving responsibly toward fellow team members, and got them to appreciate my interest in their learning. They also generally agreed that the project should be used again. Less satisfactory are the ratings for whether or not the students felt better acquainted with classmates and the degree to which they learned from their peers. While not indicative of the project being an abject failure in those regards, these ratings do suggest that the project needs modification if those course objectives are to be met.

To better understand the thinking behind the ratings I examined the responses to the open-ended evaluation items. By far and away, students liked most the opportunity to express their own ideas and opinions, particularly to me. They liked least the process of

passing the journal around outside of class. Some found it difficult to track down team members; others felt some team members kept the journal too long, leaving them little time for their own entries. Obviously then, one is not going to feel better acquainted with people who are less than cooperative in achieving a collective goal, nor is one likely to perceive that such people aided understanding of course material.

Conclusion

On the basis of students' objective and open-ended evaluations, as well as my own personal impressions, I feel the group journal project worked fairly well. I certainly plan on using it again, but with several modifications. First, I think more needs to be done at the beginning of the semester to build a sense of belonging to a team. Several students commented on the evaluation form that I should do that. I had hoped that using the groups for in-class activities would facilitate the formation of team identities, but their sporadic nature and student absences probably undermined this to some extent. I will therefore probably introduce several team projects very early in the semester before assigning the first set of journal entries. For instance, on the first day of class I might have the teams do some informal writing and discussion about their expectations for the course.

A second possible change will be to use smaller groups. With a class of 70 students I had fourteen teams. That lessened the number of journals that I had to physically deal with, but perhaps it introduced problems that hindered the groups from working effectively together.

One final thing to consider for the future will be to incorporate the journal evaluation as part of the overall course grade. Not being sure of how smoothly things would go, I hesitated to do this the first time through, and hence used the exercise primarily as a means of rewarding students for their perseverance (I did warn

students that if they abandoned their group completely and refused to participate at all they would lose thirty points from their final total). Sadly, students often do not take assignments seriously if they perceive them to have little consequence for their overall evaluation. Linking the group journal more explicitly to the final grade might foster a greater sense of purpose and cooperation within the groups.

For those who might be interested in adopting this technique, let me close with a comment (from my perspective as instructor. Without doubt, reading and commenting on all of the journal entries is time consuming, so extraordinarily large class sizes might make the costs of using group journals prohibitive. If, however, one feels that a class size is manageable, the benefits of the exercise are worth the effort. Students in large classes may feel dissatisfied in the sense that they are passive and not likely to be heard and known by the instructor. This technique sends a clear message to students that their ideas and opinions do matter, and allows opportunities for full expression by everyone in the class. I feel that I got to know my students better as persons and as partners in learning about psychology.

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Table 1

Student Evaluations of the Group Journal Project

Item	**M**	**SD**
The team journal project aided my thinking about course materials.	3.21	.56
The team journal project taught me the importance of behaving responsibly toward other team members.	3.31	.66
The team journal project helped the instructor learn about my ideas and opinions.	3.28	.59
The team journal project should be used in other large lecture sections of courses.	3.00	.71
The team journal project allowed me to become better acquainted with my classmates.	2.83	.76
The team journal project allowed me to learn more about how fellow students react to course materials.	2.97	.68

Note: N=29. Raters used a 4 point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

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Writing and Belonging to the College Community: A Direct Connection

Martha Macomber

Introduction

During my first weeks of college I remember walking through the campus and looking down at the concrete walks wishing I knew where the gum patterns were, those everlasting spots on the walkways formed by pieces of already chewed gum. I made a prediction that by the time I knew where the gray, gum-blobs were on my most frequently traveled routes I would feel "at home"; I would feel like I belonged at this college.

Wanting to "belong" is one of the greatest challenges facing our first-year students. Especially at Plymouth State, where many are first-generation college students, it is helpful if we evaluate our own teaching by asking ourselves, How is my teaching fostering the students' sense of belonging to the college?

While teaching two entry-level United States History classes this fall, I inadvertently stumbled upon an answer to this question: the teaching of writing has a direct and positive impact on a student's sense of belonging. By creating a very structured writing component that focuses upon mastering a basic writing tool, the five paragraph analytical essay, I found that students made connections to each other, to me, and most importantly, left feeling they had gained

an academic tool that would help them succeed in future courses. It is this last observation that is most critical, the idea that if first-year students conclude an entry-level course with skills that will help them succeed academically they will have moved closer toward that goal of becoming members of the college community.

Writing and Belonging

My premise that writing increases the students' sense of belonging begins with the passing back of graded papers. Requiring drafts and allowing for rewrites of writing assignments can be difficult in terms of the time commitment required, (I have included some helpful hints to manage the grading end of things later in this article) but the advantage of many assignments begins with the fact that you have to hand back a lot of papers. In so doing, I learned the names of my students and more importantly they found out that I knew their names. Taking role makes students accountable, but knowing their names makes them feel counted! I have a theory that if I learn their names I will increase their attendance and their subsequent success in the course. It is tough to have a control group for this one but logic lends itself to the argument that if a student walks in and is greeted by name they can presume that showing up to class matters.

Beyond name recognition, papers insure that a dialogue can develop between professor and first-year student—a dialogue that is not guaranteed if one relies solely on tests. One very earnest student I had, Wes, stopped by my desk after class early in the semester to show me a draft of his first opening paragraph. He qualified the paragraph by saying that he hadn't written anything for almost six months and had great trepidation. Wes continued this pattern of "checking in" around his writing. I could expect him to come at least every third office hour with something to run by me. He was not the only one. A steady stream of "checkerinners"

reliably appeared at office hours. Our discussions were about writing and school and work and sports. It was an ad hoc community that formed two days a week from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Writing also lends itself to community building among the students. One afternoon I found ten students in my office working on papers. Out of necessity we pooled our energies and began randomly and spontaneously reading opening paragraphs out loud and giving feedback. The brainstorming was fun and instructive but nothing rivaled the fun of all of us squashing into a little space and talking about writing and United States history. It was one of those moments that almost felt "staged'; the college catalog photographer was going to peer in at any moment and snap a shot of "engaged college students working together"; but it was for real.

Another issue in terms of being "known" is the crucial concept that first-year students come to us with a wide range of skills. Individualized instruction around writing meets students where they are and begins the process of getting them where they need to be to succeed in college. One student, Rick, was beginning college at the age of twenty-one after breezing through high school doing the minimal and then working for three years. Work in the outside world had convinced him he needed a college degree, but he was initially unable to translate that desire for a degree into work habits that would lead to attaining one. His first paper was handwritten—not typed—and provided no citations from the course readings. I would not grade it. He came to office hours and I outlined for him his task: to have the next draft show some discipline. Structure, citations and accountability were going to be expected of him. The next draft was better, not miraculous. The second and third papers of the semester were better still, not to mention typed! This young man is an example of a first-year student who was ready to allow college academic life to let him drown in his own sea of shortcuts. Failing a test would have let him off the hook, but having to write a very structured piece that would not be graded

until it met a certain threshold, hooked him.

My courses centered around one kind of writing, the five paragraph analytical essay. Remaining very focused on one kind of writing could on the surface appear to work against the tide of individualized instruction, but I found this not to be the case. By requiring a particular kind of essay, I could stress and emphasize different aspects of that essay's style with different students. For example, Rob's thesis was simplistic and missed an opportunity to analyze the situation. That became his task. Meanwhile another student, Carrie, handed in a paper with clear examples of plagiarism because she failed to use quotation marks properly. Her task became learning proper citations. Still another student, Monica, wrote convoluted sentences such as this in her first paper: "The evolution of a young nation changed interests to expand into foreign territories gained by a disregard to create a powerful nation." Improving sentence structure and clarity became the focus of her writing efforts.

