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ABSTRACT

Beginning college writers often approach the writing classroom with attitudes of fear and alienation. Fostering partnerships between instructor and students allows these writers to extend their private selves, affirm their identities, and connect to larger audiences. Letter writing can help establish an authentic connection between instructor and student, where the instructor can serve as a mediating audience through which students can test their authority and negotiate their otherness. Students can also relate to each other in cooperative and noncompetitive ways as writers in a writing community. It is the pedagogy of disclosure, through the intervening and enfolding use of the class letter, that can bring students into the community of writers--taking them away from writing as alienating work and into a world of mutual respect and support. As a motivating vehicle, class letters can encourage a climate of incremental risk where the self is revealed both to the reader and the writer. In the ensuing process of validation, students gain authority over their writing, a methodology that extends to their more formal assignments. (Author/CR)

The Pedagogy of Disclosure: Class Letters Fostering Partnerships between Instructor and Students

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Abstract

Beginning college writers often approach the writing classroom with attitudes of fear and alienation. Fostering partnerships between instructor and students allows these writers to extend their private selves, affirm their identities, and connect to larger audiences. Letter writing can help establish an authentic connection between instructor and student, where the instructor can serve as a mediating audience through which students can test their authority and negotiate their otherness. Students can also relate with each other in cooperative and noncompetitive ways as writers in a writing community.

It is the Pedagogy of Disclosure, through the intervening and enfolding use of the class letter, that can bring students into the community of writers—taking them away from writing as alienating work and into a world of mutual respect and support. As a motivating vehicle, class letters can encourage a climate of incremental risk where the self is revealed both to the reader and the writer. In the ensuing process of validation, students gain authority over their writing, a methodology that extends to their more formal assignments.

> Language is the most powerful, most readily available tool we have for representing the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world. Language is not only a means of communication, it is a primary instrument of thought, a defining feature of culture, and an unmistakable mark of personal identity. Encouraging and enabling students to learn to use language effectively is certainly one of society's most important tasks. —Standards for the English Language Arts (1996)

> My students and I create a universe that is the university. —Sandra Cisneros (1995)

> Sometimes these letters bother me. I do like them, but it makes one really look at their weak side. I have a very hard time with that task. If people can be so real on paper, why can't they speak it also? This must be a sign of weakness. We are all afraid; therefore, we stay in our shells. I sometimes look at people, listen to them also, and wonder if they know who they are—I mean really know why they are, not just their name and their status. Many people think they do, but ask them; they won't have an answer. I am not any different. I do exactly what people expect me to, nothing more, nothing less. People don't expect me to take risks, so I don't, though I'm dying to. Why do we do all this following? If this is what life is all about why don't we just have a road map at the beginning of our lives and follow it? Seems to me this would be much easier. —A student writer (1995)

From three distinct points of view, these texts speak of the powerful process of defining ourselves through language. In the context of writing class letters—letters between students and their instructor and between themselves—this defining takes on a sense of possibility beyond the limits of the traditional writing classroom. It often seemed as though my students and I were writing in a parallel universe, intersecting with the formal course yet existing apart from it. These class letters were written in six freshman writing courses I taught between January 1995 and April 1996. During the process and

afterward, I asked the following questions: How can class letters can affect student attitudes toward writing and writing instruction? Does letter writing affect student writing performance in formal essays? How can we characterize the class letter writing process and its outcomes?

Really a specialized version of journaling, class letters are what Elbow calls "freewriting with an audience." Students are instructed to write whatever is on their minds and to engage in a continuing conversation about writing. The teacher coordinates the process by editing the weekly letters and choosing those letters or passages that lend themselves to the topic of concern for that particular week. S/he has the discretion to not use passages which are repetitive, inappropriate or otherwise (in the teacher's judgment) too private for use in the class letter. At the same time, the teacher must be "authentic" and assume the same risks asked of the other class members. As "classmates," to use Fulwiler's term, all become members in an evolving community where letters generate and maintain a major portion of its very life.

