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ABSTRACT

This collection of essays is introduced by Paul Connelly, who focuses on how the essayists encounter problems boldly and recognize opportunity in them--the essays are less local reports of various successful process approaches to teaching writing than a record of the willingness to experiment, to take risks, to learn. The essays and their authors are, as follows: "Reinforced Lessons: Strategies for Teaching Composition" (Elizabeth Brown Guillory and Barbara Loy); "Writing at Atlanta Junior College: A Team Sport" (Carla Ranger); "Saga of the Dragon Slayers or Perspectives on Teaching Writing at Spelman College" (Jacqueline Jones Royster and Anne Bradford Warner); "'Writing to Read': A Summer Writing Workshop for High School Students at Xavier University" (David G. Lanoue and Vivian A. Wilson); "Freewriting to Better Communication and a Better Self: Two Experiences" (Ernestine M. Pickens and Jocelyn W. Jackson); "Developmental, Advanced, and Professional Writing Classes at Tennessee State University" (Clayton G. Reeve and others); "Variations on a Theme--The Empathetic Approach to the Teaching of English" (Norman Benedict Elmore); "When Writers' Groups Work" (Kathy D. Jackson); "Writing for Learning: The Confession of a Committed Convert" (Gaye H. Hewitt); and "Back to the Source" (Luetta C. Milledge). Contains 11 references. (NKA)

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# *Bard South: Teaching Writing at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*

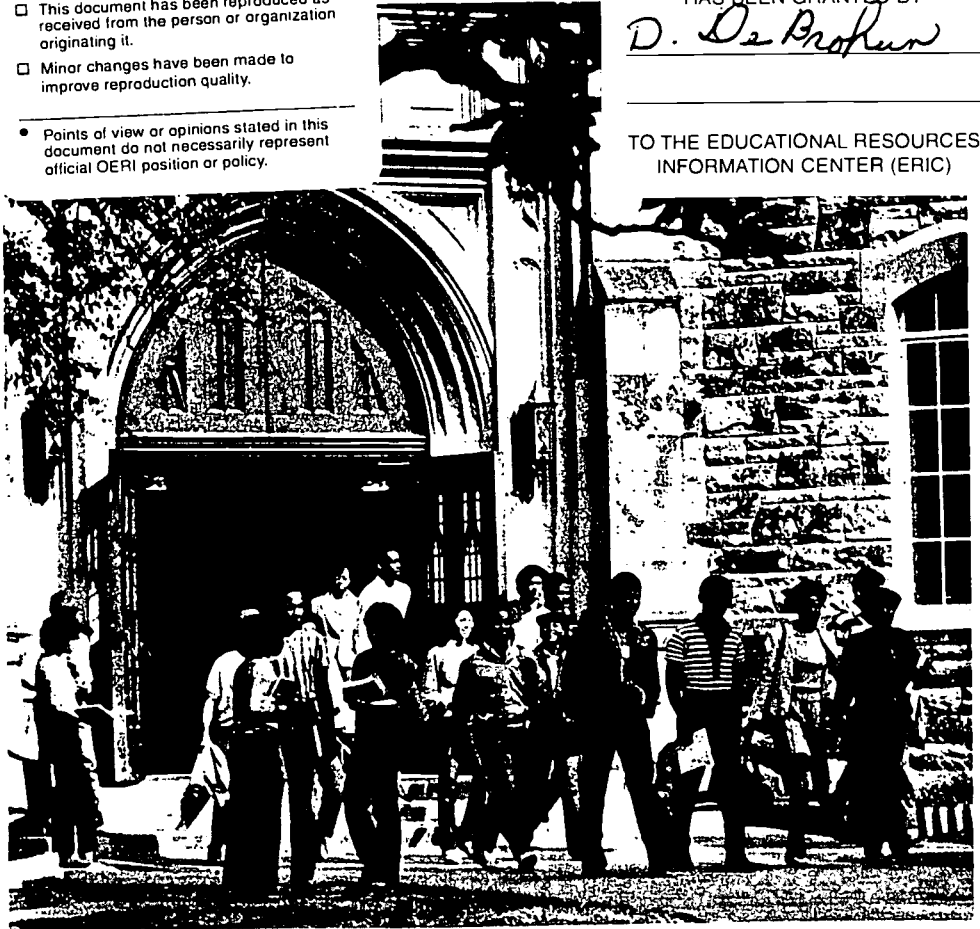
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*Edited by David G. Lanoue  
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*Bard South: Teaching Writing  
at Historically Black Colleges  
and Universities*

*Edited by  
David G. Lanoue  
Vivian A. Wilson*



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## Introduction

Sometimes I try to come to your office and ask for help but I figure it wouldn't be right to do that. Every time I get to your door I freeze up and change my mind.

Student journal.

"A disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic," wrote John Dewey in *The Quest for Certainty*. Dewey valued problems and questions. He considered them a vitally important part of education, the agents of "reflective thinking." They were, he thought, all that can protect students from an otherwise overwhelming amount of random information. "How shall we treat subject matter that is supplied by textbook and teacher so that it shall rank as material of reflective inquiry," he asked in *How We Think*, "not as ready-made intellectual pabulum to be accepted and swallowed just as if it were something bought at a shop?" Information that is not organized around a question or problem is "worse than useless for intellectual purposes . . . so much lumber and debris . . ." A question is the catalyst that precipitates concepts from data. A problem is the magnet that forms a rose from fact's iron shavings.

Most students have little experience of "delight in the problematic." By and large, they still encounter the problematic the way Sissy Jupe did in Dickens' *Hard Times*. "Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!" Mr. Gradgrind assaulted the daughter of the horse-trainer in classroom interrogation. "Girl number twenty possessed of no facts in reference to one of the commonest of animals!"

Fortunately for the class, the better-schooled Bitzer knew a horse when he'd memorized one: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too." Et cetera. In school, a problem is usually encountered as something you don't know that the teacher does.

It is possible, of course, that students lack delight because their minds are undisciplined. Students are unable, national reports on the state of education have reiterated, to think for themselves, to read closely, to write clearly. Some reformers have urged that schools go "back to basics." But when forty-eight teachers and administrators from a dozen historically Black colleges met for a week-long "Summer Writing Institute" at Spelman College in June 1985 and for a further weekend's work together the following November, they dared to ask: Why? Why do even good students seem to lack discipline—not to mention delight—after a dozen years of intensive formal education?

The immediate objective of the Summer Writing Institute, as the letter announcing it stated, was:

. . . to allow teams of three teachers and one administrator from each of a dozen private and public Black colleges the opportunity to write together; to listen to one another; to build a teaching network that transcends institutional boundaries; to review current theory and practice of writing instruction; and to define ways of strengthening programs on their home campuses.

Participating colleges, selected through competitive application, were Alabama State University, Albany State College, Alcorn State University, Atlanta Junior College, Clark College, Dillard University, Grambling State University, Savannah State College, Spelman College, Talladega College, Tennessee State University, and Xavier University of Louisiana.

Spelman College and Xavier University co-sponsored the program. The Southern Education Foundation, with a grant from The Ford Foundation, paid all expenses for the Summer Institute and most expenses for the follow-up regional workshops. From the inception of the program, it was intended that the long-term work of each team would culminate in a collection of essays, describing various colleges' writing programs and reflecting further on problems—and opportunities! These are those essays.

The nucleus of both the summer institute and fall weekends was a series of workshops designed and led by faculty associates of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College. Several of the essays in this collection speak generously, appreciatively of a "Bard model" or the "Bard method." While we are grateful for such kind words, as well as for honest comments on what "did not work," Bard knows no secret algorithm to speed the calculus of learning language. Nor can the challenge of this work be simply reduced to applying a new "process approach" to writing instruction. What then is the writing movement, described in these essays, about?

"Our needs are made of words," wrote Michael Ignatieff in *The Needs of Strangers*, "they come to us in speech, and they can die for lack of expression."

Without a public language to help us find our own words, our needs will dry up in silence. . . . Without a language adequate to this moment we risk losing ourselves in resignation towards the portion of life which has been allotted to us. Without the light of language, we risk becoming strangers to our better selves.

The central issue in writing instruction—and in these essays reflecting on that work—is clear, accurate recognition of our most fundamental need to use language, and equally clear recognition of the problems—obdurate, enduring problems—of learning and teaching language in a way that is truly empowering.

In her essay on teaching writing at Spelman College, Ann Bradford Warner tells the story of describing a sphinx to a class, in response to a student's question:

"It is a monster," I said, "part lion with wings and part woman. It asks difficult questions, and when one answers incorrectly, it gobbles up the answerer." A student responded, "That's not a sphinx; that's an English teacher."

For many students the basic problems of writing is the authority of the English teacher, particularly over riddles of Standard English Usage. It is not the profounder problem of thinking through language or finding words to float ideas, because in school there is too little opportunity to use language to float, to think.

"I expected the students to think critically and write effectively," Gaye Hewitt writes of her teaching at Savannah State College, "but had given them no opportunities to practice those processes." A little later, she adds, "shutting up is difficult for those of us who have spent a lifetime preparing to tell students what we know." What is unusual about this is not the situation itself—one most honest teachers will recognize—but the candor with which the problem is addressed. It is what is most distinctive throughout all these essays, such candor, and what is most promising for the possibility of finding delight in the problematic.

Elsewhere, at Tennessee State University, Alberta Barrett writes about a similar situation: "For many years, as I have graded students' essays, I have had the feeling that I was the one learning about planning, drafting, and revising, not the students." One reason students do not take much delight in the problematic is that instead of engaging genuine, complex problems in written language, they are wrestling with the linguistic riddles of the sphinx. A second reason, however, is that, in all conscientiousness, we teachers do our students' learning for them. We process problems the way dairies process cheese, making it soft, gummy, thick with preservatives but devoid of nutritional value. Students are expected to pretend not only to chew this scholastic cheese but to like it.

"The life of a writer in academia," write Elizabeth Brown-Guillory and Barbara Loy, "is fraught with frustrations, and even the students who want to be good writers commit pedagogical suicide with frequency." Pedagogical suicide—taking your own life at someone else's hand—is a third reason why students find little delight in the problematic. The need to please suffocates the need to experiment, take risks, make mistakes, all of which are part of the fear, but also the excitement, of confronting the problematic honestly. It makes these two teachers, and others, angry: "For too many years and in too many English classrooms, correctness has been and is the major criterion for good writing."

This is not all that makes teachers angry, when they stop to think about their work. Throughout these essays teachers relate other problems that militate against learning and teaching: classes that are too large; the expectation that all good teachers will "cover the course"—defined as touching all the topics of a textbook, all the titles in a syllabus; the difficulty of making time for active, collaborative learning; state requirements that all students creep and crawl through standardized competency tests.



Finally, what is most evident in these essays is a willingness to talk about and to deal directly, honestly with problems. For teachers and administrators, as for students, the problematic is not necessarily received as an opportunity, nor always experienced as delightful. But what teachers appreciatively return to again and again in these essays is the too rare opportunity, in Carla Ranger's words, "to talk to one another about teaching writing, what we do and don't do. . . what we'd like to know how to do better." At Xavier University, David Lanoue and Vivian Wilson write that "We devoted more than half of the total number of our fall departmental meetings to . . . discussions, making this the first time in many years that composition had become the central focus of as many consecutive meetings." The "unforgettable feature" of working together with other teachers, in Luetta Milledge's judgment, was "the human communication and communion. . . just being in the company of a concerned and caring community." Our best thinking, wrote Elizabeth Brown-Guillory and Barbara Loy, "is done with others. New ideas come from seeing from others' eyes."

A "concerned and caring community" takes delight in the problematic. That, it seems, is an important discovery teachers make when, working in two of the more solitary professions—writing and teaching—they experience professional collaboration that emboldens them to acknowledge problems, even to make them into opportunities. "Writing in school," continue Brown-Guillory and Loy, "is a dreadfully artificial situation. Students are asked to write primarily as a means of finding out what they don't know." School writing need not only be a manner of displaying and testing information, in such a way as to discover what one doesn't know. Written language, as these essays suggest in various ways, can also be a heuristic for problem-solving, a way of learning, a method of building a record of success at defining problems, exploring alternatives, and applying solutions.

The focus of this introduction on how the essayists in this collection encounter problems boldly and recognize opportunity in them should not imply that the authors experience any more problems than other teachers but rather that they have honestly dared—preamble to delight—to focus the inert data of schooling into vital problems of learning. In her Atlanta journal, reflecting on her writing and teaching, one teacher wrote: "I am excited that my experience can generate questions. . . ." It is what it means to take delight in the problematic, daring to ask hard questions. "Can sphinxes facilitate and still be called upon to consume the daily youth?" asks Ann Bradford Warner at the end of her story. That is a hard question, of the sort that deserves to be answered as honestly as it is asked.

Students themselves too infrequently experience hard questions of their own. "When teachers are the clear and present authority," as Jacqueline Royster points out, "we often do not allow our students the option of trial and error. In this type of scenario, error means crisis not opportunity."

In contrast, when we give students room to experiment at lower risk and room to reconstruct when confronted by error at lower risk, then neither teacher nor students need resort to the default mode of old habits—neither eating students whole, nor quaking in the presence of dragons and sphinxes. Our basic task . . . becomes making ourselves more consciously aware of how human beings develop as thinkers and learners and how we can reasonably intervene in the thinking/learning process.

What is significant in the essays that follow are less the local reports of various successful process approaches to teaching writing than the general willingness and determination of the essayists to experiment, to take risks, to learn. Teachers of writing are assumed to be committed, as Jacqueline Royster writes in the conclusion of her essay, to battling illiteracy, anti-intellectualism, and mediocrity, but, she adds, "we see also that we must commit to battling the sphinxes within ourselves, intolerance, unyielding authority, ego, insecurity, the fear of the unbridled, etc." It is this disciplined battle, not for right answers but for the courage to ask hard questions, that brings delight from problems.

A closing expression of thanks: This collection of essays is made possible, first, by the contributors, but as importantly by the editors; by the publisher, *Xavier Review*; by Spelman College and Xavier University, sponsors of the Summer Writing Institute; by Pauline Drake and Thomas Bonner, Jr., who proposed the institute; by the Bard faculty associates who led workshops: Elaine Avidon, Suzanne Carothers, Marcia Silver, and Bob Whitney; by the foundations and their representatives who supported this project: The Southern Education Foundation, particularly Elridge W. McMillan, President, and Jean Sinclair, Executive Associate, and The Ford Foundation, especially Nancy McCarthy, Program Officer; by Harriet Schimel at the United Negro College Fund, who first raised the question. None of these required easy answers.

## Reinforced Lessons: Strategies for Teaching Composition

Writing is a skill that can be acquired by most people regardless of occupation, gender, ethnicity, or age. Sometimes we forget that English teachers like us and students like those we see every day are writers who think about writing in a way similar to that of Peter Elbow, Frank Smith, Ann Berthoff and Mina Shaughnessy, and that we all are alike in very human ways. Whether we have been writing and teaching writing for decades or are first year college students writing seriously for the first time, our needs are similar.