The advantage of keeping to one kind of writing throughout the course was that it allowed for some variation in questions and emphasis while at the same time giving structure and consistency to the course. First-year students need both structure and consistency, and as the evaluator of these writing assignments one kind of essay was more manageable for me. I created the structure by relying on the five paragraph essay and grading these assignments using a rubric. An example of one such rubric is shown on the next page.

Evaluating Papers

A rubric essentially reads like a chart. If a thesis, for example, is "unique, offers analysis and makes connections" it is an "A' thesis and falls under the category of 90-100. There are other criteria spelled out for a "B" thesis and so forth. This rubric also spells out criteria by which to grade the main ideas and the

	90-100	**80-89**	**70-79**	**60-69**
Thesis	Precise, unique, offers analysis. Makes connections.	General. Needs more analysis. Clear. Not unique.	Describes but does not analyze.	No thesis. Inaccurate,
Main ideas	Original ideas. Supports the thesis. In the right order.	One main idea does not support the thesis.	More than one main idea does not support the thesis.	Main ideas are not provided.
Evidence	1)Evidence extracted from a variety of sources. 2)Several pieces of evidence for each idea. 3)Progresses logically. 4)Evidence is essential and original.	Of the four primary qualities for evidence the paper has three of the four.	Of the four primary qualities for evidence the paper has two of the four.	Evidence not provided adequately for any main idea. Evidence is inaccurate.

evidence. In order to correct a paper using this rubric, I would simply circle the category met by each of the three components of the essay. The actual grade would be in the range of the lowest category. For example, if a thesis was in the 80-89 range and the main ideas were there as well but the evidence only reached the threshold of the 70-79 range the paper's grade would fall somewhere between 70-79.

One of the greatest advantages of using a rubric in an entry level course with large numbers of students was that it cut down on grading time. I would circle the categories, write a few quick comments and grade it. The need for long narrative comments diminished.

The rubric has many practical advantages for the students as well. First, it allows the students and those helping the students, such as the writing center staff, to know your expectations. The rubric can change slightly from assignment to assignment but serves as a constant standard by which papers are graded.

Secondly, the rubric allows students to take control of their learning and aim for a grade. They can self-evaluate their papers and also use peer evaluations. This diminishes that feeling of many first-year students that the academic expectations of college are a mystery or unattainable. The rubric also gives us a common vocabulary. We could talk "main ideas," "supporting details," "thesis," and "evidence," and everyone is on the same page.

Thirdly, the rubric allows for consistency in grading. Students could see their improvement as their main ideas, for example, graduated from the 70's to the 80's. When correcting many essays as is necessary in an entry-level course, the rubric allowed me to remain consistent in my grading. I could correct for a while, take a break, and know when I returned, the criteria would remain consistent with the last batch of corrected papers.

Ways to Make It Work

It is all well and good to argue that teaching writing in entry level courses has many benefits; it is another thing to overcome the practical hurdles that stand in one's way of doing it. My experience has given me a few tricks of the trade that are worth passing on. First, drafts are important but I made the mistake of requiring too many of too great a length and got swamped by grading. I found that the following assignments for each paper were sufficient for giving feedback and reasonable to correct.

First, for every assignment I required a well-worked draft of the opening paragraph. I originally had the students write a complete draft, but I realized many did not put the effort into the draft knowing the grade received would not be final. I was, subsequently, spending a lot of effort that was unmatched by theirs. I also discovered that the opening paragraph more often than not was very telling about how well the paper was written. Finally, requiring a draft of the opening paragraph sent the message in actions as well as words to the student that the opening paragraph is critical and worth extra time, effort and thought.

The second part of each assignment was the final paper. I created a set of guidelines for final papers that included requirements such as no spelling mistakes, no serious grammatical errors, proper citations throughout, etc. Because the expectations were clear and drafts were integrated into the class, I also warned my students that if I ran into a spelling mistake or grammatical error I would stop reading. This encouraged students to find a source to help them proofread their work. As all experienced writers know, but a mighty few first-year students know, other eyes have to view our writing in order to catch our mistakes. By being crystal clear about expectations, and "nit picky" about the spelling and the grammar, I also found papers took less time to evaluate.

Thirdly, I allowed rewrites, required of some and optional for others. These rewrites need a clear and firm deadline to avoid the

scenario of having to read about Colonial American when the course and your energies have marched onward toward the Civil War.

I also learned some lessons concerning the number of assignments to require. I planned the course originally to include three essays and a final exam that would also have a writing component. When numbers of students in introductory courses exceed thirty students, this quantity of assignments becomes unrealistic. I have trimmed the assignments to include two essays over the course of the semester. This may sound like the shell of a "writing component," but I have found that by requiring drafts and allowing for rewrites two assignments can give students needed feedback and the opportunity of a real "writing course" within a course.

On a final note, I marched my classes to the writing center at the beginning of the semester so that all knew where it was and how it could support their writing. Many of the students embraced the writing center and in so doing provided themselves with a resource that could support them throughout their college career.

Conclusion

Teaching writing in entry level classes can facilitate the college-wide goal of improving retention of first-year students by fostering a sense of belonging to the college community. By requiring writing in entry level courses and encouraging collaboration either with peers, professors and/or the writing center, we are connecting first-year students to the academic community. Writing produces an exchange between student and teacher at a level that test taking does not require. If you can walk into the bagel shop downtown and know a students' name having gotten to know them through writing, that student is one step closer to knowing the gum blobs on the sidewalk. Connections between people is really what those gum blobs are all about anyway! Writing connects people to one another, and connections are what belonging is all about.

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Modeling Reflective Writing for the First-Year Physical Education Student

Irene Cucina

As a learner, I have always grasped new ideas and concepts by observing others. This technique has followed me as a teacher. As part of Foundations of Physical Education, which is required of all first-year physical education majors, students begin a portfolio. The portfolio is a collection of work that documents the growth and development of the student as a person and professional. Additionally, reflective statements are included for major pieces of work. The reflective statements emphasize what the student learned during the process of the assignment. The reflective statements were taught through modeling and freewrites at the Writing Center.

The portfolio process has been developed over the past three years by Dr. Joy Butler and a committee of professors in the HPER Department. The emphasis of the physical education portfolio during the first two years is on the physically educated person. Assignments in Foundations of Physical Education are based on self-discovery and an understanding of physical education as a profession. The reflective writing is essential to the portfolio process because the process of completing the assignment as well as what was learned is examined. Students find this aspect difficult to do.

Reflective writing requires the student to examine the process by verbalizing feelings and making connections with other subjects or areas in his/her life. Many students write reflective statements in the form of summary statements. Reflective statements should help the student make connections with other areas. As students begin to make connections, higher order cognitive thinking occurs.

One of the self-discovery assignments was to make a list of major life events beginning at age one to the present day. The events were categorized into the three domains of learning: 1) cognitive; 2) social; and 3) motor. Students were encouraged to contact parents and/or family members for help if necessary. Once the list was developed, I planned to have the students write a reflective statement about one vivid memory.

As the first writing assignment approached, I scheduled a class meeting at the Writing Center. Initially, students were not happy about having to go to the Writing Center for a class. Years of tracking in public school have put writing centers in a bad light. For many students, the writing center is seen as a place for remedial writers. The students said that going to the Writing Center indicated to others that you might not be able to live up to the standards of being a college student. I talked with my students about sharing drafts of my dissertation with the Writing Center staff. I explained that the feedback I received helped me to clarify my writing. I also shared my discomfort the first time I decided to ask for help. Sharing writing with another person is difficult and uncomfortable at times. Attitudes softened; however, I think they were not totally convinced of the benefits of attending the Writing Center.

The day of the scheduled visit, I was unsure of where I was going with the assignment, but hopeful that the experience would place writing in a favorable light. As the students arrived and chose an area to sit in, I talked about the importance of a comfortable

writing environment. Personal preferences were evident in the seats that were chosen. Students who work on couches and beds at home chose to sit in the soft chairs with notebooks as table rests. Students who need privacy hid behind the dividers. The students who work on desks and tables moved to the larger tables and spread themselves out.

