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An Article in Review of Article Reviews

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I took a risk and wrote a poem
(just for the fun of it):
Sometimes classes are much too drole,
and need a dose of wit.
My poetry is harmless,
and not too deep or dense,
But brushes cobwebs off my brain
and freshens up each sense.
This article will explain my need
to complete such work in rhyme
And will conclude with an example that
was handed in one time.

In most classes at Plymouth State College that I have taken, the professors use at least two methods for assessing the students' knowledge: testing, which is relatively easy to score, but may not reflect the true scope of a student's ability to use the knowledge, and writing, which most often seems to be a response to a reading or a summary of a reading. This past semester has been no different.

Dr. Turski requested two reviews on articles of our choice in the field of Earth Science, and Mrs. Bass requested ten article reviews—one for each area of health education most often taught in elementary schools. Last semester, Dr. Richey also asked for two article reviews, and since I had two classes with him, I had four reviews to do. His reviews were to be done on articles put on reserve at Lamson Library. Ms. Mosedale, in our Reading and Writing in the Elementary School class, requested a "review" of each of the nine chapters that we read in our textbook.

Article reviews seem to be a popular format for assessing the ability of a student to read and assimilate information. Each professor, however, has his or her own idea of what an article review actually is. Dr. Richey expected us to critique the article, and judge whether the information was accurate or one-sided, and whether it was a true representation of the subject matter. He did not want a summary, because he had already read the articles. He was looking for a higher level of thinking: we needed to gain the knowledge, then evaluate it based on content covered in our classes. Mrs. Bass wanted us to choose articles in many areas of health to expand our resource base, so therefore we needed to provide her with a summary, and then explain how we would use the information in our teaching or in our personal lives. Dr. Turski wanted a straight summary of an article of our choice. If we insisted on adding our opinion, it needed to be a separate section of the paper.

The Curriculum Frameworks put out by the New Hampshire Department of Education stresses "frequent writing practice across a variety of situations and tasks and in all subject areas enables students to refine and expand both their knowledge base and their thinking skills." According to the frameworks, by the end of tenth grade, students should be able, among other skills, to "use a variety of forms to develop ideas, share information, influence, persuade, create and entertain." This was best exemplified in my Plymouth experience by Ms. Irene Mosedale. Not only did we need to respond to the nine chapters that we read, but each response had to take a different format. We had to write a poem or play, relate the chapter

to past experiences, relate it to future plans, transform the information into a diagram, review a professional journal article on the same subject, write a letter to a parent or school board member defending our position, and, finally, write a simple narrative. This was the most useful class that I have had in terms of improving my writing ability. In order to reformat the information, I had to fully understand it first. If I had to defend my position to a parent in a letter, I also had to know what the opposition might be. These tasks truly depicted a full synthesis of the subject matter, which is what most teachers hope to get from their students. It was also, by the way, fun.

I visited a fourth grade classroom recently, and the students were working on their book reports (which seemed to be another form of an article review). Three children presented their reports which were based on biographies they had read. One student did a fairly traditional type of report: he told who the main character was and the highlights from the book. The next student took the role of the main character and spoke in the first person. She used a lot of expression in her presentation, and it was rather humorous to see a cute little fourth grader speaking on the subject of the beheading of her mother and the subsequent acquisition of six stepmothers! The third student had made up a board game based on her book. Each square had a problem or situation faced by the main character, and she had cards to draw that gave consequences. Of the three students, I would guess that the last two would be more likely to be able to recall their characters in three years, and have the information as part of their schema on which they will attach more information.

It is too easy to fall into the trap of regurgitating information. Time constraints will not always allow us, as teachers, to encourage the creative process as we should. It may be one of those long-term investments, however, that results in a greater pile of riches at the end of the year, and will be passed on to future generations by the students who become parents and teachers, and remember that fourth grade teacher who let them have some fun with what they were learning.

After writing seven of my article reviews for Mrs. Bass, my second review was due for Earth Science, and I was really feeling uninspired about writing it. I happened to remember Ms. Mosedale, however, and my thoughts started bouncing around, gaining energy as they went. Dr. Turski had not given us permission to be creative in our summaries, but he hadn't specifically said that we couldn't use a different form....the risk gave my ideas even more energy. What resulted was a poetic summary of an article on the planet Mercury, and like all great teachers, Dr. Turski not only allowed me to hand it in, but also gave me extra points for creativity. This poem will never go down in the annuls of great poetry, but it was fun to write, and after manipulating the information to get rhymes and rhythms to work, I do not believe that I will ever forget it. Thank you, Ms. Mosedale, for planting this seed!

Ode to Mercury
(a poetic summary of the following article:)
Nelson, Robert M. "Mercury: The Forgotten Planet".
Scientific American. v277 n2 Nov. 1997 p.56(8)

There are many features of Mercury
at which we have only guessed.
Our ability to prove them true
is a futuristic quest.

We see, we compare, we make assumptions
about the many scars
That craters have made on Mercury,
similar to the Earth, the moon and Mars.

The crater, Caloris, obliterated some scarps,
so we know that it came later.
Caloris is like a dating tool:
we see new holes within the big crater.

Cracks and scarps were caused by pressure
as Mercury began to slow.
It changed from an oval, bulging shape
to the sphere that we now know.

In the 1970's, Mariner 10
went exploring Mercury's space.
The acceleration as it neared
proved "Merc's" core is a very dense place.

Being roughly the size of our own moon,
(with a little smaller girth),
Its density would indicate a size
more like the Earth.

Of silica rocks, the outside of "Merc"
is evenly composed;
But if the core is solid or molten iron,
can only be supposed.

Electrically conductive molten materials
create a magnetic field
(on Earth). Does Mercury have the same core
creating its shield?

Or does it have some extra element
like sulfur at its core,
That keeps the iron liquid,
and keeps the core-cooling pace much slower?

Solar winds blow steadily
upon Mercury's magnetic shield,
Bringing in particles that stay
trapped within its field.

But at perihelion
(when the sun is extra near),
Surface crust is broken up
and ascends to the magnetosphere.

Hydrogen, oxygen and helium
scientists have also detected
(within "Merc's" atmosphere). In addition,
sodium and potassium are suspected.

"Merc's" poles face away from the sun,
and temp's could maintain some ice
That came from Mercury's origin,
but this theory won't suffice.

The problem is that radar-reflectivity,
which is used as an ice detector,
Can be fooled by sneaky sulfur,
which is also a reflector.

Poor Mercury is not explored,
and information is obscure.
Why don't we spend more money
to be absolutely sure?

Some say we shouldn't waste our time:
"It's really like our moon."
Others say, "The cost of fuel
would play an expensive tune."

The spacecraft needs to be
protected from the sun direct,
And from the intense energy
that Mercury can reflect.

A solar-powered thruster,
NASA wasn't willing to try.
Persistence won: now Deep Space One
is on a three-year fly.

If successful, another extended trip
might open up the door
To the observation of Mercury.
Then we will know much more!