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The Difficulties of Thinking Through Freewriting



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Abstract: Once controversial or cutting-edge, freewriting has recently become “part of every writing teacher’s repertoire” (Bizzell and Herzberg in Elbow 393). On par with outlining or webbing, freewriting seems to be a go-to practice in a writing teacher’s tool kit. This downshift into uncritical acceptance presents an apt moment to reconsider how we implement freewriting practices in the college writing classroom. Toward this reexamination, this essay problematizes the pervasive assumption about freewriting that it is above all else *easy, effortless, quick, and free from judgment, hesitation, and doubt*. The essay suggests that this assumed ease remains one of the thorniest and obscured problems in the practice of classroom-based freewriting and hypothesizes that the mode required to freewrite is not necessarily natural or automatic for student writers, but rather requires training, conversation, and reorientation. In order for freewriting to be an effective means of stimulating critical and creative thinking, teachers of writing need to consider not only how we can add in analytical and reflective thinking *about* freewriting texts, but also how we can get students to do productive, questioning, and exploratory thinking *within* freewriting itself. Above all, facilitators of freewriting can benefit from assuming the difficulties of thinking through freewriting.

In his recent book, *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*, Peter Elbow explores how the virtues of spoken language might be brought to written composition. Among implications for how we conceive of literacy, access, and the conventional divides between speech and writing, *Vernacular Eloquence* reconsiders one of Elbow’s most visible contributions to composition studies: freewriting. Elbow explains how his investigation of speech has caused him to see freewriting in yet another light:

I was freewriting my way out of a tangle of perplexity and I startled myself with a new thought: “I’m not *just writing*. I’m *speaking* . . . on to the page.” I realized that I was using the linguistic gear I normally use for talking. . . . This realization opened up a new way to see freewriting—*hear* freewriting—and at the same time it also opened up a new way to think about the very nature of speaking and writing. (147)

Speaking onto the page is Elbow’s newest metaphor for conceptualizing the merits of freewriting, merits that familiarly still emphasize using “our fingers to put words onto the page or screen” and having “the words come to mind fluently, nonstop, without planning or conscious choosing” (147).

While his consideration of speech brings Elbow to understand freewriting in a different register, the named advantages of freewriting are nonetheless familiar. As has been emphasized before, the freewriting mode is purportedly—above almost all else—*easy*, valued fundamentally for “how it *effortlessly* captures onto the page some of the precious virtues of unplanned spoken language” (152; emphasis added). In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Elbow re-asserts that freewriting is a “fast easy way to get a first draft”; a “good way to avoid the reluctance and procrastination that so often stops us”; and that it “frees us from constant nagging by the internal editor” (156). Like speech, freewriting

continues to be fast, free, and effortlessly generative, because, as Elbow writes in *Writing With Power*, it “help[s] you stand out of the way and let[s] words be chosen by the sequence of words themselves” (16). Complementing this ease of expression, freewriting is also said to generate flexible thinking. “Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn’t have started out thinking” (16), Elbow writes in *Writing Without Teachers*. To freewrite, in much of its discussion, then, is to be flexible, creative, and questioning in one’s thinking. In fact, the Bard Institute’s very definition of focused freewriting—“‘All reflective, probative, speculative writing, freewritten yet focused, that explores a term, problem, issue, question, openedly.’ That is, almost any kind of writing that has a point, and that is geared toward discovery” (Wallack 29)—is couched in terms of thinking processes. Freewriting, then, is synonymous with freethinking.

As a regular freewriter in my own composing processes and as a writing teacher who often asks her student-writers to freewrite, claims about the ease of freewriting, on one hand, ring true. In my own writing, I’ve started to use a comfortable physical writing place—an email window—to get sharper, less contorted articulations of my thinking, to be plain and straightforward, and to explore, and often to contradict, the line of argument in a working draft. The advantages I experience from using this practice, like the many who describe their own freewriting habits (Elbow, Ferro, Macrorie, Stover), are why I introduce and practice freewriting of various kinds with my collegiate and K-12 writing students alike. Like Elbow and many others, I do believe that freewriting does good things for the enterprise of writing—and thinking. But suspending this belief for a moment, I want to indulge a contrary response that serves as the center of this essay. This essay interrogates the claim that freewriting is an *effortless and quick* means to creativity, discovery, curiosity, and questioning, a way to help students “find their own perplexity” (Hammond 89) and “structure inquiry without prescribing the answer” (Hammond 88). I argue that this purported ease in freely and complexly thinking in freewriting remains one of the most obscured problems in the practice of classroom-based freewriting.

