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ABSTRACT

A writing seminar on the writing process required senior students at Rollins College (Florida) to bring to class with them piles of their previous compositions and drafts. Their first assignment was to research the composing process of a well-known writer and then write a paper about it. After that, they turned to their own work. The objective was for them to understand, deep-down-comprehend, maneuver, control and frolic in their own composing processes. The students were to know and own and celebrate the options they had so diligently acquired over their writing lives, they were to do more than identify their own best work and accept their writing processes. If this were to be a culmination, a final seminar, they should leave having "totaled" all their portfolios, noting the impact of the progression in writing on their academic and intellectual lives. The course became a quest: each student's paper the narration of an intellectual voyage, an argument for a progression, a comparison against models. In their journals, students wrestled with questions the instructor posed. In classroom conversations and 5-minute writing prompts, individuals were pushed toward definitions. Examples of how students conceived of their writing testifies to the diversity of orientations--right-brained, left-brained, creative genius, procrastinator, concerned about the impressions of others, etc. (TB)

Twila Yates Papay

Tea Leaves in the Portfolio: Teaching Writing Assessment as Life-Skill

They had done it all before: written their pieces and received peer response, revised their favorite essays and gone to the Writing Center, reworked their choices and gotten faculty input, revised and selected and submitted papers that worked. Accustomed to assessing and being assessed, they had files bulging with portfolios. But they were seniors, facing graduation. There was nothing new under the sun.

Yet despite those silent, stoic faces, I loved the idea of my seminar. After applying composing process theory to famous writers of choice, we would adapt it to a complex and sophisticated research study of our own writing processes, a senior thesis. To be honest, I never thought of it as portfolio assessment. (Only in retrospect did I see what I was doing.) I just wanted my students to amass some research materials. So I wrote them in the summer before the course began, suggesting they raid their parents' attics and their own rooms for sample papers and multiple drafts.

I suppose I wasn't prepared, either, for the mounds of material they actually brought in. Oh, two or three had avoided process writing, had a dearth of papers to draw on, but that isn't easy to do at Rollins. Indeed, though only a handful of faculty use the term "portfolio," Writing across the Curriculum is so thoroughly entrenched that over half our faculty seem to be requiring multiple drafts, asking students to keep work in a portfolio (variously named daybook, journal, folder, notebook, classbox, binder), devising some process of self-selection, and

applying various forms of assessment. Only one student claimed to have destroyed or failed to print out his various drafts. (And even he managed to dig up a few when he saw what his classmates had accumulated.)

At first the students were eager. Given the limitations of an undergraduate library for the specific research assigned, they produced some fascinating first papers on the composing processes of literary figures. In a finely argued analysis on Twain, Nancy carefully followed my exhortation that conclusions substantiated by fact be separated from the speculations which the topic and lack of resources clearly called for. And because this was an advanced writing course, several students tried out suggestions for creative structuring tactics. Kathleen, for example, structured her discussion around Thoreau's journal metaphor of writing as a diamond in the rough, awaiting the polishing of genius. After interviewing Woody Allen's press agent by phone, Brandy wrote her piece as an interview with her elusive writer. In another interview format, John used creative "Timeouts" to add commentary and speculation to the answers actually derived from Faulkner's own texts. And Deena compared Alice Walker's creative drives to the writer's own observations on her mother's garden.

But after playing detective and researching their selected authors, presenting oral reports, and reading Tom Waldrep's Writers on Writing (Random House 1985), my students turned to me, tired, dreading the research in those mounds of portfolios they had so eagerly carried to campus. "What's the point of this

thesis? Haven't we learned the process?" And oh, how jaded they seemed! Having come to terms with the assessment methods of their professors, my students could critique their own pieces, offer solid response to each other, take on the challenge of another revision. What more was it I wished them to learn?

So I had to figure it out! I wanted them to understand, deep-down-comprehend, maneuver and control and frolic in their own composing processes. I wanted them to know and own and celebrate the options they had so diligently acquired over their writing lives. But how? And it was then--in the desperate invention out of necessity--that I came upon the notion of a new kind of portfolio, a composite portfolio, one that would empower my students with the possibilities of their own range of processes. Now I did not want my students simply to identify their best work, produce the best text, accept their processes, compare themselves to experts. If this were to be a culmination, a final seminar, I wanted to give them something more. They should leave their undergraduate experience having totalled all those portfolios, noting the impact of the progression in writing upon their academic and intellectual lives. I wanted them to appreciate their writing processes.