These common needs became very clear to us upon reading the mid-semester evaluations our students had written in their journals and recognized statements similar to those we had entered in our writing notebooks during the week-long Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking at Spelman College in Atlanta the preceding summer. Respected authors on the writing process had discussed the same topics that monopolized the comments of our students and us: obstacles to writing and the benefits of appropriate environment, sharing with supportive friends, free writing and directed writing techniques, and interaction with a sympathetic teacher. Although our students, the authors, and we were representing a wide variety of perspectives, our basic needs were quite similar.

Student Journal: Everything was helpful,  
but was a waste of time.

Student Journal: I have been in English  
101 and didn't learn what I thought I was  
going to learn. I want to learn how to write  
a good paragraph that someone will enjoy  
reading. I don't like to write because I  
still don't know how to write. I am not going  
to tell you I have learned something in  
English because I still haven't learned how to  
write a good paragraph. I have enjoyed being  
in your class and I have learned one or two  
things. I want to learn more. You are a very  
good teacher. Please teach me.

Atlanta Journal: I am an experienced writer with many years experience dealing with very young students, some of whom have never written.

Shaughnessy: But the task seems too demanding and the rewards too stingy for someone who can step out of a classroom and in a moment be in the thick of conversation with friends.  
(Shaughnessy 10)

Only English teachers revere the act of writing to the extent that we do, and even many of us neglect instruction in writing to devote more time to the much preferred study of that which has already been written. Many students have found composition skills unnecessary for academic success and resent being told that learning to write well is important. They have been tested with objective tests that ask that they only mark the correct answer or write one word in a blank. Note-taking during lectures is superfluous when a video-tape is stored in the library. Even if that were not so, audio-taping is common among students. Term papers are available in the files of many Greek organizations and easily purchased on college campuses. Students know that often academic success does *not* depend upon good writing skills.

Other students have grown to discover some use for writing and some recognize the power of using good writing skills. Too many of these people, however, have not been able to overcome a lifetime of frustrations connected with that complicated act. "Stay in the margin." "Skip lines." "Your spelling is atrocious; get a dictionary." "This bibliography item isn't consistent with the others." The life of a writer in academia is fraught with frustrations, and even the students who want to be good writers commit pedagogical suicide with frequency.

There are many attitudes toward writing that are real obstacles between the frustrated writing student and the writing teacher's short memory. Most composition teachers are successful academic writers and have been so for many years. We have studied great writing, history of language, linguistics, and many grammars on a graduate level. We have decided all our students will be good writers. Enters the poor, unsuspecting first year college student.

Because we care, some of our English faculty members came together to share our individual perspectives on writing and teaching writing. We agreed that

1. Writing is self-taught, primarily by imitation and response.
2. Effective writing is multi-faceted.
3. Writing helps clarify thought, improves reasoning.
4. Writing is cathartic.
5. Most writing is an interactive process.
6. Writing is an indirect measure of self-esteem and personal feelings of competency.
7. The only way to learn to write is to write.
8. Improvement in writing requires feedback at some point from an external source.
9. Writing skills are closely related to speaking, listening, and reading skills.
10. Writing is not linear or recursive.
11. Writing is a process including pre-writing, writing, and revising.
12. Writing takes a variety of forms, is done for a variety of purposes, and is aimed at a variety of audiences.
13. Writing should involve critical reading.
14. Writing teachers should write along with their students, share bits of their scholarship or expressive writing, and involve students in faculty research projects.

We do not advocate that students be made to believe that they are good writers when they are not. However, they should not be made to feel that what they have to say is of no value and that they are incompetent down to the last superfluous comma. We have no right to expect—as some English teachers do—that our students write like professional scholars. By the same token, we must point out major weaknesses when they appear in content, development, organization, mechanics, and usage—not necessarily underscoring every error in every paper. In short, we must criticize substantively and give our students direction which will enable or empower them to improve upon their craft.

Patience might flourish if it were possible for us to recover and read the papers we wrote as undergraduates. Tolerance might be a more common virtue if we could cite the ages at which we confronted subjective mood or learned to use the lie-lay verbs without rehearsing the principal parts with each use. Expecting growth in students is commendable; it is good pedagogy. Demanding of students what their teachers couldn't do until many years past the students' ages might be unfair.

Student Journal: In order to write a perfect paper, I need more time.

Atlanta Journal: What I just wrote was written painfully even though the product does not sound as if that would be true. Often when I write about the past, I find that every phrase recalls different experiences that constantly distract me from the focus I've chosen. . . . When there are time constraints and a potential live audience, the necessity of shaking myself free of these distractions and finishing my assignment is quite demanding.

Smith: Most professional writers could not write with the physical and psychological constraints under which many children are expected to learn to write in school. (Smith 795)

Writing in school is a dreadfully artificial situation. Students are asked to write, primarily, as a means of finding out what they don't know. The writing done by the students is to conceal their lack of knowledge about a topic they find uninteresting and sometimes incomprehensible. Students are asked to write on demand. It matters not that they didn't sleep the night before or that they did and jumped out of bed only 10 minutes before. It makes little difference that she just broke up with her boyfriend or that he just learned that his father is dying of a cancer. A student's brain may be whirling with hundreds of formulas and vocabulary items memorized for a test next hour, but writing about another arbitrary topic might be the demand.

A diverse group of students with many needs meets at one early morning hour (best time for the teacher) in a room selected by the registrar that is small, dingy, ugly, sometimes hot, sometimes cold, furnished with uncomfortable hard plastic desk chairs—all right-handed—and are told to write, a task which under the best conditions for a Langston Hughes or a James Joyce would not be easy. And these students, writing under these horrible conditions are going to be criticized and graded for what they have produced. And they know it. Further, the finished papers must be accomplished in 50 minutes or less.

There is very little that can be done about the physical constraints of writing at most universities; however, there are some techniques that can be used to camouflage or at least minimize the effects of too small, too large or acoustically horrible classrooms. One outcome of our rethinking about our classes was that we began teaching our classes with small discussion groups and workshop sessions wherein involved students concentrated on interaction with teacher and peers all in one class. We learn by teaching just as we learn by writing.

Student Journal: The things that made it easy for me to learn were discussing [sic] things and writing a lot in class.

Atlanta Journal: The most immediate reward [from the conference] has been moment after moment of pure joy because of the environment. . . the (I can't believe I'm saying this.) pure joy of writing.

Elbow: That is, everyone can, under certain conditions, speak with clarity and power. These conditions usually involve a topic of personal importance and an urgent occasion. (*Power 7*)

Most social situations (and that includes college classrooms) do not lend themselves to intellectual stimulation. In most environments topics are shallowly considered with each person involved anxious to say all the clichés stored away on that topic. There is seldom much listening and there is often less evidence of creative, original thinking. The most satisfaction in these situations seems to be derived from actually getting someone to listen to some small part of what is said and maybe even respond.

English classroom environments are even worse. Rather than an agreed upon topic, the teacher-selected topic is the subject of consideration. In many situations the teacher does all the talking and each potential writer is cast in the role of listener. When the potential writer does participate in the discussion, he or she likely says only what is certain to meet with the approval of the teacher. When the talk is finished, the writers are told to respond creatively in writing in whatever time remains. Fat chance. (1) The topic may well be of interest to one person, the teacher. (2) The writer has probably up to the moment of writing not been involved in the pre-writing thinking process. (3) Most writers in most situations are wisely aware that there is no thinking to be done, only a good recording of what the teacher has said. (4) No one has listened to what each writer might be thinking about the topic; therefore, there is no give and take, no opportunity to try out ideas. (5) Only one perspective is explored, the teacher's. (6) Being creative is risky; it is breaking new, unexplored ground, and most writers in this environment do not feel safe enough to do it.

In an ideal environment for intellectual stimulation, each person is a participant, is knowledgeable, is expected to think and listen and speak; each participant is respected and listened to. In this environment information is sifted through several perspectives, blended for new flavors, carefully corrected, tasted and adjusted, and finally when the time is right, the finished dish is served, shared, and admired. Everyone has participated

in this banquet and shared his or her own speciality from appetizer to dessert and has been duly praised for participation if not gourmet talents. At such a feast everyone can be deeply satisfied.

Ideal physical environments are nice, but the writing environment is an intellectual tasting party where the varieties of tastes and textures shared will transcend even the meannest of immediate physical environments.

Student Journal: The thing that helps me become better in my writing skills is a ten-minute writing when we enter into the class each class period.

Student Journal: I like the way you give us five minutes to write then we write something else pertaining to our topic but different things about it.

Atlanta Journal: I will have my students do this writing although I'm finding it unsettling for myself. Sneaky questions and new insights keep rushing at me faster than I can deal with them on paper. Tension is great.

Elbow: But I believe you will improve your writing more through freewriting and sharing than through any other activities described in this book. (*Power 24*)

For too many years and in too many English classrooms, correctness has been and is the major criterion for good writing. Shallow, meaningless papers are praised for faultless conventional usage and rich, creative ideas are overlooked if expressed with misspelled words. Some of the most popular classroom techniques are drill in grammar or usage with subsequent objective testing. Striving to produce students who can punctuate well is a realistic response from English teachers of whom such demands are made, and students lose.

Some students learn to follow the path of least resistance and become skilled at producing meaningless little pieces of sacchrine generalities with beautiful penmanship and no misspelled words. Others insist on being creative and different and dare wrestle with complex issues. Their energies are focused on what they are saying. They often fail. Most students fall between these two extremes. Some achieve a fairly good balance and grow to write good papers. Most, however, struggle and flounder and get frustrated and sometimes fail and hate to write.



Why? Because writing is saying things the student knows little and cares even less about for an audience (teacher) who knows and cares more about the topic and who will mark every deviation from the norm in grammar and usage and who may not share and value the information but rather draw circles and arrows of criticism and sum up all the marks with a grade.

Free writing, particularly directed free writing, is a technique which seems to have worked better than any other technique to allow students to learn to write honestly, thoughtfully, and with pleasure. Students can be much more open and relaxed with this technique because (1) teacher will not grade it, (2) teacher might not even read it, (3) it might be kept totally private, (4) what is shared may be discussed but will not be criticized, (5) writing can be safely opinionated. Such freedom allows student thoughts to flow and allows them to become more open, more honest and eventually more clear, more direct and focused.

Entering college students come to us with numerous writing constraints, but the one that we agreed upon unanimously was that our students do not read enough and, therefore, are lacking in experience to write about and equally lacking in positive models for writing. Two methods which we found to help our students become better readers and, therefore, better writers were reading logs and dialectical notebooks. Students often expressed positive comments about how the reading logs in which they summarized plots and discussed themes, symbols and characters were helpful when it came time to brainstorm for essay topics. Additionally students can be encouraged to take notes on assigned readings, respond to those notes, and exchange journals and have other students react to the responses. What can result is serious probing among peers. Students begin to think and formulate opinions and even dialogue with the author of the reading assignment.

Students can learn to write something other than teacher pleasers. They can learn to write what they are thinking in clear direct language. They write so much that they can feel free to throw away big chunks of material that doesn't work. They can learn to recognize ideas that are meaningful and to express them well. They can learn to work out ideas on paper, to communicate with pleasure and to enjoy writing and gain satisfaction from it.

Student Journal: Helpful things in this class have been class participation of exercises and discussion and group work of 2 or more persons.

Atlanta Journal: My writing can be seen as potentially far more than I thought it was before our group. I am excited that my experience can generate questions and

sharing and the understanding that it did.  
My concern about my own writing is first  
that I don't receive the good constructive  
criticism that might help me grow as a writer.

Smith: Writing in general often requires  
other people to stimulate discussion, to  
provide spellings, to listen to choice  
phrases, and even just for companionship  
in an activity which can be so personal  
and unpredictable that it creates considerable  
stress. (796)

Writing is often represented as an activity requiring isolation. The cinema screen portrays a lone person quietly hunched over a writing pad and allowing no interruptions. Writing in the classroom is usually similarly quiet; each student is hunched over the writing pad on the desk with the teacher watching carefully to be sure that no one disturbs anyone else. Writing is commonly not meant to be a sharing activity.

Our experiences, however, demonstrate that our best thinking is done with others. New ideas come from seeing from others' eyes. Ideas are solidified and clarified when they are verbalized for others. Original ideas gain value when they are recognized and validated by others. Unworkable ideas can be tested and found wanting with an audience.

If a writing experience is nothing more than an assignment to be graded by a teacher, it is a dull, unrewarding chore. It can be postponed until it is dashed off poorly and hurriedly—without thinking or caring—to pass. When others are involved, however, the experience changes. The writer who is discussing the topic with others of differing perspectives becomes involved and actually thinks about it. Because each participant sees the topic a little differently, all can see it far more broadly. Tensions are created, questions are asked, dissention may occur, the writer cares. Now writing is not to pass; it is to express, to communicate. At this point good writing becomes important because the writer has a mission. Now writing can become a satisfying experience.

Students who have never experienced such sharing—and many have not—need guidance at the beginning. Group discussions often need direction at first, but students derive such value from sharing ideas that they learn quickly and soon need few guidelines. In most group situations the group can balance itself, and the teacher eventually becomes participant, not leader. The student who is too critical or negative will soon discover that more attention is gained by more positive involvement. The student who monopolizes will eventually be interrupted, and shy students are often supported by supportive peers. Student writers are more highly motivated by the expectations of their peers than the deadlines

of their teachers. Ironically, when sharing is encouraged, individual contributions become more creative, original, and unique.

When writing assignments are due, we have found that peer review with the use of specific questions has been extremely helpful. A list of questions that peer group members ask about their papers is essential because the questions help students to focus instead of merely skim through a paper. The questions may be as general or as specific as, "Is there a thesis?" or "Are there any agreement errors?" Again, students are helped to begin a dialogue about their papers.

Another successful technique is to have a student read a finished paper to two peers. With this technique, students use all three of their voices, the voice they speak in, the voice they write in, and the voice they think they speak and write in. The writer of the paper is helped because he or she is actively engaged and the listeners are put in the position of active listeners who will be expected to assist in the evaluation of the paper. Because of the reciprocity which is engendered in this type of environment, competition is minimized and friendships are built which go beyond the classroom.

Directed peer reviews and oral sharing of finished papers as well as papers in progress eliminate some of the pressure of paper evaluation for the teacher and at the same time allows students the peer response which enhances growth in writing. Although we wouldn't forfeit the frequent reading of and criticism of students' papers either in writing or in private conference, we can enthusiastically agree that sharing in the classroom is beneficial for everyone there.

Student Journal: I would go in on my own to see Dr. Loy about some of my written work, so that I could be alone with her and she could put more emphasis on me.

Student Journal: Sometimes I try to come to your office and ask for help but I figure it wouldn't be right to do that. Every time I get to your door I freeze up and change my mind.

Student Journal: Helpful things are: Student-teacher relationship how teacher communicate and make an impact but not for criticism.

Atlanta Journal: I have two major concerns: first, how will my interaction with students as writers affect them wholly, and second, are my expectations of them as college freshman writing really appropriate.

Elbow: The natural direction of communication is to explain what you understand to someone who doesn't understand it. But in writing an essay for a teacher your task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better. You seldom feel you are writing because *you* want to tell someone something. (*Power* 219)

Teachers of first year college students interact with a widely diverse group of students at the very beginning of a college career who will be sharing a large part of their most intimate selves on paper. We are academically experienced, changeable, not always sensitive human beings to whom these personal revelations are trustingly made. The quirk of an eyebrow, the mark of a pen, the clearing of a throat can have terrific impact on the fragile egos of these most vulnerable young people.

