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ABSTRACT

Reflection requires time. In one class, students were asked to engage in a process of written reflection about the writing they had done immediately after they prepared their papers, as they sat in class preparing to hand in those papers. Reflective writing, which Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff call "process writing," appears throughout their book, "A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing." Donald Murray, in "Expecting the Unexpected," lists the benefits of writing about writing. How an individual learns and the crucial role of reflection in that learning is expressed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his spiritual treatise, "Aids to Reflection," in which he states that self-knowledge is the key and it is obtained only by reflection. Students observe that writing about writing helps them see how prepared they were to complete the task at hand. Students who view their papers reflectively are more likely to see themselves as crafting something which can be shaped in a more and more pleasing way than just something dashed off at the last minute, minimally meeting a requirement. John Dewey advocates reflective thinking because it empowers the thinker to avoid impulsive action and to engage in deliberate and intentional action. For the instructor, knowing what students are thinking and how they perceive what is being done in the class is an important part of being a reflective teacher. (Contains 8 references; a list of student comments and 5 sample pieces are appended.) (CR)

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Students Writing about Their Writing as Reflection

Reflection requires time. George Posner's Field Experience: A Guide to Reflective Teaching begins with acknowledgement of this problem, but Posner then proceeds to explain how to be a reflective teacher anyway without really solving the problem of lack of time we all experience. I wave no magic wand to solve the problem, either. The Nike slogan to "Just Do It" suggests the way that reflection must be done for teachers or for writers. In this presentation, I discuss both reflective teaching and reflection about writing. For either, we somehow have to stop the numerous balls we are juggling, in midair, and "Just Do It".

I ask my students to engage in a process of written reflection about the writing they have done immediately after they have prepared a paper, as they sit in class preparing to hand their papers in. We do take class time for reflection about their writing.

Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff include reflective writing, which they have called "process writing," throughout their textbook titled A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing. Each assignment ends with specific questions for a process journal, resulting in ongoing opportunities for writing about writing. When I ask my students to write a "process piece," having adopted the term from Elbow and Belanoff, I usually write a few questions on the board to guide them if they have trouble responding to my directive to "Tell me the story of

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how you wrote this paper." Questions might include: How did you find your topic? Did you find it necessary to change topics? If so, why? What specific types of revisions did you make? Was feedback useful in your revision process? Are you pleased with this paper? Why or why not? If you had more time, what would you do with this paper? There are also questions directed to the specific nature of the assignment. However, students need not follow my questions if they have their own way of telling me about their writing process.

Elbow and Belanoff explain their rationale for such metacognitive activity as follows: "The most important kind of learning in school is learning about learning. The most important thinking is thinking about thinking" (18). These teachers report that such writing gives a writer a greater understanding of what it is he or she does when engaged in writing, an all important element in giving the writer a sense of control over the writing.

Also praising the benefits of writing about writing in his book Expecting the Unexpected, Donald Murray devotes a short chapter to the subject. Murray found himself a more effective teacher when he learned to teach less and allow students to teach themselves through their commentaries on their own papers. Murray describes self-reflective writing as being important in allowing him to step back and watch his students reading their own drafts. He states, "It became clear that effective writers are expert readers of their own draft[s] and that this is a special kind of reading, a reading with possibility, a dynamic,

ever-changing reading in which there are at least three parallel texts: what might have been written, what is written, what might be written" (132).

It was not my original intent when I began to assign process pieces to improve reading, but I have found that students do read their own drafts more attentively when they write about how they produced those drafts.

In Expecting the Unexpected, Murray lists benefits of having students prepare commentaries on their drafts:

- 1) --Students became more thoughtful writers, constructively self-critical.
- 2) --Students found they could teach themselves to write.
- 3) --We learned what we needed to learn, when we recognized the need to learn it.
- 4) --The destructive power of the teacher was diminished--I became a fellow writer
- 5) --The students' voices often became clear in the informal commentaries and later could be used in the drafts themselves.
- 6) --The students were prepared in conference and workshop to direct their own learning and make use of a reader, telling that reader what they needed to know at that point in the writing process.
- 7) --The students and the instructor became more perceptive and effective readers of drafts in process.

I found many similarities between the benefits Murray lists

and statements my students made when I asked them to write about how they viewed the self-reflective pieces I ask them to produce before they hand in each major paper.