Research has already problematized some of the most familiar of our assumptions about the freewriting mode. Sheryl I. Fontaine, for example, concluded from a large set of private freewrites that students wrote “in fairly conventional, logically structured ways about unsurprising topics” (10). Richard H. Haswell, too, has problematized our sense that freewriting is messy by demonstrating the conventional, linear organizational structures of student freewrites. In spite of these complications to our basic freewriting assumptions, relatively little attention has been paid to the conventional wisdom that student writers can easily use freewriting to move their thinking in novel ways. Instead, studies abound with positive claims about how freewriting increases critical and creative thinking (Hammond, Marsella and Hilgers, Sheridan, Stover, Spencer, Marshall), and with few exceptions, this alignment of freewriting and freethinking isn’t much questioned. This essay hypothesizes that the thinking/writing mode necessary to engage in focused, or what I’ll name directed, freewriting practices of all sorts rather requires training, conversation, and reorientation.

Reconsidering the difficulties of thinking through freewriting, my primary focus will be on practices that are best understood as directed freewriting. Though directed and focused freewriting can be understood as equivalent terms (Wallack 25), directed freewriting is usefully distinguished from focused freewriting in its procedural quality. Directed freewriting is a series of prompted freewriting sessions, bridged by review and analysis of what has been written, and designed to stimulate analysis, discovery, and development. These directed practices, described in the work of Elbow and others, centrally concern me because they render an important tension in implementing any kind of freewriting practice: one between leading or directing freewriting practice versus getting out the way and allowing the writer full control. Directed freewriting acknowledges the structured ways college student writers may need to be introduced, trained, or untrained to use writing for thinking in potentially radically new ways. However, as I will argue, this interest in leading students through a

rigorous process with their freewrites still overlooks difficulties student writers may have in freely generating ideas within freewriting itself.

Being mindful of how freewriting is implemented for thinking is especially significant given the current familiarity and pervasiveness of the practice. As Elbow makes clear, while freewriting was once considered problematic or vexed, nowadays “no one much objects to freewriting or even fights for it” (*Vernacular Eloquence* 392). Elbow notes that Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg call freewriting “part of every writing teacher’s repertoire” (393). It would seem then that freewriting has become a practice on par with outlining or webbing, a go-to practice in almost any teacher’s tool kit. This moment of uncritical acceptance represents an urgent moment to keep freewriting in critical and evaluative discourses. [\[1\]](#) [\[#note1\]](#) This inquiry responds to this need by questioning the implementation of freewriting practices touted to inspire creative and flexible thinking. The virtues of freewriting practices to this point have been empirically studied from a variety of angles: through analysis of a large sample of freewritten texts (Fontaine, Haswell), through interview of students who have had experience doing freewriting (Mullin), and through assessments of student learning aided by freewriting (Hinkle and Hinkle, Cheshire), among others. Research generally has not, by contrast, closely observed a student freewriter in the process of performing directed freewriting prompts. This up-close approach, described in the following sections, provides insight into the amount of dialogue necessary to facilitate the freewriting session as well as the surprising way the student writer deals with contradiction and discovery in her writing. Especially because freewriting relies on the writing teacher’s distance from—or better, disinterest in—a student’s freewriting texts, investigating how students understand and respond to our freewriting instructions is a novel and generative site for reconsidering how we implement freewriting in our writing classrooms.

The inquiry proceeds in three parts. In the first section, I discuss some of the varied ways Elbow and other freewriting advocates have described directed freewriting practices, emphasizing what is assumed about how student writers respond to freewriting directions and highlighting these pedagogues’ belief that a prompted complex, analytical process will necessarily lead to complex thinking on paper. In the second part of this essay, I detail the results of a teacher-research study I conducted in which I observed one of my student writers as she responded to my directed freewriting prompts. This record of our interaction demonstrates the dialogue required to get the student writer to use freewriting to think aloud, change her mind, and encounter contradiction, a kind of involvement from the facilitator previously unaddressed in scholarship on freewriting. In the third section, I reconsider the classroom structures necessary for maximally effective freewriting pedagogies. Rather than understanding freewriting as a discrete writing or invention task, this section makes suggestions that can help writing students cultivate a freewriting *sensibility*. Student writers need time and space to reorient themselves toward thinking through freewriting. Facilitators of freewriting, then, can benefit from assuming the difficulties of thinking through freewriting.