We have begun to sometimes write along with our students and to share what we have written even though it is sometimes personal and even painful. In this disclosing of ourselves we foster trust among the writers' groups and find pleasure in seeing our students risk showing themselves too. Students begin to feel comfortable not only with exchanging papers with each other but also with reading aloud their thoughts without fear of criticism or anxiety of competition. Group members begin to feel comfortable in probing each other and challenging ideas, knowing they are in a friendly, non-threatening environment—in which the teacher is a member of the group.

Any act at any moment can be an obstacle or the motivation to any of our students, and we are all too human. The responsibility is almost overwhelming when we allow ourselves to contemplate it. Perhaps this overwhelming feeling is analogous to that of our students writing their first essays. We must not forget.

## Writing at Atlanta Junior College: A Team Sport

Atlanta Junior College teachers have come out of the bleachers at last and are off to a winning season as a result of the impetus gained at the Bard Summer Writing Institute. No longer are AJC teachers simply spectators, who only observe our students engaging in the writing process or evaluate them long after it's over. Brief in-class writing activities, as well as essay test assignments, are now being tackled by the initiating professors. Realizing that our participation in numerous writing scrimmages is the major strategy to reach our goal, teachers across the curriculum have employed methods whereby students and teachers generate more writing in more classes than ever before. We are acting as if this is the fourth quarter, because we know that every play means the difference in our preparing students for a life-long game of more developed skills in thinking, reading, writing, and learning, or having them leave as the rookies they were when they approached the field for the initial "education" kickoff. Our team enthusiasm is nurtured by our students' desire to succeed.

During the fall quarter, teachers began an active practice of writing with their students. In one of the classes, a writing class, students and teachers wrote during the first five minutes of class in a spiral notebook used for journal entries only. Often the topic was chosen by the teacher (from a list of topics the students are expected to be able to respond to by the end of the quarter); however, at least once each week, students were allowed to select the topics, a reversal of roles which not only made them assume some responsibility for journal writing and focusing, but also presented the teacher as a model in an active, more spontaneous writing process.

There were other benefits of this brief, daily writing activity that helped to "settle" and "posture" the class for its daily sessions. To her surprise, the teacher found that several topics, selected to inspire experience based entries, were not as universal as she previously believed but presented much more of a writing challenge than other topics. However, both students and teacher made a commitment to keep their pens moving even though they could not readily think of anything to write. "I can't think of anything to write, . . . I haven't thought of anything yet, . . . I'm thinking of something. . . ." often filled the first few lines of many journal entries (a preferable alternate to students' meandering stares, stilled pens, and blank pages). But this, in every instance, carried the thinkers/writers to an experience and thoughts that they could write about. For teacher and students, this was a positive, motivating writing experience.

Others who are writing along with their students have cringed at the imperfections, ambiguities, and unreasonable expectations they have discovered in their own assignments—assignments which heretofore had given them pride of creation and ownership.

"This [writing responses to my own assignments] is one of the best things I've done to improve my teaching," one teacher was heard to remark. "I had no idea that this assignment asked students to do so much, with so little, in so short a time." Experiences like this, in which teachers become their own students of writing, contributed to teacher demystifying, more open classroom sharing, and learning bonds that might not have been achieved if writing in these classrooms were still a spectator sport.

In another area of the playing field, math courses, a domain where many believe that writing anything other than numbers is anti-math or against the rules, we have cheered many a courageous play. Teachers in this discipline minimized their role in developing writing skills ("... After all, you English folk don't help us with numbers") while maximizing their contributions to developing thinking (and to a much lesser degree, reading) skills. Getting them involved in the idea of writing-to-learn and in sessions where writing assignments were shared which math teachers could give, without too much sacrifice of time or the Pythagorean theorem, has made a world of difference in their attitudes, and for some, their teaching of math. Do they more clearly see the connection between thinking, reading, math and (that unequal remainder) writing? Yes! We know they have gained some yardage.

One teacher told about an engaging yet simple activity used in her math class in which she asked students to write directions and problems for their peers to read, follow, and solve. Concurrently, students were asked to provide the teacher with a written narrative of the thoughts that led to the selection and development of the problem or directions, as well as the solution.

While it is not uncommon to have peer tutors in a math class, this assignment gave students the opportunity to assume the roles of teacher, critic, student, and evaluator while reckoning with the responsibilities of each.

The math teacher touted the benefits of the exercise and was proud to be a part of the development of writing, thinking and reading skills. As students and teacher worked to overcome the math challenges in student initiated problems, they also took the opportunity to improve their skills in writing, reading, and thinking. Nevertheless, all was not glory, for near the end of the quarter, the teacher lamented, "That was the only writing assignment I had time to do." Like any good teammates, we gave the resounding, supportive cheer, "But you did one writing activity; that's a start!" We were all thinking, if all sixty teachers will do one (and some will do more) the comment, "Thank goodness we don't have to write in that course," will soon be passed'.

Because of our very efficient and well stocked audio visual center, media aids are often used in our classrooms. As a result of our writing across the curriculum thrust and our insights into ways of developing students' writing and thinking skills, media center aids that were used as supplements or accessories are now integrally used to encourage writing and thinking. For example, in one Introduction to Algebra class, the teacher always showed the film "Donald in Magic Math Land" to his first quarter students at some point during the term. He said this cartoon had always been an excellent diversion when students appeared to be bogged down in learning math, and it provided some levity during some troublesome math units. In the past, the class shared a few laughs, and made a few aimless comments about the film. Afterward everyone went back to work, perhaps a little more energetic because of the diversion.

During the winter quarter, however, the teacher prepared two specific "questions" that students were asked to respond to in writing after they watched the film. The question, "Describe ways in which Donald needed math skills in order to do everyday tasks, even though he was not aware that his math skills were being used," made the students think about and write what they saw and felt. This led to a very lively discussion as well as some oral reading when some students volunteered to read what they had written.

The activity was valuable for the teacher, who had not previously gotten over the hurdle of including writing in his classroom, and who otherwise might not have realized the stages of development of our students' writing skills. The writing and reasoning were there for him to see within the context of his own discipline.

In addition, as the teacher listened to students read aloud, he realized more about their reading levels than we could ever have revealed during discussion in faculty workshops, and he saw how he could provide another opportunity to connect reading, writing, and thinking in the class. He was anxious to show students that any activity can provide a reason for writing, and every activity should provide a reason for thinking—a meaningful touchdown for this past season's bench-warmer.

Warm-up time took a little longer for some instructors who traditionally gave one major writing assignment each quarter. The real limitations of time and energy, often discussed during our Bard College workshop, were deterrents for several teachers who felt they had so much content to cover, as well as other academic responsibilities to meet. Such limitations kept them from collecting students' papers before the end of the quarter.

One Criminal Justice teacher reluctantly agreed to experiment with assigning shorter papers designed to show stages in the development of the longer paper. The short papers were to culminate in a major paper due at the end of the quarter. Because they were given mid-quarter deadlines, students started earlier and wrote think pieces which they presented to the teacher at regular intervals. Going a step further, students

were asked to schedule brief conferences with the teacher where they both discussed the papers and formalized specific questions that the mini papers raised or should answer. In addition, the "where do I go from here" query was also explored. The teacher admitted that not only did he enjoy these sessions (which beat sitting in the office all quarter waiting for students who only came long after mid-term to discuss their papers), but he could see students become more involved in writing their papers. The deadlines of the assignment prohibited students from waiting a few days before the end of the quarter to write, and made the final papers more interesting to the teacher, who was then able to read them in less time than it had taken during previous quarters.

Those of us who are mentors for our writing across the curriculum program have not hesitated to discuss this approach as an example of a way in which the teacher and student can better see what students are doing to develop focus, and a way to question methods of investigation, sources, and organization. The term paper with teacher/student interaction reminds students of how ideas evolve into coherent papers. They are forced to deal with their reluctance to talk about their own ideas, but, more importantly, to realize that they do have some ideas of their own, which can be more interesting to read in a paper than those they copy—hence, less "pain" for the student and teacher.

Students who enroll in our Art Appreciation class spend half of their time responding in writing to field trips, works of art, their own creative projects, and museum visits. The art teacher has worked and reworked explicit assignments that ask students to be specific, fluent, and clear in their written reactions.

Practicing what she preaches, the teacher now gives all assignments in writing with very specific contextual details for each. One of her assignments meticulously guides students through several aspects of the writing process to assist them in producing the final assignment. In this assignment, students are urged to employ the same tenets of invention and creativity in their writing that they are developing while designing a piece of art, the major object of the assignment.

While setting parameters for the paper, her assignment implicitly encourages students to keep notes as they design their project and explicitly states the factual and interpretative information that the narrative must include. Written on her assignment are instructions to "write rough drafts, revise, and edit with help from our Writing Center," and they are told that the narrative will be displayed along with the art work. Even though the teacher remarked that she had to help students with final editing before their papers were displayed, she found that providing an audience, a purpose, and the (explicit) motivator for composition (of art work and paper) all made a difference in the quality of work that students submitted. The evolution of the teacher's written assignment, from the first draft to the final one, is an example of the teacher's involvement in the writing process that helped the teacher to refine



the assignment so that both she and the students knew exactly what she wanted them to do and gain from the activity.

Even though this teacher is now more aware of the amount of time and energy she must devote to writing assignments in order to obtain the desired results, she is also concerned about the amount of time she now spends evaluating the written work. We're pleased that developing strategies for non-writing teachers to evaluate written assignments will be a good topic to initiate faculty dialogue about teaching writing during next academic year.

That point conveniently brings us to one of the more exciting outcomes of our Bard experience. A common recollection of each group member was the opportunity the workshop gave us to talk to one another about teaching writing, what we do and don't do, and what we'd like to know how to do better.

Our experience during the past year with a very diverse group of faculty has produced a climate in which our faculty are talking to each other more about what we are doing in our respective classrooms. Working on developing writing and thinking skills across the curriculum brings people together to talk about a college commitment that becomes more of a shared responsibility—a responsibility which (through these conversations) becomes less and less that of the English faculty only. We all rejoiced (very often openly) when we witnessed perceptions and behaviors about the teaching of writing change right before our very eyes and ears. On our campus, which is small but with faculty divisions often too busy to "get together," we knew that at the Dean's urging, teachers across disciplines would come to share and talk at planned sessions. However, a welcomed serendipity is that more of us are stopping in the corridors, meeting in the Writing Center, and huddling in our offices to talk about what we did in our classes, what assignments we are planning, and *yes!* what we ourselves are writing.

At one of our sessions, we decided to write essays because many of us admitted that it had been some time since we had written anything other than letter grades and brief comments to students or a memorandum to our Division Chairperson. Given two weeks to fulfill the assignment, when our teacher-students met again to share their writings, we talked about how much like our students we behaved during the assignment period and even reprimanded those who had not fulfilled the assignment.

As we read and discussed the papers, and posed questions aimed at creating revision strategies for each, we stumbled upon the spark that made this an adventure rather than just another workshop. Since this particular group consisted of economics, social science, literature, science, foreign language, and writing teachers, as well as some college administrators, there was probably the unspoken assumption that each would write about some technical aspect or concept of the respective subjects. However, we were intrigued to learn that our colleagues had interests and thoughts about subjects we never would have pictured them having.

The economics teacher wrote about principles of success that he learned in the army over thirty years ago and which helped him to maintain his jovial carefree disposition (yes, even at economic depression's door. . . and all these years we have wondered who wound his clock every morning). The literature teacher wrote a moving, informative, and truly artistic account of her peak of life battle with a disease, a battle she won through strength that few believed her weakened body and dispirited soul could muster. Now, none of us take our vacuumed carpets, mopped floors, or washed dishes for granted after a conversational but shocking essay on our constant germ companions, so skillfully written by our professor of physical anatomy. This teacher, whom we can't seem to separate from her lab coat, scientific experiments and technical jargon, conjured up warm images of her children and her own home in this sometimes tongue-in-cheek essay.

Then there was the sociology teacher who unearthed a sensitive, private piece written 15 years ago after a broken relationship with a friend. We were quick to note that the uncertainty and timidity revealed in the writing of his thoughtful paper are the antithesis of the controlled authoritative voice which we now associate with this colleague.

Our communication skills teacher exposed her bent for creative writing when she authored an epic poem designed to make a direct social comment. And most of us were impressed with the sophisticated computer literacy of our French teacher as revealed in her writing of instructions about a computer program that she authored. We realized that even though some of us were not as computer literate as she, we could still talk about the paper's audience, clarity, organization, and syntax as well as the teacher's purpose and interests.

This writing experience paved the way for discoveries of mutual interests and concerns, admiration and respect in areas and with teachers whose conversational paths may barely cross only after faculty or committee meetings or during a few minutes before and after class. Of course, we could not help remarking about how much information about our students escapes us when we don't provide more opportunities for them to write.

As some of these very personal writings raised the adrenalin in our discussion of how much we can learn about ourselves through writing, and how much writing contributes to learning, the team scored again, and it was one of the easiest points we made.

The more we worked on providing varied, numerous writing experiences for our students and ourselves, the closer we got to our goals. One of our teachers, who was willing and active participant in each formal or informal faculty get together, often made very insightful comments and assessments of our efforts and activities. He always seemed to have one or another anecdote about his classroom experiences which he freely shared, orally. His department chairperson confided that for years she had been trying to get him to write down some of his ideas. But he was a writing teacher, not a writer; besides, "I don't know if anybody would want to read anything I wrote."

Well, after writing a very fluent, charming essay based on his reflections of an incident in one of his writing classes, we all encouraged him (of course) to revise it (incidentally, the essay included a delightful anecdote about what a student understood "revise" to mean), and to submit it for publication. He treated our suggestion as if it had been a glib remark, but he had to know that we were not only impressed with the way he wrote, but also with what his writing said about student writing, thinking, and learning. After basking in the positive vibrations from our group and remembering his Division Chairperson (who was present at the writing-sharing session, and who threatened to relocate his office in the energy plant if he didn't do more with the paper), he revised and submitted the essay to *Innovation Abstracts*. Approximately one month later, we were all thrilled to receive an issue of the publication, headlined with his article. Needless to say, the teacher, who had neither written nor published anything during his ten-year tenure here, took more pride in his accomplishment than he did in his end-of-the-year salary raise (well, almost). It was, overall, a big boost to our team's writing skills maneuvers.

It should be clear that after the Bard workshop, as we developed plans to shape our writing across the curriculum program by using writing to learn as the campus-wide catalyst, we were struck by our own minimal participation in the writing process with our students, as well as on our own. So, our game plan set out to change that and made us as teachers more aware of our continual roles as students. We realized that it was important to re-enroll ourselves in developmental writing, reading, and thinking endeavors in order to more effectively, efficiently, and empathetically engage our students in these activities.