I began the class with a 10 minute freewrite exercise. Each student was asked to write about one vivid experience while growing up. For many this was their first experience with a freewrite. As the students wrote, I joined them. Students were then asked to exchange papers with peers (if they felt comfortable sharing) for a peer review. I moved around the room and listened as students talked with each other. The majority of the writing covered sport experiences and included statements such as:

"I remember scoring my first soccer goal at 8. Then I played soccer until I was 12. At 12 I started playing football. I played on the high school team for four years."

"I have been doing gymnastics since I was five years old. My parents drove me to the gym three times per week."

"Soccer was very important to me growing up. My parents were supportive of all my activities."

Many of the students had no problems writing general statements about their experiences but the writing lacked reflection. Without thinking, I volunteered to read my freewrite out loud. I was nervous about sharing my reflections with the class; however, I knew that the students would be more successful with an example. In my freewrite I explained how I felt scoring my first goal in field hockey in the eighth grade. I vividly recounted the smell of the grass, the color of the leaves, and the temperature of that afternoon. I fondly remembered my mother sitting on the sidelines and cheering louder than any other parent. The exuberant feelings of seeing the ball go into the goal made me swell with pride. I recounted the beating of my heart and how proud and confident I felt

while my teammates congratulated me. I connected my experience with witnessing the first soccer goal my son scored, and reflected on how my mother must have felt when I scored my first goal. I read the following:

As Jonathan began ***to*** *run toward the goal, my heart started pumping louder and faster than I thought possible while standing still. I held my breath, as he pulled his leg back and kicked the ball; time seemed to stop. As the ball went into the goal and I began jumping up and down, I heard in my cheers my mother's voice from years ago. My heart swelled with love for my son's achievement and for my mother at the same time. I knew what he was feeling when his teammates were pounding him on the back. I was back in a 1970 kilt in middle school with teammates jumping all over me. I remembered the beating of my heart and the joy when I glanced at my mother: This time I was not only on the field but was standing in my mother's shoes. I wanted to immediately call my Mom and share this moment. For the first time, I realized the pride and joy my mother must have felt on that fall afternoon almost 20 years ago. I felt closer to her at that moment than at any other time in my life.*

After reading my freewrite, the students were quiet. I felt an immediate sense of panic. I had shared a private moment with a group of students and was unsure if I had made the right decision. I shared an experience that was a part of who I was and I feared ridicule. I also feared the class would not respect me for opening up to them. Of course, memories of high school English assignments came flooding back to me. The fear of people laughing or thinking I was stupid. After what seemed an eternity, the group responded with smiles and memories of their own that resembled mine. At that moment I felt complete and total relief. In my head I began to think, "this lesson might work." My apprehension began to decrease and I felt a little more confident.

I directed the class to expand on their most vivid memory and

to set the stage for the reader. Students wrote frantically. The lack of hesitation was exhilarating. I reinforced the rules of the freewrite; to not stop and correct spelling or grammar, to let the pen just write. After 10 minutes, students broke up into small groups. Students were encouraged to exchange papers if they felt comfortable doing so. Peers read the drafts and after reading the "vivid memory" they were asked to share their impression of the experience to the writer. Feedback was positive and insightful. I heard questions that were reflective and probing. One student wrote:

"One memory that stands out the most is the first time I rode a dirt bike. This memory stands out because I loved the exhilarating feeling of rolling the throttle back and accelerating so fast that the trees around me blurred together and the wind blew so fast that it was deafening."

The student who read this response asked the writer what it felt like to go that fast. The writer added the following to his final draft:

"This memory also stands out because I remember vividly how the bike felt under my control, how it bobbed and jerked as it skipped over rocks, how the smells of the forest whipped past my nostrils, and how the heat of the muffler scorched my un-panted leg. I remember how it felt to control such a powerful piece of machinery. Lastly I can recall overcoming my fear of dirt bikes."

The feedback provided during the sharing session helped the writer to reflect on an aspect that was not explored.

The one or two sentences regarding past sport experiences were expanded. The writing was expressive and substantive. One student wrote:

"Past experiences come and go, but what separates the events from the memories is the impact that something has on you for years to come. When something that happened years ago still has an affect [sic] on you, then you know it is worthy of being called a memory. Some memories have a bigger impact than others do,

and some are so influential that they are still affecting your life presently. I have had several memories that have impacted my life, but there is one special memory that outweighs all the rest. The moment in time that had the most effect on me was the many years in which I was in gymnastics. The coaches and teammates were like family to me. . . . This experience taught me strength, courage, independence, how to cope with failure, and a sense of pride. It taught me sportsmanship, and it gave me a sense of stability in my life."

The student, who had previously handwritten one sentence, expanded her thoughts to include what she had learned from her sport experience. This is exactly what I was looking for in the reflective description of work included in the portfolios.

Students were sharing information with each other that was at times very private. I was surprised how open and honest many of them were. One student shared her fear when her dad left for the Gulf War:

"He was gone almost a year. I remember that the whole year I was scared and worried. Everyday I woke up not knowing whether my father would ever come home. The kids at school would tease me and say awful things. The only thing I could do was cry and look at a picture of him on my desk. The day that he came back was one of the happiest days of my life. I realized then that I should never take advantage of anything in my life. I learned to make the best of times I share with those I love."

When I read the final papers from the assignment, I sometimes felt the pain and worry that was shared. Students were able to write about a vivid memory and connect the memory with lessons learned.

When final portfolios were turned in at the end of the semester, each sample was prefaced with a reflective statement that was insightful and connected. Brief summaries were replaced with analysis and synthesis of work samples. Reflective writing is one

method used to explore connections with other subjects as well as with professional experiences. Too frequently, students compartmentalize learning, keeping course content in separate boxes. Reflective writing is a process that encourages broader thinking as well as the interconnectedness with not only the physical education core and option classes but also with material learned in General Education classes.

I continued asking students to freewrite during the course of the semester. Students looked forward to issues and topics that were integrated into the course designed to encourage writing. I offered incentives when students used the Writing Center for assignments. Grading was made easier by the many trips my students made to the Writing Center during the semester. The final product that the students have in the portfolio is an excellent foundation to build on during the next three years.

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Innovative Writing Assignments in the Natural Sciences

Len Reitsma

Since I began teaching at PSC in the fall of 1992, I have tried to increase the amount of writing requirements and writing instructions in the upper level biology courses that I teach. This increased amount of writing directly follows from having concurrently required that students exercise the scientific method in these courses, that is, test hypotheses, analyze data, and write up the study in a scientific format. Because of this focus in the upper-level courses I teach, all my 300-level courses are now "W" courses. Here I describe several of the ways that I try to integrate writing instruction into these courses. I then address the appropriateness of these approaches for first-year students. Some of these strategies are based upon the successes and advice of my colleagues in the Natural Science Department (NSD). The degree to which any of these strategies or techniques may be applicable to introductory, first-year courses also depends upon the size of the class and the specific goals of the class.

General instruction in scientific writing—The biology majors at PSC are alerted very early to the value and availability of a well-written guide to scientific writing, Jan Pechnik's *Writing for the*

Sciences. Scientific writing is unlike other types of writing in that the premium is placed upon being precise and concise, and also because of the rather rigid format of published scientific studies: Abstract, Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Literature Cited. Many of the NSD faculty require that students read primary literature in this format, and several faculty also require written work in this format.

In general, I rarely assign a written scientific paper without also assigning the submission of a first draft which I or other students critique (more on peer review below). This critique is most thorough on the first assigned paper of each class. The focus of the critique is on the overall format and content of individual sections of the paper, but I also correct grammar and spelling. I do not grade first drafts. A clear pattern has emerged, however, in which the most substantive, precise first drafts always result in the best final drafts–no surprise. But I also have noted much progress on the part of those students who begin the class with less skill in scientific writing. In fact, some of us in the NSD who assign fair amounts of scientific writing comment to each other regarding how easy it is to identify a student who has already been through the process, regardless of the initial instructor.