You have my list of student-identified benefits of writing about writing in front of you, but I need to digress or explain or explore as I discuss it, so I will not go directly from one item to the next.

1) --Not all of the responses to my query about the usefulness of reflective writing were positive. In three second semester freshman composition classes, some students thought there was little or no value to such writing. After all, they had already written the paper, and they felt that more writing was an unwelcome and unnecessary burden. However, one student wrote that although he thought the reflective writing was worthless while writing the first one, he soon found the process piece provokes thought and makes students want to think about their writing more.

The reluctant students' responses echo a statement by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his spiritual treatise titled Aids to Reflection. Coleridge observes, "The indisposition, nay, the angry aversion to think, even in persons who are most willing to attend . . . is the phenomenon that forces itself on my notice" . . . (3) After their initial aversion to thinking, which writing about writing demands, students did have much more to say about specific beneficial results of the activity.

2) --Several students noted that writing about their writing

process helps them to manage time better. They wrote that the process piece helps them to consider starting earlier, leaving more time for writing than they normally allowed. They see this as a realization which will help them to create better papers in the future since they have become more sensitive to the amount of time probably required to create the kinds of papers they hope to write.

3) --Some students suggested doing writing about their writing before the last revisions of their papers. I agree that more and more opportunities for reflective writing about writing, reading, and class activities is useful. Glenda Conway in an article titled "Portfolio Cover Letters, Students' Self-Presentation, and Teacher Ethics" makes an excellent point that we should question a practice of asking students to do self-reflective writing only in the form of something like a portfolio cover letter which is tied to the students' final grade. In Conway's experience the self-reflective writing had not been incorporated as an integral part of the course before it appeared as an important part of the students' presentation of a semester's work.

However, I am interested in having my students do more and more reflective writing for reasons larger than describing their writing. Such writing seems to be a self-perpetuating activity, one that as a teacher, I am developing a strong attachment to. I find that knowing what students are thinking and how they perceive what we are doing is an incredibly important part of my being a reflective teacher. Kenneth C. Barnes, founder and

headmaster of a private school in England from 1940-1968, discusses reflective teaching. He states, ". . . one of the most important questions for every teacher to ask is What am I doing? What is really happening? We have to disentangle ourselves from all the pictures of a teacher we may ever have held in our minds" (26). Having my students respond in writing since few respond verbally helps me to see where I need to disentangle myself from previous notions about what it is that I am doing.

The more I have students write reflectively, the more I have moved to request reflective writing about everything we do: one page written responses to assigned reading instead of pop quizzes, one page written responses over the results of a class period spent in the library, a brief in class response to the previous class period's activity on writing introductions, a brief in class response to the previous class period's feedback session. With all of this reflective writing has come some of the anger Coleridge noted in his observation of people asked to think.

For example, I asked students to reread a chapter on analysis in their Scribner's Handbook because many were still complaining that they could not yet grasp the concept of analysis for the analytical papers which would soon be due. Many began their one page responses by stating that rereading the chapter did not seem important, but then they used the rest of the page to discuss how the chapter made them think about their topics. Concerns about the appropriateness and possible handling of their

proposed topics showed reflective thinking. Writing about their reading turned out to be writing about their writing and presented evidence that they were beginning to comprehend how an analytical paper should be structured.

How we learn and the crucial role of reflection in that learning is expressed by Coleridge who states, "Self-knowledge is the key" . . . "and by reflection alone can it be obtained. Reflect on your own thoughts, actions, circumstances, and--which will be of especial aid to you in forming a habit of reflection,--accustom yourself to reflect on the words you use, hear, or read, their birth, derivation and history. For if words are not Things, they are Living Powers, by which the things of most importance to [humankind] are actuated, combined, and humanized" (xix).

- 4) --Coleridge's statement illuminates the fourth element I noticed in my students' commentaries on writing about writing. Several stated that they were fascinated to go back and read the process piece again. Examining how their words came to be results in realization of the power of their words. Metalanguage reveals much about their thinking, an end which John Dewey would appreciate in light of his statement that one of the goals of education is to create a delight in thinking for its own sake (226).
- 5) --A fifth point my students made was that they wished they had been introduced to this concept before.
- 6) --Another point students made was that they saw their papers

development in a way they hadn't before.