Now, teacher journals of pre-during- and post-class activities are no longer a rare phenomenon, especially in those classes where writing assignments are given. More teachers are documenting what works, what doesn't, plans, follow-up, etc. of class activities. Now, teachers can more accurately and do readily share their writing activity wares and woes with their fellow teachers. Teachers can proudly say to students that they, too, keep notes about the class, and may refer to their own notebooks or use them as resources to illustrate the value of writing and expressing one's thoughts in order to become better at both.

Also, several teachers are excited about the usefulness of learning logs for them and their students. Reports about novel ways in which learning logs are used prompted us to seek out one another for purposes of mimicking and adapting "a good thing." As a result of information shared at the Bard workshop about learning logs, one Division Chairperson, whose administrative duties often bar her from the classroom quarter after quarter, was on a "teaching high" for the entire spring quarter because she taught a course that required students to use the learning log. Along with reading assignments, students were given questions or ideas to think about and were asked to respond to these, as well as to raise their own

questions in their learning logs. This teacher (and others have given similar reports) found that her students seemed to exude more confidence that they had something to say because they had written their thoughts beforehand and felt they had something to talk about. These logs also gave the instructor a sense of how students read and not just whether they read. For this class, it became a natural daily practice to associate reading, thinking, writing, and learning.

Learning logs have also been a big help in allowing teachers to re-examine the use of students' time. In the learning log, when the student gives some idea of an approach to a writing assignment or comments on a paper that is still in its rough draft form, the teacher can intervene and help to clarify misunderstandings or inappropriate selection of information.

Some of our starting line players are involving students in writing exam questions that require brief and lengthy written responses. Students exchange questions and have the opportunity to discuss both the questions themselves (for clarity, purpose, grammar, mechanics, etc.) and the answers. The exercise of writing the questions and thinking about what and how to ask them becomes as important as answering them.

When we think about others who made a special effort to include writing and reading activities in their classes, our music professor comes to mind. His presentation almost makes it seem as if we planned a half-time show during this year of full field participation.

At exactly mid-year, faculty and students were guests at a magnificent concert given by our choir. However, this one was very different from previous performances. Our professor of music had worked with students to develop appropriate, interpretative commentary about the music they provided. They also included choral readings, carefully chosen to enhance the musical selections. When students read the same pieces to us in different "voices" and lyrically bridged various musical renditions with meaningful, personal interpretations, the audience learned from the choir's thinking, writing, and reading, and we knew that the choir had learned as well. It was an uplifting experience, and we all—faculty, students and the responsible teacher—shared the epiphany.

More of our teachers now collaborate with others while they re-examine and rewrite their reading and writing assignments—no small effort, since we are fortunate enough to have private offices but are unfortunate in that this inhibits casual, spontaneous office conversations. However, we have witnessed more teachers requesting critiques of their memos, letters, class syllabi, and reports before they distribute them. Previously, this had been primarily a regular practice of writing teachers.

It goes without saying that administrative support for and participation in what we are doing has been central to our progress. In fact, the attempt by our administrators to make their correspondences more readable, more succinct, and less voluminous keeps them from being mere sideline boosters in this team effort.

Our Academic Dean never hesitates to talk about the impact he felt from the Bard workshop. While he had always supported our writing across the curriculum efforts, he can now experientially and specifically talk about how we can affect learning through writing in all courses. In addition, much to the faculty's delight, the Dean's own writing style is now a sharp contrast to "the way it was." Happy to produce memos that are more conversational, he feels proud of what he has been able to achieve in his own writing.

It takes time to measure the over-all success of most projects, and this one is no exception. Although we can point to some successes, we still have many questions, we are still learning, some of us are still skeptical, but all of us see this as a project-in-progress. The Bard workshop helped us to rekindle the enthusiasm we needed to recruit, train, and work with a faculty who could have quickly and justifiably dismissed the announcement of writing across the curriculum by saying, "Yes, we've been talking this game for years."

Our frustrations and skepticism grow out of our desire to know that what we are doing will make a difference for our students. We keep reminding ourselves that some of us are still experimenting with an unfamiliar, non-traditional game plan, and even though we are not always sure about how to execute certain practice sessions, more of us have the attitude to try, even though it may be trial and error.

Those of us directly responsible for guiding others through this continuing process are also susceptible to fourth downs. But somehow, because of what we know and feel, and because of what we were exposed to at the Bard and other kindred workshops, we are able to garner enough energy to serve as blockers to anything that might deter us. We hope we can maintain this strong first string.

Recent newspaper articles about illiteracy in Atlanta remind us that although we are playing offense, we (teachers and students) have such limited time together on the field. So, knowing we have no timeouts left, we've got the spirit, and it's our ball.

JACQUELINE JONES ROYSTER  
ANNE BRADFORD WARNER  
SPELMAN COLLEGE

Saga Of The Dragonslayers  
Or  
Perspectives On Teaching Writing At Spelman College

The Spelman College Comprehensive Writing Program was established in 1978 in response to a campus-wide concern about the inadequacy of students' writing skills. The initial planning took place in Colorado Springs at the 1978 Lilly Workshop on the Liberal Arts. Our closing report during that workshop was presented in the form of an allegorical tale modeled after the Arthurian legends. Spelman was Spelmanlot. The workshop team members became knights in search of the Holy Grail—writing proficiency. The major dragon was the Dragon of Illiteracy. It was a fanciful way to begin what in our imaginations was a rather impossible, never-ending quest. Seemingly, though, the tale allowed us to rise above our apprehensions about the critical nature of the task and to engage in our pursuit with high spirits and great aspirations. It is apparent to me now that even as a member of that team, I had internalized our tale to the extent that I had actually forgotten those fanciful beginnings until we began our collaboration on this present task.

In Colorado Springs, we focused our attention on designing an across the curriculum effort to develop and improve writing skills and laid the groundwork for the Comprehensive Writing Program. The basic goal of the program is for students to reach not only a minimum level of competence in writing skill, but to go beyond to a level of proficiency in accordance with the demands of the world of work and graduate and professional schools. The emphasis is on looking at writing within the teaching/learning context, and thereby redefining it as a process instead of only a product and clarifying its purpose as not just to communicate or demonstrate knowledge, but also to think and to learn. Over the years, the effort has been to:

1. Encourage faculty and students to view writing as a process which facilitates both thinking and learning.
2. Establish an atmosphere in which students expect to engage in writing activities throughout the college, regardless of discipline, and in which they expect to be held accountable for the quality—content and form—of their written products.

3. Establish an atmosphere in which faculty expect to support writing skill development in innovative ways in order to help students to think about and learn the course content, to respond to the subject matter in ways which are recognized as appropriate by the discipline, and to write in recognition of conventional writing expectations.
4. Provide specific support for faculty who make efforts to incorporate writing experiences into their course content through workshops, as well as human resources (e.g. assistance which the Director of the program can provide) and material resources.
5. Provide a place where students can receive assistance with any writing task which they may encounter through mini-workshops and seminars, material resources, and human resources (e.g., personnel who can give immediate response to a particular task).

This was the situation which existed in 1984-1985 when the Bard Workshop for faculty and administrators in historically Black colleges took place on the Spelman campus during the summer of 1985. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that Spelman was delighted to host, along with Xavier University, the 1985 Bard Workshop. We welcomed the opportunity to participate in the Bard experience, not because the approach and techniques were unfamiliar to all faculty or to the Writing Program, but because we fully expected to be stimulated and enriched by the opportunity to interact with peers who share some of our concerns and priorities. We expected to be positively affected, particularly in terms of broadening and strengthening the network of faculty within the English Department who are both intellectually and by practice committed to writing as process, to collaborative learning, and to student-centered classrooms (See Elbow, Berthoff, and Bruffee). Clearly, from Anne Warner's account below those expectations were indeed realized:

Last year in an English class I described a sphinx in response to a student's question. "It is a monster," I said, "part lion with wings and part woman. It asks difficult questions, and when one answers incorrectly, it gobbles up the answerer." A student responded, "That's not a sphinx; that's an English teacher."

When such insights present themselves, one must make the best use of them. Before I met the leaders from the Bard Institute on Writing and Thinking, I had already wondered at the dead silences on the other side of my desk in the classroom. The conventional arrangements for giving and receiving information and ideas simply were not working very effectively. My respondent on the sphinx problem had given me understanding, but not until I experienced the Bard Workshop in operation did I have the concrete sense of a legitimate alternative to my authority in and control of the classroom.

As I understand them, the techniques from the Bard Institute lower



student risk and raise commitment and responsibility in all sorts of decision-making situations and in evaluation. Success of the group interaction depends upon an implicit assumption that the writer is the authority on what she wants to say, and that she can, with help, find the resources within herself to make decisions and shape her points. The group is there to respond with their understandings or their opinions and to ask important questions about content and direction. All the activities emphasize the personal involvement which should be present in all good writing. The focus is on the students' understanding of a process by which critical decisions can be made and by which the necessary final product evolves. The classroom activities—both the informal freewritings to draw ideas to the surface and the more formal writings—demonstrate that the direction is toward exploration of the writer's own voice, purpose, and resources rather than toward institutionalized norms for college exposition. Between my very conventional notion of the classroom and Spelman's not too unspoken demands for frequent, graded evaluations of large numbers of students, incorporation of the Bard techniques at first seemed nearly impossible or, where possible, likely to be fruitless. It was clear that the institutional demands would not change; however, the two Bard workshops I attended (the 1985 summer one and an earlier weekend workshop at Bard College) changed what I believed was possible in a classroom. Most of all, they revealed that I had, perhaps, lacked faith in the students' abilities and had rather desperately needed to retain control of what happened in the classroom. In short, I found a crying need for change in my own values and perspectives. In the last year and one-half, I have introduced gradually classroom changes which are comfortable with the changes in me.

Very small steps in the classroom create enormous changes in its dynamic, so that even modest adjustments seemed highly volatile and experimental. Nevertheless, I tried four modifications. The easiest shift in the classroom involved the transition from pop quizzes to free writings. At the beginning of class I ask the students to address a topic, a question, an image from the reading—to write about it for a few minutes. Sometimes I collect the writing; sometimes not. The students emerge from the writing with a much higher focus on their reading, or some aspect of it, than one expects in a more traditional question-answer session when the class grinds to a start. If the situation is appropriate at the end of class, I may ask the students to freewrite a second time, to see what ideas have been added or changed. Such writing-as-thinking exercises emphasize the student's focus on her own ideas and progress, rather than mine. They are one insulation against the sphinx problem, and through the frequency of these types of writings, students may gradually come to regard an ungraded assignment as real.

Far more difficult to institute was the dialectical notebook, which I use in all composition courses for responses to assigned readings. The variation in performance is radical; some students say very little or limit



themselves to narrative rather than analytic commentaries, and others shape penetrating inquiries. The most reliable product of this assignment has been that more students complete their readings, and more students communicate with each other about the readings. On the days when students open up their internal dialogue and write in these notebooks in class, they also expect group discussions in a circle. Changing the chairs to the circle is a cue now for a shift from my direct lectures and leadership to a much more democratic arrangement in which they call on one another. In such discussions I have found it worthwhile to write some guiding questions or conversation limits on the board and to point out to the groups shifts of focus or digressions.

A similar arrangement of chairs and questions works effectively with the discussion of student drafts. In this environment, the papers become more communal efforts, and egos are generally nurtured, particularly by the emphasis on giving non-judgmental observations. Limiting students (and the professor) to devices of non-judgmental feedback is quite difficult. The emphasis is on descriptive comments even though interpretive comments can often be tactful and helpful. Here, the competing priorities of institutional standards versus personal expressiveness can reach a stalemate. Ultimately, the class knows that behind the scenes in this non-judgmental dialogue is a sphinx who, within a week or so, must put grades on the assignment; they may speak as they like, but they always stand the risk of being gobbled up. Redirecting focus from grading consequences is very difficult; still, the exercise works because students have a very natural interest in each other's work, a quicker understanding than mine of the writer's orientation toward the subject, and a general desire to help and be helped. With thorough guidelines, small groups have proved helpful.

The final activity which I tried out was the exercise for freewriting in response to poetry which yields a fascinating class and usually exceptional passages of description. Of course, the problem for both student and professor involves just what the outcome or product is. One does not have a critical paper, but a reader response. When the god of the classroom is analytical thinking, how does one vindicate the exercise? My response has been to ask the class to draw parallels in the various responses and to see if these indicate a communal interpretation of the poem. Sometimes the parallels are uncanny and rewarding; at other times we are caught in a complex web of subjectivity.

These efforts are conservative, yet I have on frequent occasions simply lost ground in focus, discipline, and the level of thinking. At the same time I have rarely failed in improving student involvement with the material and with each other or in seeing greater pleasure in the experience of the classroom. Do the gains offset the losses? Would the losses be so great if I were a more experienced and committed facilitator of the group dynamic? Can sphinxes facilitate and still be called upon to consume the daily youth?

I find that I am happy to have come this far. The gains in student

commitment and participation are more essential than getting *the* answers to *my* questions. Certainly, some things have been lost. However, the greatest gain is in the sense that the classroom is alive, that there are new methods worth trying out, that we need not simply default into old habits, conventional attitudes, and the usual, grumpy nostalgia for the past.

One question which emerges from my colleague's experience is just what role we as teachers are to assume in the classroom. Obviously, the problem is full of complexities, and in all probability it has solutions that are also complex. However, the old adage, "Knowledge is power," seems to hold a truth which we should not ignore. If we can redefine the learning process, as Professor Warner is beginning to, as a process of empowerment (See Elbow), then we can begin to see a clearer vision of what can happen in the students' quests to maximize their potential, their power. We see, first of all, that students will find it easier to take power, to take responsibility for their own learning, if we, the teachers, are not hoarding it all for ourselves, setting all the rules, making all the decisions, establishing all the goals, finding all the questions, and pre-determining all the solutions. If we can find it in our hearts and minds to allow room for student investment, then chances are student outcomes will reach their maximum potentials.

This notion raises a second issue, i.e., the issue of trust. As Warner pointed out, relinquishing responsibility and authority in the classroom demands that we do not just require students to take exactly what we have to offer and to take it only on our own terms. Instead, the demand is that we trust the students to engage actively in the process. It demands that we encourage them to raise their own questions, establish their own goals, find their own solutions, make their own personal connections and investments. We may provide the framework but students can share in the responsibility of filling in the pieces of the puzzle.

Ultimately, we recognize the value of another adage which says that we learn by our mistakes. When teachers are the clear and present authority, we often do not allow our students the option of trial and error. In this type of setting, error means crisis not opportunity. In contrast, when we give students room to experiment at lower risk and room to reconstruct when confronted by error at lower risk, then neither teacher nor students need to resort to the default mode of old habits—neither eating students whole, nor quaking in the presence of dragons and sphinxes. One basic task for us becomes making ourselves more consciously aware of how human beings develop as thinkers and learners and how we can reasonably intervene in the thinking/learning process (See Perry, Kurfiss, Fulwiler, and Sternberg). A consistent effort in this direction seems to hold the promise that as teacher-facilitator-grader, we can have more confidence that our classroom strategies are more

than just valuable in some vague sense but sound intellectually and developmentally and that the yield, therefore, will also be sound. We can have the confidence of knowing that the students are fully engaged in their own intellectual quests and not partly engaged or disengaged in ours. We also have the comfort of seeing that traditional classroom values which are focused on observable outcomes, such as written products, are not lost but invested for long term benefits that can pay again and again.