And so the course became a quest: each student's paper the narration of an intellectual voyage, an argument for a progression, a comparison against models. Such a slippery undertaking required a plethora of resources, like the Writing Center's pedagogical library on writing and the file I'd placed on reserve

there of papers we'd prepared on the composing processes of famous writers. As students reviewed three years of portfolios and sought to make sense out of variations, they turned to their dialectical journals to sort out the mess. Posing and answering questions, they interviewed themselves, considered the research, listed the processes of one course as opposed to those of another. Kadi discovered a poetry-writing process so organic that she'd nearly failed to recognize it at all in relation to her more sterile approach to essays she didn't like. Nancy realized that she'd finally managed to write good journal entries when she stopped mapping them out and started treating them like letters to her friends. Kathleen had the misfortune of arguing herself into agreeing with Peter Elbow about the dangers of "Trying to Write It Right the First Time," thus necessitating that she change a process she had grown more comfortable with than she thought appropriate. And some made long lists of various methods they'd found appropriate for different materials or professors.

In the journals, too, students wrestled with questions and problems I'd posed: How was your first paper and process for this class different from previous papers? What surprises you about your writing? Develop a list of hypotheses, another of complex questions which arise from your investigation of the portfolios. Select the drafts from all your materials which illustrate the widest range of processes and most contradictory evidence. Gradually the pieces were collected; composite portfolios began to emerge.

perceptions of our writing shape it? How have social contexts influenced our processes? (In fact, reflecting upon these prompts in his journal, John spent several pages questioning himself about the influences of teachers on his processes before he discovered that his young nephews had done much more to direct how he writes. And Nancy made an important discovery in response to another prompt: "I wish I could make my writing more fun to read. No one except a professor and myself will ever be interested in the papers I write."

Clearly, explorations were working. Students did come to understand and give voice to the complexity of their writing processes. Selecting and eliminating, they assembled their ultimate portfolios, collections of evidence to document the narration and analysis of intellectual progressions. For one group of writers the totalling process led down ever-narrowing channels to single overwhelming conclusions. Thus, Kadi's visions of her writing self all pointed to her primary use of writing as escape, reshuffling assignments to satisfy her need for an imaginative retreat. (The alternative, more than once resorted to, had been to drop a course.) Brandy's "A Done Paper Is a Good Paper" revealed her determined drive to work only on those papers assigned by her perceived kindred spirits, to the great detriment of her progression as an intellectual, or even to her accumulation of a respectable GPA! Conversely, Allison's thesis was a rather plodding but committed search for her lost creativity, stolen away in her prosaic middle school years:

Meanwhile, classroom conversations and five-minute writing prompts were pushing individuals toward definitions. We wrote metaphors for our composing processes, comparing them to pregnancy, inebriation, a scrapbook, working a farm, building a skyscraper, projecting a film, churning ice cream. Nancy, our most linear thinker, suggested, "Although my thinking process goes every which way, my writing could be compared to solving a math equation: once my thinking is done, the same steps and follow the same rules time after time."

More right-brained, Kadi called her writing "a roller coaster. It goes up and down and around, searching for words, phrases, feelings. I scream from the terror and yet am excited, knowing that the ride will soon come to an end, and I'll say, 'That was fun!' Waiting in line is the hard part, watching everyone who is already on the ride, writing away. I am still standing in line waiting for thoughts and ideas to enter the ride. Writing is not a straight-line process; it is filled with ups and downs, twists and turns and loops before the ride comes to a stop and you really enjoy what you wrote."

And Craig, who was always hungry, called writing a bottle of ketchup demanding "lots of effort before anything comes out. After a slow trickle, it all rushes forth, pouring over the paper like ketchup on my french fries."

Other prompts helped as well, like, "How have your assignments and teachers influenced your composing process?" The natural followup questions in our journals: How do people's

> I see my creativity inside my head. In the future, I will see it on the page. In the past my creativity had an inch-thick layer of modelling clay around it, probably left over from Mr. Temple's art class where we made ashtrays five years in a row. (And no one in my family even smoked.) Underneath this clay is a brightly colored package with a perfect satin bow, the kind of package you hate to open because it's so lovely. In the future, I will learn to open it.

More convinced of his creative genius was Duncan, whose study revealed that he had worked on nothing in his life but his writing, and that sporadically, as he always considered himself too good to work very hard! Comparisons of his own uneven habits to those of famous writers and fellow students showed him that his aspirations as a writer might require more persistence.

And then there was Nicky's persistent abhorrence. Visualizing her process as a gigantic puzzle (and she'd always despised puzzles!), Nicky observed:

> Seventeen years and a myriad of papers later, I still find writing loathsome. I continue to feel self-conscious about sharing my work. These attitudes I have carried throughout my childhood, and although I was unaware of my composing process until this semester, I see how my process reflects these personal notions.

From her term's research she developed an appreciation for computers, a recognition of her skill at "condensing" for greater effect, and the belief that she might easily change her process once she came to write for a salary.