7) --Students comments also indicate that they like the way the process piece makes them consider why they included what they did and why they left out what they did.

8) --And they described the process piece as showing them what they had done wrong, making them want to rewrite or work on those weaknesses next time.

In John Dewey's book, How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process, he names responsibility as one of the personal attitudes requisite to readiness to think (32). One of the most important functions of the process piece resides in this acceptance of responsibility for their own learning and improvement which students tend to acknowledge in a more conscious way than they did before I asked them to write about their writing.

9) --Students further express the taking of responsibility by stating, the process piece lets you grade your own work. This acknowledgement of self assessment reveals students evaluating the power of their words and how effectively they have used their words. The process piece empowers students in a movement from the passive acceptance of a grade to active consideration of how well they have presented their papers.

Paulo Freire states, "The word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible, accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction

that if one is sacrificed--even in part--the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis" (75).

10) --Students like the idea of being asked for an opinion. They express surprise that a teacher would want to know what they think about the activities they have been asked to engage in. To have the teacher validate what they know by asking for their opinion, encourages further development of what they know.

11) --Finally students observe that the writing about writing helps them to see how prepared they were to complete the task at hand. Dewey defines the phases of reflective thinking as "[involving] (1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (12). When a student writes "My first draft flowed about as well as cracking pavement," she is faced with that state of doubt, hesitation, and perplexity. But when she works with the paper further, receives feedback, and considers that feedback with an open mind, she is displaying one of the attitudes Dewey finds essential to the reflective thinker. It is through that openmindedness that she solves her problem. The same student writes that later in the process of writing her paper, "The feedback played a major role in solving most of my flow problems. They gave me ideas that I never would have had and showed me what parts of the paper I probably needed to make more interesting." Finally, she

contemplates the entire process and finds, "The thing that helped me most in writing this paper was the writing about three different memories. It helped me get my writer's mind flowing again."

Coleridge emphasizes that "[t]he reflecting mind is not a flower that grows wild, or comes up of its own accord" (8). Reflecting by taking time to write about writing in class, gives students a window for reflection which is not likely to come if we do not make it happen as part of what is required in a class. Assignments or procedures for turning in papers need to have a reflective element built in. We should direct our discourse to a stage in the writing process in addition to prewriting, drafting, and revising, the reflecting upon how it was accomplished, could be accomplished, and will be accomplished. We can encourage students to see how reflecting is a process, a stage in writing which can accompany each of the other stages.

Dewey advocates reflective thinking because it empowers the thinker to avoid impulsive action and to engage in deliberate and intentional action (20). Students who see their papers reflectively are more likely to see themselves as crafting something which can be shaped in a more and more pleasing way than just something dashed off at the last minute minimally meeting a requirement. They learn that to "Just Do It" involves a process of action and reflection.

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 "Students Writing About Their Writing as Reflection"
 CCCC 1997 Phoenix

List of Student Comments about the Uses of Writing about Writing

1. Provokes thought and makes students want to think about their writing more
2. Helps them to manage their time better
3. Needs to be done before the final revisions of papers
4. Creates a fascination to go back and reread the process writing
5. Makes them wish they had been introduced to the concept before
6. Makes them see the development of their papers in ways they previously had not
7. Makes them consider why they included what they did and why they left out what they did
8. Shows them what they have done wrong, making them want to rewrite or work on those weaknesses next time
9. Lets them grade their own work
10. Lets them express an opinion
11. Helps them to see how prepared they were to complete the task at hand

Five Sample Process Pieces

These pieces of writing about writing are in response to my version of an assignment in the Diyanni and Hoy Scribner's Handbook. The assignment, an exploratory essay, asks students to write about significant memories and to allow those memories to bring up other memories. The whole is united with a dominant idea or theme which arises from the memories.

I read the process pieces, but do not grade them for spelling, punctuation, grammar or content. They are turned in with the formal paper as information for the student and for me, but not as part of the grade. However, as Donald Murray suggests, sometimes these informal self-reflective pieces show the students' voices more clearly and the content is sometimes more insightful than in the actual papers.

Process Piece #1

When I started to think about what I wanted to write about, I had no earthly idea so I just started writing about memories. Then when I tried to tie an idea from those essays together, I couldn't find an idea so I went into my most favorite memory and picked out the ideas it contained. Fear was one of those ideas and I started thinking of other memories that could go along with that idea. I had finally found my topic. As far as using the three original memories, no, I didn't. As a matter of fact, I only used one of the three. I wrote about two other memories once I decided to use fear as a topic.