The conclusion of this saga, then, is that the tradition of the dragonslayer must continue. We must be ever vigilant of the dragons without and those within. We are committed to battling illiteracy, anti-intellectualism, mediocrity, etc., but we see also that we must commit to battling the sphinxes within ourselves, intolerance, unyielding authority, ego, insecurity, the fear of the unbridled, etc. Our varied responsibilities with an increasingly diverse student clientele require that we have at our disposal many resources for facing the dragons and for staving off the sphinxes so that our students can reap the full benefits of a quality educational experience.

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## “Writing to Read”: A Summer Writing Workshop for High School Students at Xavier University

The effects of the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking on the teaching of writing at Xavier University have been significant. The members of the Xavier team who attended the Atlanta workshop returned with enthusiasm to practice what they had learned. Later in the fall during the follow-up workshop, the new team members experienced and shared in the excitement of the Bard “stuff” (as we later called it). Two important developments resulted. First, because of the team members’ responsibility to share with other department members what they had learned, the English department engaged in a series of discussions and idea exchanges about composition and the teaching of writing. We devoted more than half of the total number of our fall departmental meetings to such discussions, making this the first time in many years that composition had become the central focus of as many consecutive meetings. The second development, and the one we will share in this essay, concerns a summer writing course we developed for high school students, the specifics of which could not have come about as they did without our Bard experience.

Through the University’s Drexel Center for Extended Learning, we developed a three-week summer writing program for high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors to help them improve their writing skills through an application of the techniques we learned at the Bard Writing Institute. While some of us experimented with the Bard approaches in our college composition and literature courses, we felt these same approaches could have special significance for high school students. By designing a program specifically for these students, we could address two crucial issues currently facing secondary education in New Orleans: the need to keep students in high school and to keep them motivated as writers. The high school drop-out rate in New Orleans is quite high. Of the number who do graduate, only a small percentage go on to college. Because of our focus on writing, we knew that we would be fostering the development of a skill essential to success in all courses. Greater success in school might encourage some students to remain there and to graduate. In addition, we hoped to begin to develop in the students new, positive attitudes about writing and to enable them to see writing as a means of achieving academic and personal growth.

Thirteen students enrolled in “Writing to Read,” meeting daily for three weeks from 9:00 until noon. Within the three weeks, we envisioned a tripartite arrangement moving from visions to re-visions to editing. While

such an arrangement reflects the linear stage model of the composing process, it was, during our planning, an arrangement of convenience, useful initially merely to sketch broadly the overall direction in which we wanted to go. Because of the writing and reading connection in the course title, we selected pieces of literature to which the students were to respond during classroom discussions, in their course notebooks, and in the drafts and papers they would produce. The readings would have to be on topics that adolescents could care about and become engaged in. We decided, therefore, to take a central theme, Growth and Discovery, around which we would organize the readings and responses. We wanted the students to examine themselves in relation to their families, their immediate environment, and to some extent society. A second but unannounced theme—growth through writing—also influenced our decisions about the course. We wanted the students to achieve personal growth through a changed awareness about themselves and about writing. We felt that awareness of themselves as writers and what they could learn about themselves through writing would be complementary goals.

The course readings we selected included several essays, poems, and excerpts from a novel and an autobiography: "Discovering the Self" by James E. Miller, "Who Am I?" by Marya Mannes, "Mother to Son" and "Mama and Daughter" by Langston Hughes, "Discovery of a Father" by Sherwood Anderson, excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, "The Little Store" by Eudora Welty, "Learning to Read and Write" from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, and "The Writer" by Richard Wilbur.

Before we could begin the explorations about and through writing, we first wanted to address the question of how the students viewed writing. Most would probably see writing as something they were required to do in school, something on which they were graded, and some thing whose conventions and rules had to be followed or it was not correct. We wanted them to talk about their writing fears, apprehensions, failures, and successes. Our class discussion revealed that most students disliked school writing because of the self-imposed pressure to get it right the first time, because they took grading very personally, and because of a concern to give the teacher what he or she wanted. Only one student had severe writing deficiencies. Most of them had done nonacademic writing, some indicating, for example, that they kept diaries, regularly wrote letters to friends, wrote poems and stories, or wrote to express frustrations, fears, and other private emotions. Only two said they disliked writing, but even they were not weak writers. We had hoped over the coming weeks to replace these negative attitudes with positive ones.

Since we had anticipated that their negative attitudes about writing would be formed by school writing, we wanted to suggest new ways that they could think of writing. We wanted to show them that not every piece of writing produced (even within the classroom) need be made

public. To this end, we introduced them to expressive writing, a mode that they could use to discover what they felt, knew, and believed; to explain to themselves or to question what they had read; to speculate about the meanings or implications of a particular passage or some aspect of our course theme. In short, in their early visions, we wanted them to begin to see writing as a liberating medium, whose conventions can and should be set aside when its purposes don't require them.

During the visions stage, we also wanted to connect their new way of thinking about writing to the course theme. Through expressive writing, in the form of freewriting and focused freewriting, we encouraged them to record their thoughts and feelings and to respond to the readings. Because it is personal, this writing could be kept private, could be shared, or an idea or two from it could be used later and developed into an essay. We wanted to emphasize to the students, moreover, that there is no correct or incorrect form of expressive writing, that they were not bound by rules or conventions, and that, in fact, to be concerned about such matters with this type of writing was counterproductive.

The next logical step after freewriting was to introduce them to some further invention strategies—specifically looping. We chose looping because it has many of the characteristics of freewriting and focused freewriting, and because we believe it is, as Peter Elbow conceives it, a logical extension of freewriting. We saw, then, quite a comfortable and “natural” progression from freewriting to focused freewriting to looping. In addition, because looping asks the writer to find center of gravity statements, it became a way to prepare them for the later demands of the essay form. Looping would further give them the chance to see how a writer clarifies thought as with each successive loop they would come closer to finding a central idea for development.

A description of one series of activities in response to an essay may serve to illustrate how we put the preceding ideas into practice. The students were asked to read Miller's “Discovering the Self,” an essay that addressed the announced and unannounced course themes. They were given the handout “Starters for Speculative Writing,” shown how to use it (through teacher modeling), and asked to write responses in their notebooks. To begin our discussion, they were asked to share their responses, several of which revealed problematic sections of the essay. We worked through these, clarified their meanings, and continued our discussion of the importance of self-discovery. They were then asked to do a focused write on the following question and to share their responses: “What do you think Miller means when he says that ‘writing is discovery’?” They were encouraged to think of any writing experiences through which they had made discoveries. One student wrote:

Writing is discovery. In that statement Miller was pointing out that through writing you can discover so much. By writing about your feelings and emotions you can discover yourself. By writing

about nature you say how you see the trees, the sky, the birds, etc. Everything is yours, through your own interpretation. By writing you discover your opinions on issues. Writing is the best way to get to know yourself.

Later in the class period the students were given this writing topic: "Think of something about yourself that others don't know but that you would like them to know. Try to discover why others don't know about this 'secret trait.'" They were told to use looping to discover ideas. At the end of the discovery stage, they were given a handout, "From Looping to Outlining," prepared by the course instructor to get them to organize the ideas they had generated and to see that outlining may be better used as an organizing tool than as an invention tool. Many admitted that in their high school English classes they disliked outlining because it forced them to attempt to organize ideas not yet fully formed and that they often wrote outlines *after* the final product and not before. During the group work that followed, they shared loops and outlines, did active listening, and recorded their groups' responses, which were used later during revision. Near the end of the first two weeks, they had produced works-in-progress to which they would return. The visions stage, then, presented a chance for the students to read, respond, share, and clarify their perceptions.

In the re-revisions and editing stages of the course, we attempted to get the students to prepare selected pieces for "publications." We hoped that they would bring their own fresher visions to drafts produced earlier and that they could benefit from the insights provided by other group members. We felt that the formation of writing groups would be a good way to accomplish these objectives. We didn't want the students to be critics of one another's texts; we wanted to be mirrors giving back reflections of the writer's words. From writing-group interaction, we wanted them to go back to their drafts and make their revisions with the intention of making meaning clearer, of truly communicating.

In the second week, after students had generated several pieces about which they cared, they were asked to choose one of these for inclusion in the workshop anthology. They were given the opportunity to enter their short "essays" on computer diskette. One group at a time was taken to the Xavier Computer Center for an introduction to word-processing; each session took approximately 1½ hours. After a short "hands-on" orientation to the computers and to a basic word-processing program, each student created a file and began entering the text of first drafts. Speed and proficiency varied widely. More skillful typists among the groups were faster and more accurate than their "hunt-and-peck" counterparts, but sufficient time was allowed for all to enter at least a page or so. At the end of this first session, rough drafts were printed and distributed, and students were told to bring these back to the workshop for revision.



In the final week the groups rotated through a second session of word-processing. They were asked to edit their "essays" and, in addition, enter a short free-write, focused write or poem written during the workshop. This time, emphasis was placed on using the program's deletion and insertion capabilities: the "cutting-and-pasting" that makes the computer a wonderful writing tool. We had hoped that the integration of computers into the workshop would enable students to discover the ease with which text can be rearranged, compared, and (if necessary) changed back to its original form—in other words, creatively manipulated on the computer. This experience was intended to reinforce their appreciation of writing as an ongoing, recursive process of gradually refining (and discovering) what one is saying through a series of successive drafts. A few students in fact did this, but these by and large were already familiar with word-processing. The majority tended to type over their second draft, defeating much of our purpose. As in writing, the teaching of word-processing requires sensitive, step-by-step guidance and strategic interventions on the part of the teacher. Students, especially high school students, require more direction than being shown a few buttons and left to their own resources. Next summer, we plan to be more directive in our word-processing lessons. For example, in the second revision students will be told that they can only use the insert and delete modes, not over-type. Also, a third session devoted to final polishing will be useful.

While the first summer's students perhaps did not acquire a full appreciation of the computer as a writing tool, the tangible result of their introduction to word-processing was an anthology about which all, teachers included, were visibly proud. Before printing, punctuation and spelling were spruced up by the two teachers (next summer, the students themselves can do much of this in a third computer session). Words, phrases, syntax, meaning—everything else was left "as-is." The manuscript was printed, duplicated and bound; its cover-page, done on yellow card-stock, was designed by one of the more artistic workshop participants. The success of the anthology as a means of getting students excited about their own thinking and writing—getting them to appreciate deeply and personally the value of such efforts—was attested by their reactions to the finished product on the last Friday of the workshop. After some initial banter, all fell silent; "Writing to Read" had met the goal promised by its title: everyone in the room was quietly, intensely, reading.

While the first "Writing to Read" summer workshop was on the whole successful, we intend to do several things differently next time around. In the first place, the topic will need some refinement. Exploring themselves in the context of family worked beautifully for a week or so, but started to go stale by mid-workshop. The students had played out who they were and the writing accordingly began to get redundant. Next summer, we plan to keep the theme of discovering self through writing, but with an added focus on popular culture. Outside material, such as advertisements in magazines and on television, will be brought in to



stimulate inquiry into how one's identity and values can be affected and even manipulated by merchants of mass culture. We hope that this additional focus will bring the personal discovery and writing to a high level of excitement and intellectual commitment in the second week of the next workshop.

Another proposed change grows out of a mid-course correction in the first. When asked to perform collaborative readings of poetry, students seemed willing enough to perform in small groups but not for the class as a whole. Each performance was prefaced with a disclaimer ("This may not be right; This is probably no good") and/or some indication of students' fear of looking stupid ("They'll think we're crazy"). High school students are easily embarrassed, and embarrassment, at that age, can be devastating. As a result, large-group performances of the poems were flat and lifeless—defeating our purpose of awakening students to nuances of interpretation. We, therefore, stopped using large-group performances; such activities were kept in less threatening small-group settings. We intend to continue with this approach.

A final proposed change that might have special interest to anyone planning to design a program of this nature has to do with marketing the workshop. The first time around, advertising was hit or miss; word-of-mouth recommendations by Xavier faculty and staff brought in at least as many students as the small flier of Drexel Center summer programs, which had been sent to area high schools. Next time, we intend to begin our advertising campaign by January, get out our own posters and fliers (in addition to the common one distributed for all Drexel Center workshops), and establish more personal contacts with high school teachers, administrators and counsellors. On this last point, we hope to recruit high school teachers to work alongside Xavier faculty on the program. As the workshop expands from one to two sections, high school English teacher involvement will be important. For us, a recruiting link to the schools will be established. For the high school teachers, an opportunity to step outside an often restrictive curriculum should be a welcome and stimulating change of pace. Other Xavier summer programs have already adopted this practice, and "Writing to Read" will follow suit.

The "Writing to Read" summer workshop for high school students is just one of the tangible effects that the "Bard approach" has wrought on the Xavier University writing program. Based on student and faculty responses the first time around, the program—with modifications—deserves to continue and, we hope, expand. In a city where the drop-out rates for high school and even junior high school have reached alarming new heights, summer programs that "turn on" young minds to their own powers of thinking and creating are especially needed. This latter challenge is what "Writing to Read" is really all about.

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## Freewriting to Better Communication and a Better Self: Two Experiences

Assuming that freewriting was "the easiest way to get words on paper" (Elbow *Power* 13), I decided to have my first-semester freshmen begin English 105, a composition course, with the freewriting technique. I used the technique learned in the workshop conducted by Bard College writers, initially to develop fluency and to eliminate fears about writing. Later, I used freewriting to prepare students for certain kinds of writing. Thus, at first, the freewriting exercises were non-directed; later they were focused.

When I introduced the idea of freewriting to the class, students were skeptical about my intentions. They could not believe that I really meant for them to write without stopping to edit. Consequently, during this first effort of freewriting, students scratched out, stopped to think, and attempted to rewrite (some even used white-out), even though I told them that I would not read or evaluate their efforts. After a couple of sessions, however, and more assurance from me that it was all right for them to write whatever came into their heads, the students were able to keep their pens moving. Soon, most of them were producing at least a page of writing per session. By increasing their fluency, the students gained more confidence in their abilities to generate ideas. After the fifth session of freewriting, a young lady shared her thoughts with the class. Her sample illustrates fluency, good form, a reflective mood, and much self-confidence:

### *Sample 1*

The appearance of a day affects me in so many ways. I have a tendency to feel as the endless days look. When the days are bright, and the sun dances gaily in the sky, it releases diamond streaks that cascade down and gently caresses everyone around. Those are days when I am full of joy and bursting with energy. Negative thoughts don't dare enter my mind and no one can upset me. The cheerful days are my favorite. The wind whistles, the air is crisp, clean and refreshing. I am sure that even the insects are happy! One may wish that each day could be as beautiful as the last!

There are other days, though, as I recall. Days that I hope would be delayed. Yet still, they come, regardless. These are cold, dark, gloomy days. Days that neglect us of sunshine, and neglect me of happiness. The sky is engulfed by a raging sea of darkness and is drowned by violent showers. Those are my quiet days. Those are days that cause me to analyze the negative aspects of life. Those are the days to ask a million "whys." Why are things the way they are, and can they not be changed? But even though the rough days are depressing, I can bear with them because I am strong and determined. When the good days come around I receive them with open arms!