So, multiple drafts are a common practice, usually just a first draft but sometimes two drafts before the final. By helping students develop a better sense of the content of a scientific paper, instructors help students comprehend peer-reviewed journal articles as well.

Special assignments

1. *Peer review*–In certain classes, students have been required to both author and critique scientific papers of their peers. Reviewers are often best if they are randomly assigned, and this is accomplished using an alphabetical listing of the class with reviewer following author. If two such assignments are given in a

single class, the reviewer is changed for the second assignment. Peer review affords at least three benefits. First, students get a better appreciation of their peer context. They become more familiar with the skill-level of their classmates. This can be reaffirming, but it can also present a challenge. The challenge sometimes comes from certain students' realization of a greater skill level among their fellow students. Second, I can review the peer reviews and gain insight into the clarity of the paper and the level of critical thinking demonstrated by the reviewer (I do grade reviews, so far in a relatively non-rigorous manner). Third, the author receives input from others. At times I find it necessary to qualify or augment a critical comment made by a reviewer, but the overall input of multiple reviewers improves the final product.

In one class, I randomly assigned students to groups of four (more below) and each group submitted their co-authored paper to another group. Each member of the group used a different color pen when critiquing so I could identify individual reviewers–of course, allowances must be made for the order in which reviewers critiqued a paper because the initial review is likely to pick up the greater number of obvious flaws. This group approach increases the sense of context each student experiences in learning to write scientifically. That is, students get greater exposure to the level of critical thinking that occurs during this process.

2. *Group authorship*-In a recent upper-level class, I randomly divided a class of 16 into four groups of four (again using the alphabetical list of students). The class had collectively obtained data from the field-morphometric data from birds captured in mist nets and released after data collection–and we used the dataset to generate four testable hypotheses. Each group then selected a hypothesis to test (mostly by mutual consent) and we laid out the timetable for due dates of first drafts, peer review completion, and submission of final drafts.

The merits of this approach are numerous. Any effort that requires group cohesion, delegation of tasks, and peer input at all stages has a host of intrinsic values. The group approach is an efficient means of having all students involved in written work without generating one paper per student. I was pleased with the potential of this assignment and the relative ease of using it for assessment, so I did it again with the same class. In some cases, certain individuals wrote the easier Methods section each time. Others tackled tougher sections. But in general, I was happy with the way this approach brought the students together. Another benefit to this approach is the way it forces students to meet outside of class time for specific academic purposes. The students were generally in favor of this approach even though they knew that a single grade would be attached to each group paper. I do not recommend this approach without any individual assessment of writing, but I believe it was a positive complement to individual work.

3. *Journals*—Regular writing in journals is common in college courses at PSC and elsewhere. I use journals in a combination of ways and I agree with others that they have many values. In my upper level classes, students are instructed to get a bound notebook of any size at the beginning of the class. I give the students a hand-out describing the potential uses of the journals. Journals are confidential so I tell them they may write whatever they like over the course of the semester. I also give them assigned entries such as scientific journal articles to read. In such cases, I ask the students to either react to the article, critique it, or relate it to an experience of their own. For example, a student may read an article on forest fragmentation and relate an experience about the destruction of a forest remnant in their own neighborhood. I have also used journals to get students to capsulate a film viewed in a lab (which I indulge them in very sparingly), or to comment on an outdoor lab and provide a species list of what was seen or heard. I

collect the journals approximately 8-10 times throughout the semester, but only keep them for one day or one weekend in order to insure that they will have the journals most any time they have the urge to write.

Some students view the journals as an assignment and their journals have nothing more than what was assigned, which is fine. In fact, students who do not take the opportunity to personalize their journals often still have very thoughtful prose. Other students use the journal for many purposes. I have read thoughtful evaluations of lectures, labs, and field trips, and the value of these student evaluations is heightened by the fact that their impressions are fresh, from events recently experienced. I have also read journal entries with personal content. Journals can be valuable ways for instructors to get to know students. Many of the students who choose to write about personal things are quiet in class. They appear to relish the opportunity to reveal some more of themselves through this forum, and they do so more readily with the strictly positive comments I make in the margins like "Cool" or "Wow" or "I remember the first time I saw a Pileated Woodpecker. . ." In other words, I encourage them to continue to write freely.

The semester-end evaluation of the journals does not end up being a significant part of a student's final grade, although a student can reveal certain strengths that may not come out in any other method of assessment. But the journal has become a valuable instrument to me. I never correct grammar or spelling, and the students realize there is no penalty for mistakes of this kind. The journal allows me to discern which students are the most capable of distilling scientific literature, and for those who so choose, I get to know them better. I have never had a student be indiscreet in a journal entry. I am not concerned about this happening either.

Relevance to first-year students

Of the three categories of writing assignments described above,

the only one I use with first-year students is the journal in IAC. This is the only strictly first-year student course I am involved with. In IAC, the NSD biologists attempt to compose two sections of strictly biology majors. This has not been 100% effective to date for logistic reasons. We attempt this in the hopes of building a sense of community among the majors as early as possible. We also have attempted this in order to cover certain topics in IAC that are especially relevant to biology majors such as scientific writing, a briefer on statistics, and the particulars of Boyd Hall. I had IAC students use journals to enter written reactions to reading assignments, short chapters in a book of essays. but they were also told they could write whatever they liked and it would be kept confidential. While the concept is workable. the book Ichose wac not generally popular (*Ever Since Darwin* by Stephen J. Gould). But I learned that a group of TAC students also contains a percentage of students who relish the opportunity to get a bit more personal using this format-sort of like letter writing to their instructor. This can be an important medium for wine first-semester students to form even a small connection to PSC, which is so important at this stage of their college careers.

The other approaches to writing in the classroom could potentially be useful to first-year students. especially students who will need to develop scientific writing skills. The general approach of incorporating greater amounts of peer involvement in each student's written work are transferable to other majors, other disciplines. Team writing exposes students to the work of their peers in a different way. By requiring that one or two assignments be co-authored, the instructor gets the students sharing their relative strengths and weaknesscs. The obvious criticism of this approach is that the strong may carry the weak.The danger of this is minimal if these approaches are used to augment individual writing assignments.

The benefit of getting students more involved in the learning process can arguably outweigh the risk of giving a specific student

too much or too little credit, And too, instructors should have an accurate sense of whether a team has benefited from a strong student. Indeed, instructors may make bold to pair the strong with the weak purposely if the method of evaluating the outcome is creative and can be sensibly and sensitively articulated to the students. When it comes to assigning and evaluating written work at the college level, first year and upper level work, we need to be open to new ideas, new approaches, creative ways to engage the students more in the course content and in each other's work.

Writing to First-Year Students

by a

Student-Centered Class

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Writing Into the Curriculum: Adventures in Advanced Composition

Alys Culhane and Randy Stebbins

Introduction
by Alys Culhane

In the Fall '98 semester I taught Advanced Composition. During the course of the semester, my students and I produced a class book, the audience of which was first-year students, entitled Spirits of Change. *The focus of the completed anthology was on self-policing, as it related to campus partying. The collective message was: "Party responsibly."*

I had no idea what any of my students actually learned until one such individual, Randy Stebbins, said that he was interested in writing about his experiences as they related to this particular class. I said that this was an excellent idea and further suggested that he should submit his completed piece to The WAC Journal. *After talking with Randy, I elected to write a complementary essay, one in which I wrote about teaching a student-centered class.*

Part One: Writing to the First-Year Student by Randy Stebbins

"I feel that these girls and that guy are pretty damn stupid. This story shows how idiotic some people are. I have no idea why we read this, probally [sic] it is some alcohol awarness [sic] lesson or somthing [sic]."

"This is a good point to make about poor judgement. It is not always easy to take the easy road, meaning it doesn't always lead to the quick end."