Happily, another group of students ranged farther and realized deeper truths, choosing devices to explore why they write, how, and to what end, as when Carol compared her favorite writing to the complex escapes she found as a runner. Nevertheless, lamenting the lack of control in her writing, she also

yearned for higher demands. "I wish I'd adhered to adverse criticism," she remarked. "Sure, I loved the professors who praised me, but if only they'd cut more of the extraneous junk out of my papers. Yes, instead of my creativity, I needed them to concentrate on my lack of structure."

Hilary depicted herself going through all the old papers in her attic, reflecting upon her reasons for writing and considering how her process had been molded by the pressures and thinking of others. How might she shift this practice enough to take advantage of her own complex and creative thinking, to become her own independent writer? "I hope sometimes," she wrote, "that I won't always take my writing too seriously. Maybe it's better to say, too personally. When someone shows dissatisfaction with my writing, it depresses me very much. I never realized how important my writing can be to me, perhaps at times too important. But if I'm going to have my own voice, write the truths I know with conviction, then I have to coerce myself into calmness, acceptance, and the willingness to let my writing stand on its own before the world."

Deena wondered how she could become a writer when she procrastinated so much. Envisioning herself as a successful sixty-year-old, she looked back over formative years of dreading to write, fearing the process, yet feeling such excitement over successful products that she persevered despite depression. Only learning to compose at the computer empowered her to write in

drafts, a technique she finally mastered in her senior seminar. "Process is everything," Deena concluded:

> I've had a crisis in my writing this year because I first had to face how I hated it, my chosen profession. But if I can stick to the better habits just starting to evolve in my writing, I think the times spent behind the computer will be the best times, whatever job I choose.

John Joplin's focus was somewhat different. He produced a cheerful letter on the writing process for his nephew's use in the year 2003. Centering his comments upon a series of "Jop's Rules" amply illustrated with Calvin and Hobbes cartoons, he reflected upon his comprehension of the composing process and what strategies had produced his college success. ("Think about the things I have told you and compare them with where I am standing in 2003," he wryly concluded. "If I am successful and doing a lot of writing in my career, then maybe these ideas worked for me and will work for you. If I am a flop, well, then, at least have a good time laughing.") Along with illustrative analyses came advice to choose teachers who make one love to write, accept cheerfully the writer's slavery to the computer, "take the time tc produce good writing, as otherwise you will have to do it again with a higher level of frustration," and "keep the idea of the paper at the front of your mind during periods of creative procrastination."

For all of these students, then, the research had paid off; creating the "ultimate portfolio" had taught them the power and complexity of their skills. Three students went even further, evolving major realignments of thinking about themselves as

writers. Doug, a rather weak writer, compared his work to a walk along a reservoir, his process to the entering streams, a matter of "releasing it all, the fouled with the pure." Doug's metaphor led him into the primary discovery that he had been revising all along:

> I used to think I wrote single-copy drafts, but it wasn't true. I did not realize until recently that I was actually doing early stage drafting in journals and notebooks. Being a write-rewrite composer also means I have been drafting several drafts in one by covering the previously deposited material with new, filtered deposits.

This conclusion he supported with journal entries and blotchy written-over drafts illustrating his work's progression.

Doug also identified his idea-collection process, jotting notes in the middle of the night, recording odd bits he'd read in the newspaper or heard in conversation, struck by alternative thinking. "I have an attraction toward this thing I have never seen before. The urgency to possess it," he explained, "to capture it by writing it down, is compelling." He noted too that he had learned from his collaboration with Hilary on their first paper that she always consulted with others, while he had never discussed his ideas in process. Thus, Hilary had already tested her thinking before it ever hit the page. This tactic Doug was beginning to like. Writing is healing, he concluded. "I have opened any number of old wounds on this ramble. However, they no longer hurt because the paper I've written on is like a bandage, the ink disinfectant. They heal the wound, the memories. As long as I write, my health will improve."

Kathleen also found her writing to be a matter of personal health, though she'd always gotten good grades. Exploring her training in the five-paragraph essay and other "safe" strategies, she revealed a pattern of struggling to please teachers and avoid mistakes. "I realize the blueprint for writing I was given in high school was for a house in the suburbs," she complained, "each one like the last and the next; it's time I revised this plan, as I want to learn to build skyscrapers and palaces, or at least a home of my own design."

Tracing her college career, she saw her concern with "orderliness. . . . I honestly could not bring myself to move past the introduction until I was perfectly satisfied. When I hit a block, I had to change my topic. No wonder I despised it all so much." Achieving mental stability as a writer, Kathleen realized, required some major changes, like use of the word processor and peer review, or recognizing the journal as a pressure-free writing forum. Her new process involved writing looser earlier drafts before the research was finished, delaying contemplation of audience, talking through ideas in process, becoming more playful in style. Most of all, Kathleen aspired to bring herself into her papers: "finding my own voice, using humor, learning to write for myself. . . . Perhaps if I want to do these things," she concluded, "I will learn to take more chances, worry less about reactions. I could say I am no longer afraid, just a little unsure. At least now I feel no pain. I guess liking to write is new; for me, it's a revolution!"