This sample, handwritten, was one-and-a-half pages. The student is thinking in entire sentences (not fragments) and even in blocks of thought. In the first paragraph, she tells how sunny days stimulate sunny thoughts within her. In the second paragraph, she tells how dreary days stimulate reflective thinking—the "whys." Despite the student's admission of depression, she displays self-confidence in coping with her bleak state by asserting, "I am strong and determined."

Although my initial goal for this activity was to get my students to become fluent and to rid themselves of the fear of writing, I was pleasantly surprised at the high level of logic and introspection that some of the freewriting samples revealed. Not only is the above sample potentially a good descriptive essay, lyric poem, or personal narrative but it is a sign of a strong, confident individual—the kind who makes an excellent student.

In addition to using freewriting to increase fluency, I used this method to prepare students to write the descriptive essay. I asked them to think of an object, a place, or a person, and to freewrite about their chosen subject for ten minutes. During the next class meeting, I instructed them to convert their freewriting into a descriptive paragraph. I gave them twenty minutes for this exercise and asked them to use what they had learned in class about writing a paragraph and a descriptive essay. After the students wrote their paragraphs, I divided them into six groups of four students each. Within the groups, they read their paragraphs aloud and received reactions from each other concerning the following features of the descriptive paragraph: 1) an adequate title; 2) a suitable topic sentence (a simple sentence with a controlling idea); 3) sufficient support; 4) good paragraph unity; and 5) noticeable sensory language.

After the students received responses to these features, they submitted the criticism and their paragraphs, unrevised, to me. At the next class meeting, I returned the papers and the peer evaluations of them, with little or no comment. Then I gave the students thirty minutes to revise their papers and resubmit them to me for evaluation but not for a grade.

The two samples below exemplify a freewriting exercise before and after it was converted into a descriptive essay:

*Sample 2*

Life on St. Croix is not that different from life on the mainland. The major difference is the life on St. Croix is slow paced. There isn't any trains or skyscrapers. The tallest building in St. Croix is approximately three stories high. The reason being is that there is a law in the V.I. which states that a building cannot be higher than three stories high. There are many beautiful beaches on the Island with the known being Cramer Park. It's not the best beach on St. Croix but everyone goes there. I think the reason everyone goes there is because it's a good picnic spot. This beach is usually crowded on Sundays and holidays. But during Easter vacation and other long weekends people sometime camp out at this beach. Another attribute on St. Croix is its rainforest called "Anally." In the rain forest the grass and trees are always . . .

*Sample 3*

St. Croix, The American Paradise

St. Croix, Virgin Islands, is truly an American Paradise. The weather, which is appreciated by all, soothes the soul. Although the sun shines bright, the island is always cooled by the sweet smelling tradewinds. These tradewinds are filled with the smell of freshly ripened fruits such as juicy mangoes, luscious plums, and other tasty fruits. The water is salty and crystal clear. It is also cool and refreshing, especially after a long day at work. The sand is warm, clean, white and pleasing to the touch. While the seagulls fly above waiting to catch fish that are clearly seen from the seagulls' viewpoint, they make their own beautiful sounds. Taking in all these wonders I can proudly say, "We are blessed with a treasure."

Obviously, the student, with the help of peer evaluation, turned her freewriting into a well-organized descriptive paragraph. She provided an interesting title, a straightforward topic sentence with a controlling idea, and specific details. The reader feels, smells, and tastes St. Croix through such sensory language as "sweet tradewinds, cool and salty water, warm sand, and juicy mangoes." "Crystal water, white sand, and seagulls" waiting to catch fish help the reader see the island's beauty. The writer's details support the idea of a paradisaical island, and the entire structure of the paragraph illustrates far more control than the freewriting sample. During a third writing not included here, the student concentrated specifically on syntax and mechanics.

As the goal of freewriting is in the process and not in the product (Elbow *Power* 13), it gives both the student and the teacher time to evolve. Through their participation in the non-directed and the directed freewriting, I saw my students grow to trust their intuitions about their ideas and to freely record them on paper. In the meantime, I learned to restrain my use of the red pen, to have patience, and to sit back and enjoy the process of evolving writers and maturing human beings. As a result of freewriting, we all became less conscious of grades and more conscious of learning; writing to us became a way of exploring. Consequently, by the end of the semester, most of the students were better writers, and more important, all of them were more confident individuals.

E.M.P.

I used some of the process writing techniques in three of my classes in 1985 and 1986. The first assignment in freshman Honors English required the students to do a series of freewriting exercises on successive days, at the beginning of the class periods. After three days of this activity, I asked them to volunteer to share their notes with the class. We had time for only eight or nine readings, although a few more students were eager to share their writings. By the time we reached this step in the process, the class members were relaxed enough to relate their thoughts and feelings in an unintimidated fashion. We all experienced that "freeing" response referred to so often in the literature on process writing.

The first directed writing was on the broad topic "What I Would Like to Be Doing Right Now." The second day's freewriting was literally "free"—they could write for ten minutes on any subject. On the third day, I asked them to write on the topic "Why I Want A College Education." This was the topic which they shared with the class and later developed into a major paper. It coincided well with the unit we were studying on College and Education.

Following that third session, I asked the class to impose some general order and organization on their notes, reflections, and impressions. They were to bring back a revised version to the next class period. I was careful to instruct the students not to be concerned with matters of punctuation, sentence structure, unity, and the like; rather, they were supposed to be certain that they had included *everything* they thought and felt about the topic. This part of the assignment appealed to them most.

The students who had not read the original freewriting shared their revised versions with the class—all except two who were reluctant to share. (Eventually these two became comfortable with the method and "opened up" a bit.) After the in-class exercise, I asked the students to submit their papers to me for my review and comments. I did not "correct"

them in the usual sense but rather responded to their ideas in the form of a short critique of each paper. I returned them within a week and instructed the students to work toward a final draft, to be submitted in one week. I also asked them to attach all of the forms which they had done, from the original freewriting session to the final copy.

I was particularly impressed with the openness of some of the students' observations on their reasons for being in college. My conclusion was that writing on an assignment which they could personally relate to enhanced the quality of the final papers. Familiarity with and interest in subject also enhanced my efforts to "persuade" them to focus upon process rather than product. Also, I detected a "natural" inclination toward organization and order, as they moved from the uninhibited free expression to the second stage, through my written critiques, and to the final form. My evaluation of the final assignment was done in terms of *what* the students said and how *well* (clearly and precisely) they said it. While I did not correct grammatical and diction errors, I did circle such mistakes and later instructed the students to correct their own papers in terms of grammar. So that their focus would not be obscured, I deliberately down-played the grammatical aspects in favor of an emphasis on their subject.

I had to fight consciously against my tendency to circle and mark and criticize, in a grammatical sense. But as I continued to read and evaluate the papers, I began to focus less on that area—unless, of course, it prohibited my understanding of the content—and to look at the paper's ideas in a new way. Later—I found that the students were less adept than I am in detecting and correcting their own errors, but they liked the idea of doing it. A few of them commented that they went to their handbooks to find some of the circled words, phrases, and punctuation marks, since they "could not imagine why" they had made a mistake. In terms of this aspect of the exercise, we reversed roles for a while: I learned to accept, provisionally, their errors, and they learned to correct them.

The last part of this exercise (which lasted five weeks) was an assignment for the students to find one essay or article in an educational journal or appropriate magazine related to the unit. They were to do their own critique of the reading in terms of one point made in their individual papers; they were looking for one area of commonality. The final paper which emerged from this applied assignment was graded as a major research assignment. In my opinion, the quality of the papers in combining research aspects and elements of related freewriting sections of their papers was superior to any freshman papers that I have had in a first-semester class. I believe that the process that we experienced together contributed to the strength of their paper. In every class I teach, I plan to incorporate some aspect of process writing because I have seen its value in most of my students' writing.

J.W.J.

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## Developmental, Advanced, and Professional Writing Classes at Tennessee State University

We at Tennessee State University have adapted to our English classes several techniques that we learned at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking. Since we teach a variety of writing classes, we have tested many of the approaches under a wide range of circumstances and with a broad spectrum of students. Clayton Reeve teaches classes in developmental English in which he has employed several of the strategies. His students are incoming freshmen who have not demonstrated skills necessary to enter the regular freshman composition courses. Alberta G. Barrett has used the techniques primarily in a junior-level class entitled Expository Writing. Students who take this class have already satisfied the University's freshman composition requirement. They are taking the class either as an elective or as a requirement for their particular major. Judy A. Simpson used the approaches in her classes of technical writing for nursing students. The persons in these classes are also juniors, and the class is required of all students who earn a bachelor's degree in Nursing. Elements of the Bard approach have thus been applied in classes where students have more than usual number of problems in writing and in classes where they have fewer than the usual; with beginning students and with advanced students; in classes with the aim of developing general writing skills and in classes with the aim of developing more specialized writing skills demanded by a specific profession. Oddly enough, our reports do not cover standard Freshman Composition classes, since we have not taught enough sections of these classes to test the techniques adequately.

Each of us has written a section of this essay to cover his experiences in his own classes. As one would expect, our emphases in our discussions and our conclusions differ; we have made no effort to reconcile our reports, believing that their diversity is useful. However, we do share the following opinions.

We believe that the greatest strength of the Bard College approach is its recognition of writing as a process and its devising of strategies to bring this fact to the attention of the students. While the steps in producing good prose are not entirely separate from one another, they are separable enough to allow students to focus on them one at a time. To make students aware of prewriting and revising as significant parts of the process can only improve the final product. A process as complex as good writing may be impossible to master if one tries to deal with

it all at once. Isolating the steps and trying to improve them individually is very helpful for inexperienced writers.

We are all convinced of the value of loop writing, the use of a sequence of writing assignments on different aspects of a complex topic, and the final combining of these separate treatments into a unified whole. Beginning writers—and in this respect most undergraduate students are beginning writers—struggle to deal with complicated subjects. To allow them to see that complex subjects are built up from a series of simpler subjects enables them to handle such subjects on their own.

We have all found the management of time to be our biggest problem in adopting the Bard techniques. All of our classes have a number of goals which compete for time and attention, and a fifteen-week semester has only 37.5 hours of classtime. The objectives of the Bard method of involving everyone in the community of writers, of hearing from everyone, of encouraging personal discovery and experiment, can be very time-consuming. We have found it difficult to accommodate the activities which involve a great deal of interaction among the students with the accomplishment of other goals, especially since the interactive activities have to be repeated to be effective.

The three of us have permanently adopted a number of Bard approaches in our classes, and we believe that we are better teachers because we have. We further believe that we can, and no doubt will, adopt more of the techniques as our teaching situations change and we teach different classes. All in all, we regard the Bard Institute as one of the most stimulating professional experiences that we have had.

## WRITING AS PROCESS IN DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH

The only writing classes I have taught in the past several years have been developmental writing classes. These classes are part of a comprehensive remedial and developmental program instituted at Tennessee State University under a mandate from its governing body, the State Board of Regents. Similar programs have been established at the other universities in the Board of Regents system, also at the behest of the Board. The Board has also established the fundamental policies and procedures for these programs, rather than allowing individual schools or departments to develop their own.

All students who enter the University with an ACT score of fifteen or less are required to take the Academic Assessment and Placement Program (AAPP) test to determine at which level of work they should be initially enrolled—remedial, developmental, or regular college level. Developmental level students are defined by the program as having ninth-or-tenth-grade competency in writing and other fundamental skills. Clearly the methods of the Bard Institute would seem suited for such students, who typically have problems in developing a topic adequately



and using standard English. Freewriting and brainstorming as a means of stimulating thought, forming writing groups to provide a sympathetic audience of peers, loop writing as a means to teach the development of a topic, dialectical notebooks to encourage interaction between the student and his reading—all seem designed to aid the student who has not been very successful in his writing, has not enjoyed writing, and perhaps has even had anxieties about it. Unfortunately, some of the pressures arising from the standards imposed on our developmental studies classes are frequently antithetical to such methods.

All teachers, of course, are aware of the pressure of time in all of their classes, but the problem is especially acute in these developmental writing classes, both because the students have such a wide range of problems and because of externally prescribed standards of competence which students must meet at the end of the semester. Among these standards is considerable emphasis on "correctness"—avoidance of sentence fragments, comma splices, fused sentences, errors in subject-verb agreement, errors in pronoun—antecedent agreement, errors in sentence and word punctuation, and similar matters. In addition, the students are required to learn to paraphrase and summarize, to quote sources, and to document borrowings. These are admirable aims in themselves, but ones not wholly compatible with the Bard approach.

The merits of the Bard approach are considerable, but they also require a great deal of time. Freewriting, listening to and responding to one another's writing, forming writing groups, interpretive reading of texts—all may be ways of encouraging students who are reluctant to write, who have difficulty getting started, and who see little connection between reading and writing, but these methods also consume large quantities of time. An individual teacher may see the virtue in the slow evolution of improved writing habits, particularly in remedial and developmental classes, and be willing to postpone matters of correctness until another semester. But when uniform standards for all sections of a course are laid down, and when a final examination is prepared by persons other than the instructor to ensure coverage of all the materials, the teacher simply cannot ignore these external constraints. In other words, the problem that is faced by all teachers in all classes—finding time to accomplish all of the course objectives—is severely compounded when one tries to adapt the Bard methods to this situation. How much classtime can be devoted to listening to one another read, for example, when the end of the semester is approaching and students are still having problems with grammar? Like it or not, we have to prepare our students for the state-mandated requirements, and thus some of the more time-consuming elements of the Bard approach have to be sacrificed.

Fortunately, the components of the Bard method are detachable from the whole, and I have been able to use several of them effectively. I have tried to make students more aware of writing as a process, which I take to be one of the main goals of the Bard approach. Thus in the

early part of the semester I have emphasized the steps of pre-writing, writing, and revising, encouraging the students especially to use the first and third steps rather than simply relying on the second. I have also made the students more conscious of their writing by assigning such topics as "What I Expect to Get Out of This Course," "What I Have Learned About My Writing This Semester," and "The Steps I Went Through in Writing My Last Paper." This practice of having students write about their own writing is something I had not considered prior to the Writing Institute at Spelman, even though I have frequently pointed out in my literature classes that one of the favorite topics of poets is their own poetry. Some of the students have made quite perceptive observations about their writing, and certainly making writing a more self-conscious process can only help students.

Another strategy I have found useful is loop writing. While the emphasis in the developmental course is on writing the paragraph, near the end of the semester we move on to writing brief essays. One way to bridge the gap between writing a single paragraph and writing an essay is to have the students compose an essay from several paragraphs they have written previously. This strategy requires, of course, that the teacher assign a series of paragraphs on related topics. The students can then make the revisions necessary to fuse the paragraphs into a unified essay. The first time I used loop writing I asked for a number of separate paragraphs on college education, which were later combined into an essay. In the current semester, since I am asking students to discuss their own writing, I will have them write on the importance of writing in modern society and what they expect to do with their writing after college. A consequence of this strategy is that students can see that they have the ability to write well developed essays, whereas developmental students frequently believe they do not have enough "ideas" to write at length. Loop writing also contributes an intellectual unity to a semester that is lacking if a series of miscellaneous topics is given.