At the end of each semester, I asked my students to submit a Portfolio, containing three sections: (1) Students were asked to include at least ten letters written to me during the course, and at the end of the semester to write a forward describing the content of the letters and an afterward describing their value. (2) At the same time students were instructed to include four essays (with multiple drafts) composed during the semester and at the end of the term to describe them in the same way as the letters. (3) In order to evaluate the overall instruction process, students were asked to add a third section describing the course's strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

Beginning with the spring 1997 semester, I invited my students to write their letters on a class Internet Website bulletin board. "Friends," as the bulletin board was called, provided class members—students and instructor—direct access to all our letters, and in so doing transformed my role from that of director or editor to one of fellow writer. In this electronic mode, all writers had a more direct sense of the composing process; opportunities for validation and membership were more immediate and perhaps less contrived than through the hard copy letters scripted earlier by their instructor.

The Pedagogy of Disclosure

In the college writing classroom, class letters can be instrumental in bringing students and instructor into significant conversations about writing and the very terms of engagement. Under the pedagogy of disclosure described by David Bleich, class members—student and teacher alike—enter into a new relationship in which the terms of membership are themselves transformed. The process of communication—sharing and developing mutual goals—can become the shaping agent for educational and lifelong change. "If not now, when?" becomes the new credo.

One January day, as the snow was blowing outside my study window, I wrote a letter to my writing students. As the conversation proceeded, I thought it useful to introduce the pedagogy of disclosure:

> Now the snow has picked up velocity and has started swirling madly into my window panes, trying to invade my warm cocoon. So let's turn to the private-public conversation. Some of this discussion crosses paths with writing trouble spots. Lisa, in what appears to be her public letter for all of us, feels that I am a good judge as to what the whole class would like to know. She adds: ". . . if the students are able to write something to you, knowing that these letters are really for the whole class, they should be able to share them with the whole class." With one clear exception: Lisa thinks people "who really are just writing for your eyes only" should request that I don't share this with anyone. That's true, Lisa. I use

judgment, but my sensitivity may be flawed. I'm that mediating audience that stretches or retracts for you. I'm assuming you can trust me, but I'd rather you trusted yourselves and worked more independently of my nurturing care.

> *Jason:* Sometimes I take a lot of risks and a lot of the risks come back and haunt me. I guess this all happens to everyone. A risk to me could be different than a risk to someone else. Let's try this one: I have been skydiving twice; this to me at the time was risky. But someone else may say this was not only risky but stupid! That is my point. When you say risks I take that in the context it's in. I had fun but it was risky. I have taken many [which have] been thrown back in my face. If I had to do them all over, I would probably do the same things.
>
> *Jennifer:* I am not afraid of the public. I doesn't matter to me what other people think as long as I like it. But some people are messy about it and I think no one should be pressured into going public. I think with a little time and support everyone will at least be able to go semi-public.
>
> *Kim:* The issue of how much to disclose about yourself depends on the person. I learned in one of my classes last semester that girls disclose little bits of information that the other person discloses to them. That is how girls can say who is their best friend because she has more than likely told her almost everything about herself. . . . With guys it is different. They are more revealing on the basis of hobbies and interests. Their best friend is the one that he shoots hoops with or rides bikes with.

Some new information might be helpful at this point. David Bleich, who teaches English at the University of Rochester, believes that mutual self-disclosure on the part of every class member can bring otherwise alienated people toward dignity and understanding, and can forever change the curriculum. Under these conditions of trust, a "pedagogy of disclosure asks each class member to announce, sooner or later, the *terms of membership* in the class. . . . Such an announcement could include . . . the histories of one's family, school, ethnic, gender, as well as one's vocational and economic reasons for choosing courses, one's clothing, eating habits, and travels, one's aspirations, fantasies, values, and plan. These announcements are understood to be continuous yet paced comfortably for each individual's level of involvement in the class" (Bleich 48). Bleich's idea is that writing in a community can help bring people's lives and their work together, instead of separating personal lives outside class from formal work assignments. Writing, like other academic work, has traditionally been a solitary activity. Instead of motivating people through the hope of future employment, why not motivate them *now*, through real, extended, and thorough recognition? He adds: "A pedagogy of disclosure can help to teach students to demand nonalienated work, to make their work more a part of their identities, their identities more connected to others, and their vocations more palpably implicated in society and

> in other people's needs" (Bleich 49). So we become partners, and in so doing we become part of one another and more whole as individuals. David Bleich's words are rather academic in tone but they do have a ring of truth.
>
> So instead of running away from the personal, let's embrace it. Let's get to know each other fully and at the same write more knowingly both of our individual and our collective selves.
>
> How does this translate to our next assignment, an informative essay? We can, if we wish, explain something personal—why did I like storytelling as a child then lose it later? What is it about fishing that is so special? Your letters and mine contain gold mines of leads which can be expanded into extended conversations. We are each other's teachers. May we all so learn.