The Development of Directed Freewriting Practices

In this section, I explore some of the different kinds of practices that fall under the umbrella of “freewriting” by focusing on what I name directed freewriting practices (practices in which freewrites are taken through a process of generating, reading, reflecting, and refining). These kinds of “critical” freewriting practices interest me because they present the central paradox of any freewriting pedagogy: the tension between explicitness and openness. How can a writing teacher set the scene sufficiently for freewriting to be generative for thinking while not being directly involved (through review or evaluation or even reading the writing produced)? How can the writing teacher make freewriting valuable for student writers while still letting them have control? Directed freewriting pedagogies acknowledge that freewriting is not automatically useful or generative but nonetheless

make assumptions about how student writers will take up especially the freewriting space itself, assumptions that we should attend to more carefully as facilitators of freewriting.

Freewriting's association with freethinking has developed over time. This practice was first described in *Writing Without Teachers*, [2] [#note2] where Elbow imagines the routine of ten-minute freewrites combined with the habitual sharing of writing with a non-evaluative group of trusted fellow writers. The sentiment around freewriting as described in this book is something I think we now *disconnect* from the implementation of our own classroom freewriting practices, but this sentiment remains critically important to considering the complexities of facilitating freewriting. *Writing Without Teachers* was a book with an unabashedly liberatory goal. Elbow addresses his book to “a huge and diverse audience: young people and adults in school, but especially young people not in school” (v). Freewriting as the foundational practice of *Writing Without Teachers* operates on the idea that a writer learning to write doesn't require a teacher or school, doesn't require any external instruction on what makes good writing. Freewriting was intended to function *outside* of the structures of schooling and was absent of any specified content or goals for proficiency in academic writing. As an anti-writing-instruction practice, freewriting was the precise *opposite* of doing writing in school. Elbow dramatizes this for his audience, describing throughout this book (and almost every subsequent time he describes freewriting) how he had come to struggle to say anything under the strictures of academic, proper writing standards and how freewriting became his personal panacea for automatic and easy generating.

When we truly sit with the antiestablishment sentiment of freewriting's origins, it's shocking to realize how central it has become to the writing curriculum establishment. How did freewriting, a practice that didn't need a teacher at all, become “part of every writing teacher's repertoire?” This question puzzles first because, in spirit, freewriting is in some measure a pedagogical impossibility. Teachers shouldn't even be *able* to facilitate it. This acknowledgement alone goes far in suggesting that freewriting in the college writing classroom isn't then easy or automatic. Moreover, it should similarly challenge our assumptions that freewriting can be an easy, discrete classroom task, on par with outlining or webbing. Rather, freewriting in the weighty context of the writing classroom must involve an effort to loosen the habits and assumptions about academic writing that our students have been enculturated to believe. As facilitators, we do well to remember that we have *work to do* to help writing feel free for our students in the context of the classroom.

Rather than attend directly to this, however, freewriting practitioners have seemed to deal with freewriting's antithetical relationship to the schooling of writing by making its practice more rigorous and complicated. In the introduction to the second edition of *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow describes the kinds of responses he thought he'd get for this “teacherless writing class.” He thought “intellectuals and academics” might say to him, “You do propose a process, but it is a process devoid of critical thinking, logic, debate, criticism, or doubting” (xx). From here, Elbow begins emphasizing freewriting as rigorous, connective, and thoughtful *process*, rather than discrete, unrelated sessions of an “unthinking” way of composing. Now most often, we see freewriting described as a recursive process involving the interplay of [3] [#note3] “mystery, chaos, nonplanning, relinquishing control, the nonrational, the unexplicit or tacit, and the magical” with “analysis, conscious control, care, explicitness, and rationality” (*Writing With Power* xxvi). And this relationship between free-thinking and exertive-thinking reverberates throughout Elbow's oeuvre. In “Teaching Two Kinds of Thinking by Teaching Writing,” for example, Elbow distinguishes between what he terms “first-order” and “second-order” thinking. First-order thinking is “intuitive and creative and doesn't strive for conscious direction or control” (*Embracing* 55); it relies on senses and hunches; it is produced by “writ[ing] fast without censoring” (55). Second-order thinking, on the contrary, is “conscious, directed, controlled thinking”; it is “committed to accuracy and strives for logic and control”; and significantly it “is what most people have in mind when they talk about ‘critical