I have also found dialectical notebooks to be valuable. Developmental students frequently do not interact with their reading, but simply skim. Reading dialectically—that is, paraphrasing the important or interesting parts of a selection and reacting briefly to them with comments of one's own—slows down the process of reading and forces the student to involve himself with the materials. The student's comments can then serve as the basis of a paragraph or an essay of his own. An added advantage for developmental students at Tennessee State University is that reading dialectically gives them practice in paraphrasing, one of the skills students must demonstrate to pass the course. I have also used the dialectical reading as a part of the loop writing, assigning specific newspaper and magazine articles on a given subject for the semester, so that the students have something more than their own ideas to work with.

I can say, then, that I have found the Writing Institute and the Bard approach as a valuable source of strategies. Equally important, I

believe I have greater sympathy for students who are not highly verbal at the outset. We teachers also need to be reminded from time to time that helping our students to become good writers is more than helping them to become merely correct writers. At some time I would like to be able to adopt the Bard system more thoroughly than I can under present circumstances. I am not sure that all of the strategies are particularly useful for development students, but I would like to give them all an empirical testing.

C.C.R.

### SHARING IN EXPOSITORY WRITING

For many years, as I have graded students' essays, I have had the feeling that I was the one learning about planning, drafting, and revising, not the students. How I have wished to have them look over my shoulder and hear my thoughts which led to the assessment of each essay! I had generally been unsuccessful in getting students to read their essays aloud to the class because they felt threatened—that the listeners would hear their "mistakes" only. The sharing techniques of the 1985 Summer Writing Institute solved my problem. With those techniques, sharing is a giving and a receiving, not an appearance on a witness stand. It is built into the classroom procedures and arrangements.

First of all, most of the activities take place while the students are sitting in a circle if the class is small or sitting in several circles if the class contains over twelve to fifteen persons. On the first day the teacher makes himself or herself a part of the circle(s) and writes along with the students. The teacher shares his or her efforts as do the students. Most important from the outset is developing attitudes of constructiveness and togetherness. Freewriting (writing non-stop whatever comes to mind) as a beginning activity helps "to break the ice" and to assure all that their minds are teeming with thoughts. Sharing freewriting can lead quickly to sharing focused freewriting and then whatever assignments are done in or out of class.

The listeners (receivers) have as much responsibility as the readers (givers). The listeners must be able to say what they have heard, point out strengths and weaknesses (with emphasis on strengths), ask questions about the subject, audience, and purpose of the writing, and offer constructive suggestions. The tone should always be mutually helpful since everyone will have many opportunities to be both giver and receiver. Readers should gradually develop the ability to communicate, without apologizing, what they expect their listeners to hear. But they should not be offended when their listeners hear something else. Honesty and a feeling of mutual helpfulness should enable all to become better readers, critics, and writers.

Students of my last expository writing class, a junior-level class, I believe will continue to work on their thinking-in-writing skills. Unlike many in the past who expected to "learn how to write" almost overnight, they have learned that writing is a process. Sharing taught them to appreciate the complexity of that process, enabled them to experience the evolution (sometimes tortuous) of that process among their classmates, and eventually assured them that they can control and even master that process by means of their own thinking-in-writing activities.

Most students who believe that they cannot write well are intimidated and even "put off" by the realization that good writing is creating order out of chaos through a series of planning, drafting, and revising activities focusing on subject, purpose, and audience. My students' sharing revealed that each person could experience a variety of difficulties depending on decisions made at given moments. Hearing the problems and solutions of others heightened students' awareness of possibilities. It also helped them to understand that their problems were not unique and that they were learning to manage highly complex mental activities which no one understands completely.

As students shared their activities from week to week, they experienced the evolution of many essays and research papers. The givers, aware of a specific audience, finally learned to listen to themselves. The receivers learned how to listen for a statement of subject and purpose, a thesis sentence, topic sentence, supporting details, unity, coherence, tone and style. A major benefit to the instructor was that students frequently had a better understanding than did the instructor of what their fellow students were trying to say. Thus they could help each other to revise before the instructor assessed the paper. Marilyn, at first not understanding how to limit and develop a topic, profited from listening to others. Finally comprehending how others planned and drafted successfully, she learned how to construct and follow an outline and then how to help others. Larry welcomed her criticisms and suggestions and sought her aid. His praising her gave her more confidence in her abilities. I believe that Phylicia would have developed her critical abilities earlier had she not been habitually tardy, thus missing many giving and receiving opportunities.

The students' major benefit from sharing was developing confidence in their abilities. Phylicia, finally listening to herself read to the class, learned to hear many of her grammatical and syntactical problems. "That doesn't make any sense," she would sometimes interject. In her favor was that she had many interesting ideas and experiences to communicate; so she had an incentive to state her generalizations clearly, to support them sufficiently, and to revise for clarity. Donald as a result of sharing became an excellent critic of both his own writing and that of others. After he learned to handle the syntax of his thesis and topic sentences, he was able to evaluate his development. In the meantime, his grammar improved dramatically.

Sharing the research paper in its various stages of development was

most helpful. Donald, as a result of his unsuccessful attempt to bypass the step of taking notes on note cards, explained to Larry why the latter needed to take his notes on note cards—one to a card. Marilyn confided that her breakthrough occurred when she made an outline of exactly what she wanted to say and followed it. Marcia admitted that she would have to develop more patience in order to plan, draft, and revise effectively. Reading aloud helped them to hear that they needed to acknowledge the ideas and information taken from their sources. The listeners could distinguish who said what only when the writers made the necessary distinctions. Marilyn was the first one to acknowledge her sources effectively. The others were happy to hear how the acknowledgments could be handled. They could follow her examples more easily than those of the textbook.

The most rewarding outcome of the students' sharing their essays as they evolved was their realization that they could become good writers despite the complexity of the process. Those who thought they could not write learned that they could improve not only their writing skills but also their self images. Knowing that they could discover what they wanted to say and communicate it the way they wanted to say it gave them a good feeling about themselves.

A.G.B.

## LOOP WRITING IN TECHNICAL WRITING CLASSES

After several years of teaching professional or technical writing to all kinds of majors—business, engineering, social welfare, criminal justice, and nursing—I had all but despaired of ever receiving a successful formal report in which students were able in one paper to select, evaluate, interpret, use and document reliable data; organize, edit, and revise, as well as prepare all of the necessary supplements, such as the abstract, table of contents, visuals and list of references. Nearly every semester I changed my strategy, sometimes stretching the construction of the report over weeks and weeks, checking and rechecking, doing both group and individual instruction. That approach was, however, not very successful as the students, thinking that they had plenty of time perhaps, waited until the last moment and, therefore, produced papers that were more likely than not to be poorly researched, poorly organized, and to have poorly prepared supplements. Sometimes, therefore, I pushed students to complete the report in a very short period, thinking that procrastination had produced the poor results. Time, however, was not the real culprit. Reports produced over a short term had all of the failings of those produced over the long term in greater abundance.

At long last, by adapting one of the techniques to which I was introduced at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, I have been

able to engender formal reports from my technical writing for nurses classes that have been overwhelmingly successful in all areas, even from marginal students.

The concept which Bard introduced to us and which I have been able to adapt so well to my class is Peter Elbow's loop-writing process. Elbow's loop-writing process takes the student on "the voyage out" where he freewrites pieces related to a topic, but not dominated by a specific topic. On the "voyage home," the writer "bends. . . back into the gravitational field" of the intended topics parts written during "the voyage out." These parts are then selected, organized, and revised to produce a piece on the original topic (*Power* 60).

As I indicated, I have adapted Elbow's looping process to my professional writing classes. During the first three weeks, I have the students select a semester-long topic. Since these are nursing students, the topic may be a disease or any other medical subject with which the nurse is concerned. At this point the topic is very broad and general. For example, the student may begin with skin diseases or nursing homes. For the first part of the semester then, the student "loops out" from this "gravitational center." She may classify the various kinds of skin disease; describe one of these in detail; compare and contrast two or more skin diseases; describe the process of treating a certain skin disease. The second half of the semester, the student does a questionnaire, a case study, as well as the formal report on some aspect of this topic. She may have narrowed skin disease down to herpes simplex 1, about which she does an extensive study.

Looping with one topic in several rhetorical modes allows the student to accumulate and assimilate a good amount of information before she writes her final paper, for each study requires that she use sources. She, therefore, has a reasonable grasp of her subject matter, and her papers are vastly improved in content over the students' papers which begin with a new topic each time. This adaptation of looping also allows the student to practice the various rhetorical modes independently before she is expected to use them conjointly in the research report.

I also apply the looping (if I may call it that) principle to teaching the technical aspects of formatting the long, formal report. Gradually, spreading them over the various papers, I incorporate such formatting technicalities as documentation, headings, visuals, abstracts, letters of transmittal and so forth. For example, the writing of the results of the questionnaire lends itself to the teaching and preparation of tables; the preparing of the questionnaire for distribution lends itself to a letter of transmittal; and the description of the mechanism lends itself to the presentation of a figure. Of course, headings, documentation and the like can be introduced with any paper—and the sooner, the better. By the time the student begins the formal paper, she has had ample practice preparing the supporting documents and dealing with the technicalities that make professional writing what it is. Since several of these papers

are to be typed, she has also had the experience of typing the papers or of preparing them to be typed. In short, looping in this manner, with both content and formatting, prepares the student for success with her final paper. By the time she writes this paper, she has perfected, if she is ever going to do so, all the various formatting techniques and she has done enough research on her topic to produce a worthwhile study.

In view of the fact that professional writers, those who write on the job, spend large amounts of time writing short documents, such as letters and memoranda, I have also been able to use another technique to which the Bard Institute introduced us. The day that each of the papers is handed in, as well as through the planning, pre-writing, and writing process, I have the students write process reports in memo or letter form. These short in-class pieces make the student aware that writing is a process. In these pieces she tells me where she had difficulty, if she did; why she thinks she did have problems; and how she went about solving them. Finally, I ask the student to discuss precisely what she learned about her own writing process and the process of writing in general.

Writing in-class process memos and letters seems to help the students understand that writing is a process, that they have a process, and that they have control over that process. They begin to be able to see what their writing problems are and are often able to correct these problems on their own. These process writings re-emphasize the point that one of the primary writing skills that a nurse needs is to have an efficient writing process, involving a series of steps for planning, writing, and editing.

J.A.S.



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Variations on a Theme—the Empathetic Approach to  
the Teaching of English

Personalizing the thinking, reading, and writing processes has become a more pivotal concern for me as I continue to find and explore new approaches that might assist me in helping students in composition classes that I teach at Savannah State College to generate better writing. Myriad thoughts come to mind as I try to reconcile for students and myself the essential networking of experience, actuation, thinking, processing, and recursiveness that must be components of the effective *linguaging/composing* process. I firmly believe, too, that the professor must have the ability to empathize with students and understand those experiential, expressive, and traumatic situations that either advance or impede writing proficiency. With each passing day in class, I become a more tolerant leader of students because I constantly remind myself that in order to teach them composition I have to understand more deeply what causes them to think, feel, behave, and write as they do. Candidly, I must say that this reality was renewed and reinforced in the Summer and Fall, 1985, when I attended the Bard College Writing Institute held at Spelman College in Atlanta in June and November. Since then, I have made it my business to make learning more student-centered in my composition classes.

One of the approaches that I have found useful in my composition classes is collaborative reading of a common text such as a brief poem, a mini short story or an excerpt from a play. Such a process allows me to guide discussions that generate writing, that is, both student-prompted and directed. Usually the students' reading of the text becomes an odyssey or an exploration that leads to personalized meaning underscored by Louise Rosenblatt in the seminal work *Literature as Exploration*; the actual dismantling and personalizing of the text helps students to respond to issues, axioms, and themes in writing in a more authentic and controlled voice. The multiple means of expression shared by the students give rise to a more authoritative train of cognition which Gusdorf has labeled "parole"—a more personalized thought which allows writers to inform audiences by using language which addresses real concerns born of experience and the recursive process. It generates the kind of student-centered writing James Britton (*Language and Thought*) calls expressive—transactional—poetic. This process which allows the students to either write in one mode or to blend the modes when necessary helps them to realize that responding to topics or issues in writing is not one-dimensional but a process that lends itself to divergent and evolving strategems.



To further test my thinking that the teacher can guide students in writing more ably if there is a focus on empathetic constructs, especially in the second course of Freshman English, which focuses heavily on enlarging both the literary and composing visions via argument and persuasion, I have had students read, discuss, and write about "War" by Luigi Pirandello, "Antony Persuades the Mob" from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, "McDougal" by Frank London Brown, and "The 1961 Inaugural Address" by John F. Kennedy. I have allowed them to approach these works analytically and to use their own constructs to examine and/or present arguments based on how they think and feel and relate to the human condition. Compared to previous strategems I have used, the more recent student writing has been felicitous and I have grown significantly as a teacher.

In sum, the newer teaching strategems I have used in composition classes in the last eighteen months were rekindled at the June 1985 Writing Institute. That epiphany continues and helps me to understand better Neil Postman's saying in an NYU linguistics class many years ago—"Language is discovery!"

## When Writers' Groups Work

One warm September morning, about two weeks into the fall quarter, two of my students and I walked down the crowded hallway of our classroom building, with boxes of old magazines and newspapers, glue and scissors. As students and colleagues parted to make way for us, a few could not help but wonder aloud what we were planning to do with the materials we carried. Some students jokingly surmised that we were going to play kindergarten; the colleagues, more cynical than the young students, suggested that the hectic pace of the first weeks of school had probably reduced us to "sniffing glue." However, clear of our purpose and certain that it related to the learning process, I trooped forward, leading my two probably now embarrassed student assistants into the classroom. Once there, we joined the rest of our writers' group where we continued our discussion about writing essays that we had begun earlier in the week. The discussion ended in suggestions of topics for an assignment which involved the materials we had brought to class. The assignment was for each person to think of a point which he or she wanted to make (a thesis) and to use the magazines, newspapers, scissors and glue to make a collage presenting and supporting that point. The topics suggested in class were just food for thought; the students could select any thesis they wished.

The next day, as we sat in our writer's group, we voluntarily shared our collages one by one, and responded to them by telling what we saw, how the images that we saw related to each other, what we thought the main idea was, whether or not the examples supported the main idea, and so on. In most instances, the creator of the collage listened to reactions to it before commenting about it. A few students, however, wished to comment on their collages as they presented them and before others reacted to them. In either case, the discussions about the collages generated questions—"Is \_\_\_\_\_ the point you are making?" "How does \_\_\_\_\_ relate to the point?" "Do you see what I am trying to say?"; assertions—"I also wanted to use \_\_\_\_\_ as an example, but could not find anything to represent it"; suggestions—"You could also include \_\_\_\_\_"; and requests for assistance—"I have an idea of what I want to say, but I can't seem to focus it. What suggestions do you have?" As the class period came to an end, the discussion was lively. Everyone was also busy jotting down ideas and suggestions, because the next step was to put ideas from the collages into essay form. First drafts were due at the next class period.