The pedagogy of disclosure, through the intervening and enfolding use of the class letter, can bring students into the community of writers, taking them away from writing as alienating work and into a world of mutual respect and support. As a motivating vehicle, class letters can encourage a climate of incremental risk where the self is revealed both to the reader and the writer. In the ensuing process of validation, students gain authority over their writing, a process that extends into their more formal assignments.

This improvement of the constructs in writing has been documented through the work of Fulwiler and others in The Journal Book, and through extensive anecdotal testimony from writing students. The following sampling from my students, writing in their portfolios, describes the impact of class letters on their writing:

> These letters have really been a great help in my writing. I normally don't write very many letters, but this class has gotten me started. The letters that you wrote to us have helped me hone my writing skills also. The letters from my classmates were outstanding. It was an outstanding way to get to know about my classmates, and see their different writing techniques.
>
> The letters allowed me to write. That is the key. They also got me looking forward to getting new letters from my classmates. They were all interesting. Your letters were also a big help.

The dear Roger letters were a great idea that served many purposes. First of all, they got us writing. They allowed the class to feel closer to one another. Most important, the letters served as a link, from the student to the teacher.

In all of the letters, including my own, I can see how the class developed a better sense and style of writing. It is very plain that as the class went on, we gained in confidence and skill and, as we came to know one another better, camaraderie. The writing of these letters became very important to me. It was my way of letter you know what I thought and how I felt about the writing assignments and also just my life in general. You got my mind whirling, and who knows where I'll go from here?

I feel that this portion of our class work was very instrumental to making the class so enjoyable. Through these letters we have all grown closer than we would have without them. Most classes are all composed of strangers being led through the course material, but with these letters we all learned enough personal information about everyone else that we all felt comfortable with each other. Earlier in the semester I stated that these letter made it seem like we were a room full of pen pals rather than strangers, and that seems to be the closest thing to the truth. Thank you for showing us how fun writing can be.

I enjoyed the letter writing for this class. This was a nice way to get to know the other students. My grammar skills are not as good as I would like them to be; therefore, I was reluctant to write. I know people judge us by how well we speak and write. Writing letters to an English teacher was at times intimidating for me. When I was writing letters to friends or family, I realized that each letter probably could have been written better if I went back and did some revising. Reflecting on letter writing I now realize that it is a valuable way to keep our minds active by putting our thoughts and ideas down on paper. We may not write essays every week, but we can write letters to family and friends.

Conclusion

Class letters, through the pedagogy of disclosure, can: (1) foster a sense of community, vital to student writers; (2) link private, semi-private, and semi-public modes of discourse; (3) encourage students to experiment with voice; (4) relate teacher and student as writers and human beings, transcending traditional classroom roles; (5) model both teacher's and student's writing in a dynamic, interactive process; (6) establish

personal lines of communication (personal asides) which can assist or coach the formal writing being assigned; (7) build trust in the classroom, a major prerequisite to learning; (8) reaffirm the human side of teaching and learning, all too often lost in classes whose numbers exceed desirable limits; and (9) emphasize learning as interactive between teacher and student, and student and student. The class letter can invite students to enter a self-contained universe that evolves into the university. "Students in the writing classroom," Halden-Sullivan observes, "bespeak their condition, not so much as mirrors reflecting an external world from which they stand apart, but as voices of their world's being, emitted from within that world" (54).

Beginning college students often approach the writing classroom with attitudes of fear and alienation. Letter writing can help these writers extend their private selves, affirm their identities, and connect to a larger audience. Class letters also help establish an authentic connection between teacher and student, where the teacher can fulfill the role of a mediating audience through which students can test their authority and negotiate their otherness. Students can also relate with each other in cooperative and noncompetitive ways as writers in a writing community.

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