These two different individuals are talking about the same piece of writing. The quotes are from first-year students who read an essay during an IAC class conducted by Ms. Kate Newell-Coupe of Plymouth State College's Education Department. The comments were scrawled on the back of Kate Langheim's "Two Minutes Feels Like Forever," a startling memoir about making a bad decision and getting in a car with a very drunk driver. Ms. Langheim's work appears in *Spirits of Change,* an anthology of student writing published by Dr. Alys Culhane's Advanced Composition class in the Fall semester of 1998.

Spirits of Change came about because the Advanced Composition students in Dr. Culhane's class wanted to use their writing to bring about a change in first-year students, perhaps preventing them from making mistakes that could hurt them in the years to come. Incoming students learn behaviors that may stay with them their entire first year and, in many cases, the rest of their college life. These students learn about the beauty of unsupervised living. They find out about the wild, drunken parties going on anytime of the week. They discover that women are being attacked and harassed on and off campus. Most of them learn, and the rest get at least a glimmer of the idea that the excessive use of any substance and/or excessive behavior has emotional, physical, and financial costs. With all that learning going on there was a ready, and at least semi-

willing, audience for the kind of personal writing that is in *Spirits of Change*. The writing and publishing of the anthology was the result of student efforts to make a difference.

Believing that a forty-odd-page anthology of student essays would forever change the hearts and minds of incoming freshmen is akin to believing in the Easter Bunny. That gargantuan cony doesn't really hop, hop, hop along, but he does bring some light to the lives of many children. The students involved in *Spirits of Change* didn't advocate excessive sugar consumption, but they did want to shed some light on two ugly facts of campus life, excessive drinking and its cost. The painful and frustrating story of the production of the anthology is a story that is still affecting those advanced composition students and the English Department faculty.

September was sliding toward October and Plymouth State College was about four weeks into the Fall semester when PSC President, Dr. Donald P. Wharton, fitted himself into a student desk in a Rounds Hall classroom. Student antics and muttering came to a halt as he settled in and looked around.

I said, "Good morning, Dr. Wharton, my name is Randy Stebbins and I have been volunteered to begin our discussion. You were invited here so that we could talk with you about student drinking, student violence, and the heavy-handed, disruptive police presence on and off campus." Thus began a frank, and sometimes strained discussion about issues which we as students and aspiring writers believed were affecting our education and our development as citizens.

Autumn and the resumption of school had brought increasing numbers of student arrests and confrontations with police and town residents. The ongoing friction between students and authorities seemed unavoidable. My fellow students and I wanted to do something about the problems, but we were unsure how we could help

resolve the multiple issues facing the student body and the college's administration. Continually talking about the problems in class was getting nowhere. We had the desire. We needed guidance. Our professor, Dr. Culhane, invited Dr. Wharton to our class, and that was the first step in a new direction.

The course structure changed dramatically. Drawing on her personal teaching experience and on Jane Tompluns' essay, "Pedagogy of the Distressed, " our professor decided to let us determine how we would learn. In her essay, Tompkins describes how she relinquished her role as performer in front of the classroom and gave her students control over the structure and nature of their learning. In addition to creating a student-centered classroom, Dr. Culhane suggested we publish an anthology of student writing related to the problems we had been discussing in class. This proposal, plus the novelty of directing our own learning, appealed to us and so we enthusiastically embraced the idea. After discussion and a vote, the class accepted Dr. Culhane's challenging offer. A syllabus revision committee was selected. Working with the professor, this committee presented us with a new syllabus within the week. The combination of the initial professor-centered syllabus, along with our new student-directed approach, accomplished three goals. First, we would be writing the memoir, place, and profile non-fiction pieces that were the core of the course. Second, we would find out how to write these pieces through our own efforts. Third, we would gain practical experience with group organization, leadership and the mechanics of editing and publishing.

Lest you think anarchy reigned, know that Dr. Culhane did not simply throw open the gates to Rome and invite the Visigoths to plunder at will. She exercised professorial control when we wandered off course, and gave us the benefit of her education and experience through intensive one-on-one conferencing. She also initiated and guided some in-class discussion and showed us her personal enthusiasm for our project. We were excited about using writing to accomplish a specific goal. James Joyce said that if he

could get the particulars of a story, he would have the universal We would soon discover how our individual particulars carried at least some of Joyce's universal within them. Classroom theory was meeting the real world. Language as artifact was meeting language as social construct.

The initial enthusiasm quickly waned and, as many group projects do, our effort degenerated into committee formation and shot-gunned assignments. Point that shotgun at a consensual agreement not to have an editor-in-chief and we had a plan for a boat that was not going to float. We managed to overcome the initial difficulties of organization by being persistent, but there were other problems. Just as in Tompkins' student-centered class, we experienced immediate discord and significant emotional disruption. Spending a day in endless discussion about material we had covered in a previous session frayed our nerves. This resulted in angry, sometimes personal remarks. Students failed to read assigned essays and came to class unprepared to discuss the relevance of the readings. Others failed to make a distinction between literary and personal criticism and saw all efforts at a constructive critical response as an attack upon their very selves. Time was sometimes wasted, and everyone involved had strong opinions about how class time should be used.

While preparing to write this article, some three months after the conclusion of the Advanced Composition course, I talked with several of my fellow students about their reactions and about what they had learned in the class. Not unexpectedly, given the severe emotional reactions to the structure and progression of the course, many of these students claimed they had learned nothing from the class. Their remarks were almost entirely detailed criticisms about interpersonal conflicts with other students and the professor. Little substantive criticism came out of my discussions with classmates. Most of them "hated the class," "didn't learn anything about writing" or "didn't know what they had learned." Many also complained that "everything was too personal." These comments are similar

to some made about Tompkins' student-centered class. Also, like many of Tompkins' students, many of my classmates did not function well in a non-traditional classroom. By and large, those who failed stumbled because they did not take responsibility for their own learning. The absence of a performer at the head of the room convinced many of them that nothing could be learned. This attitude was surprising given the educational level of the class. We were all juniors or seniors and most of us were English majors. I did not expect the acrimony and carping that characterized many of the class periods, but perhaps those who were unhappy did not understand that we were trying to reach a larger audience than just our professor and peers.

In contrast, the students who actively participated in class, the project work, and especially the eventual publication of *Spirits of Change,* had an entirely different take on the course. These students told me they had learned how to write non-fiction. More importantly, they said they learned as much about their fellow students and about the dynamics of group work as they did about writing. Specifically, they learned that not everything someone says is necessarily true or meaningful and that a spoken commitment to a group goal is easy, but that the actual implementation of a commitment is much harder to accomplish. However, these students were not overwhelmingly positive. They had uniformly negative reactions about in-class disruptions and outbursts. Judged against the accurate nature of hindsight, there also was overall agreement that we should not have switched learning methods during the semester. Everyone involved felt that it would have been better to have begun the student-led method at the start of the term, yet every class session gave us insight not only into the mechanics of non-fiction, but into the workings of our fellow students' minds and hearts. There was learning going on in Rounds Hall. It was painful at times, wonderful at others, unavailable some days, and difficult always. Four weeks into the semester we had reversed our concept of how learning is accomplished in college. It was

proving to be an immense challenge.

Some of our classmates, squawking about not learning anything because there was not a professor lecturing, dropped the course without testing the water. Others faded into the background and floated in the calm headwaters of what would become, at times, a vicious river sweeping its streambed clean. Still others found something buoyant and hung on, paddling hard to stay in the middle of the torrent, away from the snags. The remaining abecedarians joined forces and worked to get the unwieldy boat we had designed downstream and docked without drowning anyone. Most importantly, we wanted to deliver the vessel's cargo to its intended recipient, PSC first-year students.