The next day we shared our essays by reading them aloud. This time we responded as listeners, using "sayback" ("I hear you saying that \_\_\_\_\_"), "skeleton finding" (identifying the main idea and implicit and explicit supporting points), "pointing" (identifying words, phrases or images that stand out—one student exclaimed "great" as one essay was being read and clapped when the reading was completed, saying that she was impressed with specific words and phrases used in that paper), "criterion-based," and other kinds of responses. Again, there was lively participation in the discussion. Both listeners and readers asked questions and gave comments. At the end of the hour, students seemed to have a better feel for their papers from feedback given to them and from the comments made about the essays of their classmates.

Listening to writing was obviously successful in this writers' group, as were several other of the teaching strategies presented at the Writing Institute, such as dialectal notebooks, loop writing, poetry reading and responding. But then, this *was* a freshman interdisciplinary honors class. There were only sixteen students, and these same sixteen took three classes in which they were the only students enrolled, so like those of us at the Institute, they were in a small-group setting and they were together long enough each day to build a comradeship of sharing and trust. Additionally, the students in this honors class were fairly confident about their writing skills—after all, a good writing sample and high test scores were important criteria in their selection for the class.

These characteristics, however, were not present in classes where my attempts to use the writers' group had not been so successful. In these classes, usually regular freshman composition, even attempts to form the chairs in a writer's circle to promote better communication usually ended in very strange configurations because of the number of students and chairs involved. Most of these classes ranged in size from 25 to 30. Additionally, students in these classes generally lacked confidence in their writing skills and were hesitant about sharing their essays with their classmates. They did not always feel very comfortable with all of the other students in the class, most of whom they saw across a crowded room for only one hour each day. I even tried involving the students in several small group activities to help them become accustomed to working with each other. Unfortunately, though, the quarter was almost over before the students developed the kind of confidence, trust, and support needed for a successful writers' group.

Another factor that is important in a writers' group, but that was missing in my regular freshman composition classes, was the presence of active listening skills. Certainly a writers' group is an excellent setting to teach these skills, but I found that one must be careful not to lose the students' interest in listening and responding to writing before they reach a desired level of listening skills development.

The fact that some of my experiences with the writers' group were not as successful as I had hoped did not discourage me from trying the

teaching strategy again, and I am glad that it did not. As I have already explained, it was successful with the honors class. It was also successful with a few humanities classes, which, for the most part, had characteristics similar to the honors class. The enrollments were small and the students felt comfortable with their writing skills, for they had already successfully completed the freshman composition sequence. They also had developed a higher level of skill in listening and speaking than the students in freshman composition; thus, they were generally able to concentrate on particular elements while listening to the readers and were able to articulate their ideas effectively during discussions.

I am still experimenting with the writers' group in my regular freshman composition classes, and while I haven't had the success there that I have had in the other classes, I feel confident that an adapted form of this strategy will work at some point in the course.

## Writing for Learning: The Confession of A Committed Convert

Writing represents a unique way of interacting with experience. . . . The processes of writing hold unique correspondences with certain major learning strategies, such as feedback and re-inforcement. Writing represents, therefore, a unique mode of learning.

Janet Emig, *Writing as Process*

The primary goal of teaching is effective learning which enables students to acquire usable knowledge and skills to carry with them into the next level of their education, into their careers, and finally, into their lives beyond classrooms and professions. Effective learning requires active student involvement in the process of critical thinking and logical reasoning based upon a continually expanding knowledge base in varied fields of study. Active involvement includes reading and listening as well as observing and questioning or simply talking about information related to the subject being studied. But I am convinced that all of these activities must be reinforced and made meaningful to the individual through writing.

Specifically, I am a firm believer that thorough understanding of any subject requires analysis (the dissection or breaking down into its essential parts) followed by synthesis (organizing and arranging those parts to create a new, unique framework) and that these two processes are enhanced and made intelligible to the learner by a third process—writing. Furthermore, analysis and synthesis in written form enable the learner to clarify ideas and to incorporate information into patterns facilitating problem solving and decision making as well as drawing conclusions or engaging in further inquiry when needed to make valid conclusions. At the same time, students develop, hone, and use skills, including language and vocabulary, which become an integral part of the learner's approach to future challenges.

I am not a recent convert to having students engage in writing as a means of learning. I adopted that method a decade or more ago after many years of frustration and disappointment with the quality of written answers on history tests. In most cases, students' responses were sketchy, lacked a central focus, and essentially repeated information drawn from lectures or texts without making connections, showing insights, or drawing conclusions. For too long a time I attributed the inadequate answers to poor study habits of students, but I eventually came to realize that the real problem was my teaching methods. I expected the students to think critically and write effectively, but had given them no opportunities to

practice those processes. I decided to bring my teaching methods into line with my learning goals for students by developing and using writing exercises designed to involve the student in analyzing significant events in history, synthesizing the pertinent aspects involved, and writing a well-organized essay to illustrate understanding of the subject.

I began to assign one or two essays each week, allowing students to choose from a list of topics reflecting the behavioral objectives for the unit of study. This procedure became a standard assignment for all classes. Students were also required to prepare and submit an analysis of the subject, using their own words rather than those from the text. I read the essays, wrote comments and suggestions for the student and returned them to be revised and rewritten until the quality of writing was acceptable and the student was satisfied that the best product possible had been achieved. Only then was a grade recorded for the written work. Without question, this teaching-learning method requires intense effort and a lot of time on the part of both teacher and learner. But the dividends paid are well worth the investment. Consequently, my students still choose topics, write, and rewrite, averaging two essays per week prepared outside the classroom.

When test time arrives and students must write in class, they have something to write about and they write effectively. Moreover, they become involved in their reading and in class discussions and are more excited about tackling the subject under study; therefore their ideas and interpretations have substantive value—and they know it! So in spite of my tired eyes and harried schedule, I persist in the teaching of history through analysis, synthesis, and writing. It was not until I participated in the Summer Writing Institute under the guidance of the Bard College Center faculty, held in Atlanta during the summer of 1985, that I discovered my teaching was product-oriented which, while not without value, did not take full advantage of the possibilities for using writing as a teaching-learning tool. So I am a fairly recent convert to process writing by students; but I am an enthusiastic, committed convert.

It is my contention that analysis, synthesis, and writing are processes requiring active student involvement to undergird effective learning. Since both the teaching procedures and the evaluation measures should reflect the knowledge and skills one expects students to acquire and apply during a course of study and, hopefully, find useful outside the classroom, emphasis should be placed on teaching students how to analyze, how to synthesize, and how to write, both as product and as process. In other words, teachers must make these three thinking processes the tools for expanding the students' knowledge base in history, other social sciences, or any field of study. The question is—how? I am convinced that an infinite variety of writing approaches can be used to assist effective learning.

First, however, I want to state a method which cannot be used—the traditional lecture which fosters rapid note-taking and rote-memorization

of so-called "facts" to be restated on tests after which the learner's mind once again becomes a "tabula rasa," a blank tablet ready to be filled again with someone else's words, thoughts, and ideas. This cycle is repeated too often in too many college courses and is one that explains why students do not think critically nor write effectively. The lecture can, however, be converted into only one of many tools for teaching critical thinking and effective writing if students are given an equal amount of time to analyze, synthesize, and write about their understanding of, and reaction to, the information presented. To put it bluntly, the teacher must "shut up" because when the teacher is talking the learner is neither thinking nor writing; both are processes requiring active involvement rather than passive listening and note-taking. Admittedly, "shutting-up" is difficult for those of us who have spent a life time preparing to tell students what we know. But the beauty of adopting analysis, synthesis, and writing as tools for teaching is that they can be as flexible, as creative, and as rich in variety as the mind of the teacher allows—a challenge that more than compensates for giving up center stage at the lectern. Even more important, our teaching will become a model of the very skills we expect our students to develop in order to use the knowledge we expect them to acquire from our courses.

At the Summer Institute, I became converted to process writing by participating in that process and I left Atlanta excited about introducing some variation into the highly structured writing assignments previously used. I have been inspired and challenged by students using Dialectical and Collaborative writing as a means of improving critical thinking and logical reasoning abilities while learning history. The Dialectical notebook has proven effective in moving students from a superficial reading of the text to an in-depth analysis of what the author is conveying as well as an insightful synthesis based on their written interpretations of cause-effect relationships in historical events. From reading and evaluating my students' work and listening to their comments, I can state unequivocally that the Dialectical notebook, with its loosely structured emphasis on process writing, is a valuable learning experience through which students teach themselves. It is a process involving inquiry, a crucial step in critical thinking.

Exciting results have also been achieved through collaborative writing about learning activities, particularly films and filmstrips. Students write their reactions to what they have seen and heard and exchange their comments with other students who respond in writing. On a volunteer basis, these comments are shared with the class, providing the ideas for stimulating discussion from which arise fresh insights. In addition to the dialectical and collaborative techniques, my students are engaging in process writing at the beginning and/or the end of each class session. They are asked to write about their text or collateral reading from the previous day or about the topic for class discussion and to try to make connections between those and prior beliefs of knowledge about the subject as well as current happenings on the national or international scene. I have not

discarded product writing as an effective teaching-learning tool. Rather, I have added process writing as a means of assisting students to achieve the behavioral goals for history courses.

The most valid measure of which learning activity works, or whether any activity does, is the reaction from students. While they may complain about all the work involved (and we agree that both writing and learning involve work), they do perform better on tests, both objective and essay questions. They feel good about themselves, the course, and me because they know that their evaluation will not be some surprise that I am going to "spring" on them to find out what they do not know or cannot do. Tests are no longer a contest upon which they waste much mental energy and suffer anxiety trying to ascertain the kinds of skills and knowledge they will be required to master in order to pass the course. Instead, the students accept testing and writing as a continuation of the exercises they have been practicing and on topics about which they are well-informed. Invariably, students tell me that they have learned much more about historical events which they have investigated, analyzed, and synthesized through writing. They further state that they have acquired skills and developed procedures they feel will be useful in all aspects of learning and living. In other words, the students have confidence in themselves as readers, thinkers, and writers—the most liberating of all abilities and the primary goal of teaching.

As the teacher, I am tired but gratified and inspired to continue finding new ways to help students become effective learners through writing. I am a contented convert.



## Back to the Source: Reflections on the Atlanta Experience

The Atlanta Workshop helped me return to the revitalizing waters after living in the nay-saying deserts of competency testing for many years. I needed to return to the headwaters to view the reading and writing process from the perspective of the learner. The experience enabled me to review the problems and the rewards inherent in the teaching of language arts and skills. I began to see writing as a process that may or may not result in a publishable, ESE product. I began to perceive reading in that pristine way of my youth, when reading was talking with the author of the printed words. I am less certain of a number of things—testing and grading, for instance; I am more certain of other things—the viability, variety, and vitality of language and the gifts and potentialities of the learner. I believe I have acquired more of the patience of which Mina Shaughnessy speaks, the “patience for the slow pace of progress in this most complex of crafts [writing]” (293). Also, in Shaughnessy’s words, I have found, with the help of the Atlanta experience, “ways of refreshing [my] own belief that writing is not only a necessary skill in college and an advantageous skill in work but the most accessible way people have of exploring and perfecting their thoughts” (293).

This exploration was made possible by my return to Atlanta, home of my first postgraduate education. It was quite a time for exploration, for discovery, for recollection, for reflection. All too often senior faculty forget what it is like to encounter the process of learning the communicative skills. The Spelman setting took me back to the time when, as a nineteen-year old magisterial student, I sat mesmerized by the glad teaching of Tillman and Colburn and Chandler and Jarrett. I was transported once more to that heady time when these professors helped me to establish dynamic links with Chaucer and Shakespeare and Hughes and Whitman and DuBois and others. I remembered the quaking feeling I had when papers were returned and I vowed again that my students would not view my comments on their papers as punitive and dehumanizing. I would help them realize that my marginal dialogues are liberating and uplifting. I cannot deny that my responses are still regarded by my students as being “weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable.”

An unforgettable feature of the Atlanta experience is the human communication and communion that developed. Reading, talking, writing, and just being in the company of a concerned and caring community made me more aware of the truth of Donne’s sermons. And there were times when personal voyages through memory summoned up spectral images and thoughts I had submerged long ago. When memory did speak, I came to understand anew the deep sources of construction.

Making connections with others through the dialectical notebook was a logical extension of the actual human linkages we experienced in Atlanta. I now encourage my students to use this effective strategy and to develop the "say back" techniques needed to clarify, to augment, and to modify what is written. The team under Norman's leadership has helped colleagues develop and use this strategy.

The return motif inspired by the Atlanta experience took me back to the African concept of *Nommo* (the word). Through a search for modality via reading and writing, one can create out of the seeming chaos of rough drafts, generative writing, and free writing, verbal structures that can enlarge and transform emotional and intellectual boundaries. As Gwendolyn Brooks reminds us, we must "live in the along." We must write in order to write. The vacant stare often masks the dynamic mind and the Atlanta dialogues, text renderings, and free writing confirmed this for me.

Just as the destruction of African rain forests dooms my garden, the affirmations of great minds ennoble my sensibilities. The dialectical exchange we had with Frederick Douglass on his learning to read and write is one that I think all learners should have. Such an exchange might enable the "new" learner to appreciate the "long, tedious effort" requisite to learning. The writer who rarely reworks is rare; most of us are like the father-writer in Kate Barnes' poem, "My Mother, That Feast of Light." We "[struggle] all morning to finish just one sentence— / Like a smith hammering thick and glowing irons, / Like Jacob wrestling with the wonderful angel."

And so the archetypal journey, ever reaching back in time and ever straining forward to eternity, moved another cycle for me. The ambience of Spelman and Atlanta, the human linkages, the reading and writing experiences—all of these converged to reconfirm my decision of decades ago to devote myself to the study and transmission of our cultural heritage. In spite of occasional periods of despair, I have kept my promise. I remember the Collins exhibit in the Rockefeller Fine Arts Center at Spelman, with its massive portraits of Black women like Marian Anderson, Josephine Baker, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and Wilma Rudolph: The artist has captured the spirits of these strong sisters, encapsulating them in fossil imagery to be an inspiration to generations to come. And, oh, the human connections I will always remember, among them Wendolyn for her golden, resonant laughter; Suzanne for her impish brilliance; Ojeda for his intricate meshing of African and African American culture. The models that undergirded our reading and writing in Atlanta served to remind me of the immutability of the human spirit. The body can be imprisoned; the mind is ever free if one has the power of *Nommo*, as witnessed in the works of Bunyan, of Douglass, of Malcolm. The iron bars of Birmingham may have caged King's body, but no fetters could bind the golden eloquence and truth of the words written in his cell.

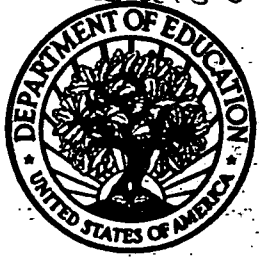
So Atlanta was "felt experience" in the Jamesian sense. The journey

back was inspiring, invigorating, and essential. I know that my students taking the Regents' Test will not have the time and space for return and reflection that the writing process requires. For the Test, the product's the thing. But I believe I am helping them to develop strategies that will foster confidence and models that will enrich their minds. The Atlanta ambience provided the time and the place needed for re-vision and reflection.

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