My first draft of my paper flowed about as well as cracking pavement. My ideas weren't flowing together at all. I went through about three different readings and revisions of the first draft before I thought it was going to be ok to work with. The feedback played a major role in solving most of my flow problems. They gave me ideas that I never would have had and showed me what parts of the paper I probably needed to make more interesting. The most difficult thing for me was probably a toss up between finding a topic and making my paper flow.

The thing that helped me most in writing this paper was the writing about three different memories. It helped me get my writer's mind flowing again. I am semi-ly pleased with this paper. I think that the content is good, but I am not so sure about the punctuation, spelling part of everything.

Process Piece #2

At first, my exploratory paper wasn't really going anywhere. I just started writing about a trip. Then wrote on a couple of more trips I had taken. I soon realized that each of these memories taught me something. On each of these trips I was able to learn new cultures and their way of life. I was able to see parts of the world as a young teenager and it changed my outlook on life. When I went back to revise my paper, I found a lot of "to be" verbs and had to change those. I also added a little more and made it more descriptive. Feedback helped, because they said that I was making them feel as if they were there and I then went back and tried to make it even more like reality. This paper was rather easy for me since it was about something in my life that was exciting. I guess I am pleased with my paper right now, but there is always a need for improvement. I could definitely make it even more visual and descriptive. Maybe even tell more about each experience.

Process Piece #3

This is the story behind the story. In the beginning there was void and darkness. Then Dr. Reimers spake, "Write a list of 10 significant memories," and then there was light. Not a bright glowing light, but a glimmer of what I would like to write about. It wasn't until after finishing my list of memories that I finally figured out what I really wanted to write about. There was only one memory on my list that would fit my idea, the rest were sacrificed.

This paper was entirely different from others that I have written for classes. This paper had no overlying rigidness imposed upon it, and it shows. The revisions that I did were drastic and varied. (I have about 25 more pages on disk that you may have if you wish, I didn't feel like that writing was worth the paper it would be printed on). The feedback helped, but since my idea wasn't in a final form, it was less helpful than it could have been.

I am not at all pleased with the paper as it is being presented to you. Besides the obvious typo's, I modified my thoughts to the point where I didn't have time to re-revise my final copy. The fastest part, amazingly, was the introduction. If I had more time I would flesh out the last idea and the conclusion.

I learned that too much revision can be the damper that smothers the original glimmer of an idea.

Process Piece #4

When we first started writing about a significant memory in class, at first I did not realize that they would be connected to form a single essay. Then as I came to realize that the memories were to be connected, I was happy when all of my memories were very easy to connect, so I did not have to change topics, or use different memories other than my three original ones. The paper was different than any other that I had written, but I made it seem familiar by working in a familiar way. I do all of my major school work by sitting on my bed with my lap desk and all of my resources scattered before me, so that working in this manner made me feel at ease about the essay. I really didn't make any major revisions on my paper just small things like changing a word or adding a comma. To print the paper I used [another student's] computer. She

is also in our class, so we would help each other with feedback and ideas to improve the essays so that helped me a lot. I am pretty pleased with the essay, esp. since I went to the library and saw the example essays. Although I do not think my essay is better than theirs, mine is at least as good, I think. The hardest part of the essay was writing the transitions between the memories, the easiest was writing the actual memories. One thing I learned was how to make the connection in the exploratory essay between the memories that are not necessarily related.

Process Piece #5

I had already written two memories before I knew what was happening. Once I knew that I had to connect these memories, the third memory was very closely related to the second. the first one didn't fit the same format as the other two. I managed to find a common link by really stretching my imagination. When I think back, I believe I could have done better if I had written another memory. The feedback didn't help me much but the stories in your folder helped. My wife works and I have to take care of kids, house, and meals, so it is very difficult to find time to write without distractions. Most of my writing took place after 10:00 p.m. when my kids went to bed. writing does not come easily to me. It will be more difficult when typing is required because I don't have a typewriter.

Students returned these process pieces to me and granted permission to have their work copied for use in my composition research. Students' words have been retained with some editing of spelling and punctuation.

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