The first-year student was an obvious choice for our audience. During our classroom discussions we talked of our own experiences as new students and what we had done and thought. We decided that we could do the most good by relaying our experiences and asking, through our writing, that the student body enforce its own rules for acceptable conduct. We had no illusions about changing behaviors that had become an informal norm at PSC, but we wanted our voices heard. We knew there was someone out there who would listen. To gauge first-year student opinions about our project, four of our classmates visited Dr. Culhane's introduction to literature classes. I was fortunate to be one of those visitors, and I found that the new students had strong opinions about our idea. The first-year students were initially reluctant to talk about drinking and bad behavior, but they quickly loosened up and readily gave us their ideas. They liked the concept of our project, but many were unsure about its effectiveness. When drawn out more, some of them said that they would read the stories as long as they were not preachy. Reasoning that writing that does something is worthwhile, we carried on.

It became obvious that we were not simply writing to the first-year student. We were writing across the curriculum, believing that all departments should have access to our publication. We

believed that it could be of use in any classroom, not just English or the social sciences. We had an opportunity to influence students throughout the college. Additionally, our desire to target incoming students would actually drive our writing into the curriculum through the Introduction to the Academic Community classroom.

IAC was the obvious choice to place our anthology and one of our committees contacted the IAC instructors. A few of the instructors agreed to use *Spirits of Change* in their classroom. This energized our production and gave us the audience we felt we needed, but it also brought up an entirely new set of problems for us to understand and manage.

Targeting a particular audience for a piece of writing is far different from writing for oneself or for a professor. Questions immediately arose about pedagogy, didacticism and how we might avoid a Falwellian voice in our writing, particularly in our memoir pieces. It would be easy to write a "this happened to me so don't do what I did" kind of memoir, but I knew writing of that nature did not work. Why would first-year students, flush with new freedom and hungry for experience of any kind, read and learn from our memoirs? These questions were answered through in-class discussion and especially through readings such as Norman Sim's "The Literary Journalists," his introduction to the anthology of the same name. We also read Frank Cannon's memoir "Rat Patrol: A Saga" and Lauren Salter's "Black Swans" in *Best American Essays 1997*. These two memoirs, though personal accounts of the authors' lives, touched on our individual experiences. In talking about the work we realized we could reach the first-year student by writing about ourselves. In the end, we wrote our memoir pieces for ourselves, making sense out of our particulars and finding Joyce's universal appeal at the same time. Our stories became the stones of our peers. While the names and places were different, the emotions and perspectives were familiar.

Finding a universal appeal in a non-fiction piece about a place

was a different task. How does a place have anything to do with the issues of violence, drinking, and boorish behavior? Again, our class examined these issues as a group. We read John McPhee's "Travels in Georgia" and Joan Didion's "Salvador" to see how other authors handled writing about a place. We began to see the connection between a place and humanity through their work and our discussions. The results of our learning is especially evident in Jamie Ramsey's essay from *Spirits of Change* , entitled "St. Peter Doesn't Play Beirut." Ms. Ramsey writes about the connections between the places she has been, and her awakening to a new understanding of her place in the world shows how an environment affects our lives and influences how and why we act as we do. Her discovery, while at a rowdy house party, of the contradiction between the debauchery of the party and the solemnity of the church across the street, led her to a moral epiphany that marks her to this day. She is not a Puritan, but neither is she now taking the types of risks or engaging in the boorish behavior that many first-year students do.

Shortly after writing the place essay, we were asked to compose a profile piece on a living, breathing human being. This initially presented an obvious and easy connection to our class goals. We would simply find a person directly related to our subject, such as Campus Police Chief John Clark, write a few pages about him and that would be it. Our perception of the simplicity of the task belied its true nature. Telling the biographical story of a person, even if they had intimate knowledge of our subject and were of interest to our audience, would not be sufficient. The real question was how do we tell the story of a person in such a way that he or she becomes a human being struggling with the problems of living, just as our target audience does each day. And how does the profiled person's humanity affect the job they are doing, or the behavior they are engaged in? How do we make them real and connected to our purpose? Again. we read and talked. We had

Jane Kramer's profile of a Texas cowboy from *The Literary Journalists*, and Hinton Als' piece about his mother, "Notes on my Mother," from *Best American Essays 1997.* Writing to effect change was proving to be difficult with the profile piece, and submissions to our journal dropped in response to that difficulty. That we published one piece, my profile of President Wharton, "Who Hath Woe?' in the journal is testimony, not to my prowess, but to the structure of the course and the input and criticism of the active students in the class. The acceptance and inclusion of this profile piece completed the writings that we needed to publish a thoughtful, effective anthology.

The self-discovery we experienced and the self-directed learning we struggled with could not have taken place in an ordinary, professor-centered classroom; it took the kind of student-centered pedagogy that prevailed in our advanced composition class. The technique of having students grapple with the questions of how to make a piece of writing relevant to a stated purpose was more effective than lecturing would ever be. We wrote across the curriculum, into the curriculum, and were educated in the bargain.

We had, each in our own way, navigated a tumultuous river and, except for some chafed skin and bruised feelings, we were safe on shore. It had been an exhilarating ride, but I was glad it was over. We had weathered unorthodox pedagogy, personal doubts and public criticism. It was an adventure in living. It made some of us better people, and that is what this college experience is all about. isn't it?

Part Two: Making the Underlife the Overlife
by Alys Culhane

I originally decided to write about my experiences in teaching advanced composition because I wanted to come to grips with what were some very deep-rooted feelings of ambivalence. On some days I thought that last semester's advanced composition class was the best course that I ever taught; on other days, that it was the worst. However, in the process of writing, another motive emerged: I determined that I wanted to remind my colleagues that real learning takes place when both teachers and students take risks. Last semester, I took a major risk in that I opted to use a more student-centered approach; I allowed my advanced composition students to participate in the decision-making process as this related to the day-to-day running of the class; I encouraged them to make their stories the focal point around which the class revolved; and I assisted them in making the transitional leap from private to public writing when they decided to share their work with a campus-wide audience.

Having the above in mind, I decided to write a narrative, one in which I provided readers with some nuts and bolts strategies in relation to student-centered teaching practices. And I decided to write about how teachers might deal with something that goes hand-in-hand with student-centered teaching: underlife behavior; those activities that students engage in to subvert the institutional status-quo.

At the beginning of last semester, I decided to make creative nonfiction the focal point around which advanced composition revolved. This was not a new or radical idea. Many nationally-known compositionists, including Chris Anderson, Wendy Bishop, Toby Fulwiler, and Michael Steinberg, have been doing this for some time. These writer-teachers believe that reliance upon a creative

nonfiction emphasis encourages students to develop a more writerly ethos. This is because the more open-ended characteristics of this genre gives students permission to work inductively and explore topics of self-interest. The above writer-teachers also contend that students learn the importance of implicit argumentation when creative nonfiction is used as a stylistic model.

Because I planned to forgo teaching advanced composition the way it had previously been taught (as a course in explicit argumentation) I left nothing to chance. I wrote up a detailed syllabus and put together a course reader. I decided that the focus of the course would be on defining style and alternate style, and, as well, on how writers use both to achieve their given rhetorical intent.

Student writers would begin the semester by coming up with class definitions of both. They'd next look at how other writers were defining these terms. (The stylists include E.B. White, Richard Lanhain, and Lois Johnson Rew; the alternate stylists include Tom Wolfe, Winston Weathers, and Robert Root.) They'd then come up with a more encompassing definition, one that they'd draw upon in writing their own essays. My reasoning in taking such an approach was anything but haphazard. In defining style, students would discover that the majority of creative nonfiction writers are working within the boundaries of pre-determined conventions. Furthermore, in defining alternate style, they'd discover that there are a handful who in their work are attempting to push the boundaries of these conventions to extremes. Additionally, my hope was that in writing their own pieces that they'd make the connection between theory and practice. I further deduced that having students write memoir, place, and profile essays would complement this intent. The focal point of a memoir is oneself, the focal point of a place piece is the setting, and the focal point of a profile piece is another individual. I determined that in relying upon the conventions of all three, students would learn that in order to make their experiences resonate with their readers, they'd have to rely

upon the use of particulars. They'd also learn that it isn't enough to narrate or expostulate; in order to keep your reader's attention, you have to use both. Their stories needed to support their claims and vice-versa. Writings by (among others) Charles Simic, Lauren Slater, Frank Gannon and Gay Talese would support this premise.