thinking” (*Embracing* 55). When we consider these opposing modes of thinking as related to the freewriting process, we can see that the most obvious or identifiable acts of thinking come only *after* the actual freewriting itself is complete. Freewriting becomes most characteristically a bundle of contrary modes: loose, “free,” nonevaluative generating, followed by critical, analytical, and evaluative shaping. In adding familiar academic modes to the freewriting process of evaluation and analysis, freewriting is made more appropriate to academic modes. But these steps assume, it would seem, that the first mode, that intuitive, creative, automatic, unthinking mode, is something that student-writers can assume just as easily as the analytical steps that serves as the foundations of their schooled orientations.

Pedagogues taking freewriting into the classroom have generally continued to make freewriting as rigorous and directed as possible, downplaying concern for how student-writers think within the freewriting space itself. Joy Marsella and Thomas J. Hilgers, coauthors of “The Potential of Freewriting,” describe what they call the “freewriting heuristic,” which takes directly from Elbow’s pedagogy. In this process, which prompts “not only ideas but also analysis of those ideas” (94), students begin by freewriting on a topic, locate the “center of gravity,” and then formulate an assertion. This assertion becomes the starting point for at least two more rounds of freewriting: finding the center and making an assertion. Notice the emphasis on process and analysis—because this heuristic requires analysis in “finding the center” and then takes that center as the jumping-off point for another sustained consideration, critical thinking skills are exercised at several points. This process is indeed thinking, but in this conception, Marsella and Hilgers concern themselves with the thinking that is happening outside of the actual freewriting itself. Similarly, Lynn Hammond, author of “Using Focused Freewriting to Promote Critical Thinking,” offers a process-model for putting freewriting to work as a critical thinking practice. Hammond’s process leads students through a series of freewrites on discrete parts of texts, followed by freewriting on relationships between those freewrites, and finally freewriting about this process. This elaborate process, which holds great similarity to that of Marsella and Hilgers’s in its focus on process, connectivity, and analysis of the freewriting texts, can be summed up in her phrase: “break[ing] down the thinking process” (91). In other words, Hammond begins the analysis for her students by breaking up the text and offering the sections as discrete subjects for sustained consideration. In freewriting on discrete parts, students are almost guaranteed to encounter contradiction, ambiguity, and uncertainty, as they navigate *across* those discrete considerations.

Mark Reynolds, in “Making Freewriting More Productive,” suggests that “because free writing is chaotic by nature and full of unusable material, students often need guidance in extracting what has value” (81). Again the focus is on what writers can *do with* their freewriting. Reynolds gives a helpful list of prompts that vary widely in their purposes: to find workable ideas for development (“line through all unusable items”; after determining what is “not usable,” see if the remaining ideas might develop into a paragraph [81]), while others focus on tracking the ideas as they developed (“take the ideas extracted from the free writing and make a tree diagram in an effort to see relationships among them” [81]). The important assumption, though, across all of these nonetheless valuable ways to make freewriting thinking, is the necessity of adding thinking steps after the freewriting is completed. What of the thinking going on in the actual freewriting space itself? How can we make this the most productive thinking that it can be? How can we help students effectively switch modes from non-evaluative to analytical?

With all the emphasis on making freewriting as rigorous as possible, we’ve put more focus on what process freewriters can use than on what it may take to inhabit the freewriting space itself. There is no doubt that the vision of freewriting in these practices is rigorous; important and fruitful analytical skills are being exercised, as well as metacognitive ones. But these conceptions of freewriting for critical thinking, much in the way some of Elbow’s characterizations would lead us to do, put the

thinking in the process, while taking for granted the kind of thinking going on in the freewriting space itself. It is important to consider how students are working in the freewriting space because of the great outcomes we expect—students *will* grapple with complexity, discover new and dynamic ideas, and explore their thinking more than they otherwise would have. How much of these substantial goals can be met by only the freewriting processes we design? What else might be necessary? How might we counterintuitively *instruct* students how to loosen the hold and make their freewriting free and easy? The following exploratory case study puts into relief some of the unforeseen complexities when assuming students' ease in thinking through freewriting.