And finally, there was Nancy, author of the finely wrought Twain paper. After a lifetime of straight-A traditionalism, Nancy produced a remarkable experiment in two voices, allowing the creative "Janie" (her middle name) to discuss the complexities of process with the formidable analytic mind who had seized control of her writing in the past. (Indeed, I probably saw the first lapse in sentence structure of her entire college career as the strain of bringing forth Janie taxed her nervous energies!) Recognizing the rigidity of her former composing processes, Nancy spoke for the needs of her imagination, learning to take chances and "share" a piece of writing with her other selves. She even included a section on "Feelings," blamed the rigidity she'd identified for her aversion to collaboration, and refused to utterly relegate Janie to journals and letters. It was the voice of Janie which concluded the paper with a startling step beyond the notion of simply using both voices from time to time:

> Well, Nance is more aware of her process, and knows that she needs to try some changes. Trying to keep her different voices in the appropriate places would be a nice start, but learning to reconcile us so we could function together would be a wonderful achievement. She could write big ideas in an interesting way! I also think she has seen things aren't so cut and dry as they may have appeared before. In short, she has learned that she has much more to learn about writing.

Irrepressible, Janie responded to Nancy's final question of whether people might like their paper, "Let them read it!"

Thus our research together was successful: we had examined the cumulative effect of portfolios in different disciplines, reaching conclusions about ourselves as writers and people. But now came serendipity. . .or was it magic? In time our investiga-

tions enabled us to visualize our futures, to define the writers (and often readers) we wished to become in choices of profession suddenly rendered more apparent. My students began to define job interests and resumes in terms of writing processes, now seen as a collection of skills. Not that the career search looked any easier. After all, these students' metaphors for leaving Rollins touched on hacking through jungles, being lost in strange cities, plunging into deep frigid waters. Craig worried that all careers seemed tied to the writing he still had not mastered: "I wish I could make my writing a priority. Too often I forget how much fun it can be until I feel dragged to the computer. How can anyone go off to the work world like that?" Hilary feared that her writing would dry up now that she had gone through every professor in the English Department, and we all confessed to extensive bouts with procrastination. Our conversations were filled with doubts and expectations.

Only Nicky remained blissfully detached from the problem. "Although I despise writing now," she concluded in her paper, "I will acquire a new perspective once I am employed. . . . I do expect deadlines and stress in advertising, but I know I'll enjoy producing my writing in a working environment. And I know my process will change to one I enjoy; no longer will writing be loathsome. It will be the pleasure of my career."

To the class's credit, no one laughed when she read her conclusion, simply turning to another reader and waiting an

appropriate length of time. Finally Deena muttered, "If I hadn't changed my process, I'd still be hating writing."

Someone, maybe Kadi, responded, "For me it's too personal. If you don't like writing for an audience, it shouldn't be part of your career plan." It had started. The last two days of our seminar, like bits of time before, were devoted to career goals, matching jobs with writing skills, listing talents to cite in letters of application. The portfolios were yielding up tea leaves: we had found the vehicle to sift through four years of education, to define our workplace skills.

Well, I admit to being surprised. I mean, I'd only meant to teach a course! But I began to see applications. In Advanced Expository Writing my students prepare case histories of themselves as writers, using the materials of their writing careers. In my peer writing consultant training course, they write on how their own composing has changed as a result of Writing Center work. Couldn't a late journal entry redefine writing processes for the work place, with an appropriate resume, a letter of application? With what ease I might thus help my students assess their academic careers to envision professional possibilities.

But the fact is this: surely we have been wasting a precious opportunity our students sorely need. How seldom, even in individual courses, are our students invited to <u>total</u> their intellectual experiences or define real learning, let alone translate and measure it against the skills they will soon be called upon to use. Here at last they may <u>total</u> their educa-

tions, just as a final journal entry enables them to spell out their growth in a course. As the peer writing consultants who helped me on this paper remarked, "It's sort of like the real final examination--only much nicer--a way of finally coming to terms with yourself, what you've learned, who you are."

Of course, I don't know yet if I was successful. They only graduated two years ago. But here's what Nancy wrote back from law school last January:

> I wanted to thank you for giving me a writing life, for making me go beyond that one dull voice that would never have worked in my complex writing here. But now I feel more whole. I still keep a copy of something you wrote in our seminar, and today I see that it's true for me too. "I'm glad I discovered the lost consciousness of time and place and person in journaling."

I guess she feels free now to be lost and then found.

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