My first day-jitters were intensified by the fact that I was a new faculty person. But because I had a plan, I wasn't overly anxious. Emboldened by my careful syllabus preparation, I bounced into Rounds 204, took a seat, and in a very upbeat voice asked, "Does anyone have any good stories?" The course enrollees, mostly juniors and seniors, talked about courses, commuting, life in general. They listened to one another and asked sensible questions. This, I thought, is going to be my best class ever.

What may have appeared to my students to be a spontaneous gesture had been carefully contrived. I sensed having students share stories would give them (as writers) a better sense of their more immediate audience. I also reasoned that articulating their ideas to others would allow them to stockpile what I called "essay fodder." Additionally, I believed that sharing narratives would subvert underlife behavior.

As defined by Compositionist Robert Brooke in "Underlife and Writing Instruction," underlife activity includes note-passing, talking while the teacher is talking, and changing the topic of class conversation. Brooke contends that engaging in underlife behavior enables students to establish identities that are in opposition to those which are mandated by the given institution. Brooke makes his point with a rather telling example. He writes about two students who, when the subject of potatoes was brought up in class, began a conversation amongst themselves about how potatoes are used to make vodka. In talking, these students implicitly agree that it isn't the subject of potatoes which is important; what's important is what one might do with potatoes. Essentially, these two individuals are countering their academic identity by coming up

with one that is radically different. In this case they are taking on the roles of consumers and producers of alcohol.

I have always been wary of underlife behavior. For me, there's nothing more disheartening as a teacher than for students to show disinterest in subjects that I feel passionate about. I'd previously dealt with this by gritting my teeth and ignoring the underlife. But after giving the matter considerable thought, I opted to make the underlife the overlife. As I define it , the overlife is the subject that emerges when teachers make the connections between the given subject matter and the student's area of interest. For example, a writing teacher might switch gears and ask the vodka makers to do an I-search paper on the subject of alcohol production. Or an economics teacher might have students do a supply and demand study, using vodka consumption as a model.

I'd make the underlife the overlife by encouraging students to bring their stories to the forefront of class discussion. They'd then draw upon their stories in filling the course writing requirements

After a few weeks I sensed that I was on to something. In relation to my student's stories, I saw no signs of underlife behavior. I also noticed that a common theme was emerging, which was that of campus unrest. Students acknowledged that Plymouth State College is a party school. And yes, PSC has all the problems that go with this label including documented cases of sexual assault, excessive drinking, public rowdiness, and poor class attendance. What, I repeatedly asked. might be done about this? No one agreed, but everyone had answers. Students suggested that there be more and less police intervention, more and less interaction with area citizenry, and more and less focus on the underage drinking problem. No, students couldn't seem to find a common ground, but as I told them, at least the general tenor of the class was one of respect.

Yes, we were on to something. And because we were on to something. I surmised that students should be given the opportunity to share their ideas with a larger audience. This opportunity presented itself when, at a new faculty get-together, PSC President

Donald Wharton spoke to six of us newcomers about the importance of getting to know our students.

"You need to get to know each and every one of your students on a first-name basis," he said. "The one-on-one contact is what gives students a sense of belonging and commits them to remaining at this institution."

I had an idea. I'd invite President Wharton to meet with my students.

When I told my students that I'd scheduled a class visit with President Wharton, they were both astonished and skeptical. They told me that they'd never before had a PSC administrator attend one of their classes. And they seriously doubted that the One At the Top would take time off from his busy schedule to talk with them. Said one student, "Things like this don't happen around here."

After President Wharton and I agreed on a meeting time, I told my students that if they were serious about being heard, that they'd need to get their ideas on paper. Seeing them hem and haw, I added, "The President is more apt to take your claims into consideration if you present them to him in an organized fashion. Plus, taking the time to get your ideas on paper will help you to better determine what is and isn't important."

In preparation, everyone did a freewrite in which they considered the question, "What are the problems here in relation to campus unrest, and how might they be dealt with administratively?" In the weekend in between putting their thoughts on paper and the President's visit, a group of four collected and read the freewrites then wrote up a working document.

On the day of his visit, President Wharton strode into the room and took a seat. I noticed that he looked uncomfortable. So did my students. I wondered if I'd erred in asking him to visit. But my feelings of unease dissipated as my students spoke from an outline that contained a list of their concerns. All, including President

Wharton, talked, listened, took notes. President Wharton concluded the fifty-minute session by telling my students that many of their ideas made sense to him. He added that he'd meet with PSC Police Chief John Clark and talk further about one of their primary concerns, the lack of nighttime on-campus lighting. The students were pleased with this final gesture because he'd indicated to them that he was going to act upon their ideas.

I was elated because it appeared as though my students were interested in making the PSC climate more conducive to learning. Riding high on this wave of optimism, I suggested that they put together a class book, one in which they told their own stories in relation to campus unrest. This seemed to me to be most appropriate in relation to Advanced Composition, an upper-level writing course. Furthermore, the publication of a book would allow the student writers to make their ideas known to an audience that extend& beyond their teachers and peers. But providing a public forum was not my only reason for suggesting that the class put together a class book. I acted because I was seeing signs of the underlife. It was getting increasingly more difficult to make the connections between my students' stories and the subjects of style or alternate style. Any time I tried to initiate discussion in relation to the readings, they became inattentive. My students, however, seemed to be very enthusiastic about the prospect of going public with their ideas. Before putting this idea to a class vote, I warned them that such an endeavor would require a great deal of work on their part. "Think before you vote," I said. "If you decide to put out a class book, you'll end up having to put in additional time outside of class." Undaunted by my caveat, they unanimously decided to pursue this project.

My students accomplished a great deal in nine-week's time. They established editorial, copy-editing, fund-raising, and liaison committees, set up a production schedule and wrote memoir, place, and profile pieces. They also decided that the audience for *Spirits*

of Change would be incoming students. This decision had a profound effect on their work in that they immediately began talking about how they might write "to" this particular audience. All agreed that the intent was not to put out a book in which the message was that partying was bad. Rather, it was to put out a book in which the message was that it's okay to party – but for the sake of all involved, try to use some common sense.

While in the process of working on innumerable drafts, four students elected to share their work with two of my Introduction to Literature classes, which are comprised primarily of first-year students. Randy Stebbins and Abigail Hodgeman read their essays to one class. And Erik Kleinschmidt and Jen Hall read to the other class. At the onset, in both classes, the advanced composition students appeared to be uncomfortable. This was understandable. Before them, in both classes, were 30 somewhat skeptical individuals. As usual, the baseball hats were pulled down to brow level. And those who I'd dubbed the "slouchers" had slunk down low in their chairs. Moreover, the student readers were also nervous because they were going public with what were some very personal stories; Abigail had written about date rape; Erik about a rowdy dorm party; Randy about his-perceptions as a non-trad in relation to the Plymouth party scene, and Jen about her experiences as an underage drinker at a frat party. The readers, however, needn't have worried; the majority of the Introduction to Literature students listened intently to what they had to say.

The post-reading discussions were lively. In both classes, the female students were the most vocal. In one class, the discussion centered around the dangerous party scene, as this related to slipping rolfies in drinks. And in the other class discussion centered around the fears that they had in relation to campus safety.

The next day, I talked with the Advanced Composition students about what I observed when Randy and Abigail, and Erik and Jen went public with their work. My intent in talking about

the class visit was to make audience concerns seem less like an abstract concept. I noted that when the Advanced Composition students read they seemed to become aware when their audience's attention peaked and plummeted. I also pointed out that the readers became super-attentive when, in the subsequent discussions, students referred to their individual stories. I concluded by asking, how does this relate to your concerns about your audience, first-year students. They concluded that they needed to 1.Think about the vocabulary limitations of first-year students 2.Refrain from talking down to them. 3.Try to keep from sounding preachy and 4.Write their stories in such a way that incoming students might take them to heart.

In many ways, the underlife became the overlife. Although drafts were often late, students willingly shared their memoir, place, and profile pieces with one another. The majority of the time, group members were encouraging and supportive. All recognized that everyone had something important to say. This included the members of the editorial committee, who in keeping with the theme of self-policing had to reject some of the submissions.

My students and I also talked at length about how the class was and wasn't functioning. Even those who had divested themselves from the project felt no qualms about expressing their dissatisfaction in relation to how things were going. And so, by the semester's end, I felt the sense of satisfaction that comes when a teacher feels that everyone has learned something.

The above suggests that all went smoothly. For the record, it did not. At times, the underlife did rear its ugly head. The majority of our problems centered around student indifference as this related to doing the work. In most cases everyone did their jobs, but some did little more. In the words of one editorial committee member, "I've done my share of the work. I don't think I should have to do the work of the slackers."

My sense that I was riding on the underlife/overlife

rollercoaster made itself most evident during the last three weeks of the semester. Since the copy-editing committee didn't have the time to assist me in preparing the day's lesson, I planned to talk about some of the specifics of copy editing, using two essays that were going into the book as examples. When I asked students to list specific things that the copy editors should look for when copy editing, their eyes glazed over. Finally, after getting some semblance of a list together, I suggested that we look at one of the unedited pieces. Their responses went something like this:

"I think that this is just fine. This is a great piece of writing."

"This flows."

"So and so worked really hard on this essay. I see nothing wrong with it."

"This flows."

"We can't make any suggestions. That would be messing with her style."

"If we copy edit this. we'll change the voice. I don't want to change this. It's very unique."

"This flows."

I left the classroom feeling dubious about this particular project. I hoped that there would be a resurgence of interest in the copy-editing phase of production since a bad final product would negate what, on the part of many of my students, was thirteen week's hard work.

After break, the class missed three final deadlines. Finally, four students who believed in the project took charge. One of these students was Randy, who had become the unofficial Editor-In-Chief. During the course of the semester he had projected the ethos of a hard-working student. He made sure that his classmates were prepared for President Wharton's visit. And he often led class discussions. But it was during the final stages of production that his strengths as a leader became most apparent.

On the Friday before our fourth and final deadline, I announced

to the class that I didn't think that *Spirits of Change* would be done before the end of the semester.

"The manuscript needs to be carefully copy edited," I said. "And we're still lacking a preface, a table of contents page, an acknowledgements page, and a completed survey."

The response from one student (who'd missed eight classes) was that we ought to "bag the project." Much to my dismay, about a dozen of the twenty class members agreed with his informal motion. But before I could say anything, Randy spoke up:

"We committed ourselves to this project, so we should finish it," he said.

In response, eight or so students nodded their heads.

Seeing as there was some support for his idea, Randy began rallying the troops. Jumping out of his chair, he clapped his hands and shouted, "Okay, everyone, let's start copy editing."

"Where?" asked one student. "There's a class in here this afternoon. It's getting close to finals time. All the machines in the other computer clusters are being used."

"I'll ask if we can use the computers in the English Department Reading and Writing Center," I replied.

By 2 p.m. seven students had gathered in the Reed House. Their final goal was to assist Randy in making *Spirits of Change* a readable document. By Saturday, the number of writer/editors had dwindled to four. Together, Randy, Abigail, Laura Lavriviere and I worked for an additional six days, writing the preface and acknowledgement pages and doing the much-needed substance and copy editing. The students were in good spirits, but of course were frustrated because so much had to be done in a short amount of time. Additionally, they were concerned about time constraints because final exam week was two days away. Much to the relief of all, *Spirits of Change* was delivered to the printer during the middle of exam week. The class celebrated by hosting a reception. (Among others) President Wharton, Dean of Student Affairs Richard Hage,

and PSC Police Chief John Clark were in attendance.

I can only speculate as to what those enrolled in my advanced composition course thought they learned last semester. Self-evaluations are always problematic in that students, in being close to the material, aren't able to see how it might relate to other things that they've learned. The same goes for teachers. At the semester's end my students' high degree of resistance made me think that I'd been unsuccessful in making the underlife the overlife. Furthermore, I believed that their recalcitrance stemmed from the fact that the majority didn't want to do the work. I still believe this to be true. But after giving the matter even more thought, I determined that there was another reason why most hadn't put their hearts and souls into this project; the problem was that most felt uneasy about supporting what they saw as a non-drinking stance. The majority (who were primarily juniors and seniors) had forged identities as campus partiers. They were willing to admit to me and their peers that certain aspects of student behavior are problematic; however, they weren't wanting to fully commit themselves to sharing their print-based ideas with a larger, campus-wide audience.

As time passed, my perceptions in relation to the outcome of this particular class continued to change. Now, five months later, I realize that for most (including myself) that this was no ordinary class. Looking at it metaphorically, advanced composition was like a pebble dropped in a stream – the positive effects have been like concentric circles in that they have moved beyond Rounds 204. Now, five months later, I can say with some assurance that the underlife has continued to diminish while the overlife has grown. What follows are some of the signs of this:

In the process of telling his story, Randy drew upon what he learned last semester. Early in the drafting process, he situated himself in relation to what he freely admits was a stressful trip across the educational River Styx. Furthermore, he was able, in writing to PSC faculty, to make the particular universal. He also

did what Creative Nonfiction Anthologist Norman Sims notes is a characteristic of creative nonfiction – he cited other sources. Stebbins interviewed President Wharton, IAC faculty, and students. He also imitated the literary journalists in that he made sure that his source material was accurate. In writing and revising, Stebblins also relied heavily on the devices of dialogue, metaphor, and point of view.

I have kept in touch with a handful of last semester's Introduction to Literature students. A few (without prompting) have said that the best class was the one in which the juniors and seniors came and read their work. All liked the idea that the readers were trying to get across — that it's possible for students to party responsibly. Additionally, two of these individuals asked if I had extra copies of *Spirits of Change.*

This past semester, two of last semester's Advanced Composition students enrolled in my Introduction to Journalism class. I noticed this semester that both are adept at working in small groups, at critiquing one another's work, and at articulating their ideas in relation to the course material. In part, I attribute this to them having been active participants in a student-centered class.

My Advanced Composition course became a template for my Spring '99 Editing and Publishing course in that from the first day of class on, I drew upon what had worked well the previous semester. The Editing and Publishing students opted to put *Spirits of Change* on the Internet. Talking about this publication's content forced us to think about our own experiences in relation to self-policing. Those enrolled in Editing and Publishing also put out the English Department *Comp Journal*. Here, another important connection was made: in working on the *Comp Journal,* both the substance and copy editors worked closely with the first-year students on revisionary and copy-editing concerns.

Last semester, I too learned a great deal. In going into this semester, I determined that my role would be that of a facilitator,

mentor, and coach. This past semester, however, I've done a better job of asserting my authority in relation to these presumably more egalitarian roles.

The question that remains is, will I again try to make the connections between the given subject matter and student concerns? My answer is yes. What I found most successful this past year (and would like to do again) is to have upperclassmen share their works-in-progress with incoming students. And, taking this idea a step further, I'd also like for incoming students to share their works-in-progress with upperclassmen. For as I'm thinking, in connecting with peers, students are more likely to forge identities which complement rather than subvert the academic status-quo.

Note: *Spirits of Change* is available from Dr. Alys Culhane in the English Department, and on the Web through the department's home page, courtesy of her 1999 Spring semester editing and publishing class.