Portrait of a Student Freewriter and Facilitator

Working also as a literacy instructor at an all-ages tutoring center, I've had the chance to observe students do informal focused freewriting. Our writing students do what we call journaling, the rules of which are very much like Elbow's freewriting in *Writing Without Teachers*: write non-stop for five to ten minutes on a chosen prompt or question. Just write whatever comes to mind with the goal of getting down as many words as possible. Don't erase anything! Don't worry about spelling, or grammar, or being "right." Just think of something and write it down. Keep your fingers moving and don't edit or evaluate. And like a lot of low-stakes freewriting practice, we don't correct this writing, or even develop it. Instead, we talk in general about the ideas the student was able to come up with. But our goal behind this task is simply to have the feeling of generating words and ideas in a rapid manner.

Every single student I've worked with at this task struggles with these directions. Sitting next to a single student writer engaged in a freewriting exercise echoes what I've seen of my college student writers doing freewriting in my classroom. No matter how much I emphasize to the writer that if she can't think of anything to say about the prompt she should just write "I don't know" or whatever other thought is occupying the mind, there are always *several extended moments* when the student pauses. They wait; they exert. No matter how much I emphasize what we call "no backsies"—the outlawing of the backspace button—every student inevitably tries to click spell check or beats rhythmically on the backspace button. No matter how much I model a quick frantic pace each time I write along with my student, the student writes in a way that can only be described as deliberate. No matter how much we model a lack of concern for correctness, when I look at these student's freewrites, I see proper spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. I see controlled, careful writing. These experiences, gained through the one-on-one proximity to a student doing freewriting, are in part what make me reconsider the supposed ease of this mode. Even a fifth grader seems already to have accrued a strong sense of what writing is supposed to do and feel like in a school context. Just *telling him* that it's OK to make spelling mistakes in favor of lots of thinking on paper doesn't make him able automatically to do so. Gaining new perspective on a practice I'd come to highly value in my college writing courses, this experience got me very interested in seeing how a college writer might take up my freewriting directions. I wanted to know: How does a student respond to the specific, and sometimes elaborate, directions for directed freewriting? How do they interpret and act upon those directions? How effective are these directed freewriting prompts in eliciting creativity, discovery, and critical thinking? As scholarship on directed freewriting tends to focus on the design of prompts (for example, see Wallack) and typically emphasize the *products* of directed freewriting sessions as evidence of the prompts' usefulness (for example, see Hammond), I directed my inquiry instead toward the interaction of the student freewriter and the prompt. What I had not anticipated, however, was the limits of what the student could accomplish in the freewriting space itself and the unanticipated involvement I would have in administering the exercises. Findings from this study, detailed below, in other words, point to the guiding and participatory role teachers must have as students enter freewriting spaces.

Methods

To begin answering these questions, I turned to the context of my own first-year composition classroom. Because I was interested in closely examining how a student writer responds to directed freewriting prompts—prompts of the sort I’d been using in my writing courses—I elected to focus my observations and interview on one student of mine, here named Liz. In turning to my own classroom, my own student, and my own practices, the method for this inquiry is best described as teacher research, or practitioner inquiry. Of this research perspective that understands students as participants in active contexts of learning, Nancie M. Atwell writes, “teachers are in an ideal position to observe, describe, and learn from the behavior of student writers” (84). Like those who practice and advocate teacher-research (Fleischer and Fox; Cochran-Smith and Lytle), I determined that I could learn from my student something about the processes I was attempting to teach. As a freewriting facilitator, the most valuable data from this study comes not from the student’s participation or experiences per se but rather from my experience in administering the session.

To accomplish my study, I observed Liz, whom I was concurrently teaching in my first-year-composition course, [\[4\]](#) [\[#note4\]](#) as I led her in two separate directed freewriting processes. This observation session took place after our class met, in a quiet computer lab in the English building. Following these freewrites, I recorded Liz’s answers to a number of reflective questions about the process. I picked Liz as a participant in some sense arbitrarily, in part because I thought she’d be an eager participant. To some extent, too, Liz was typical of many first-year writers: rules-oriented, eager, achievement-seeking. Liz was a good student and earned high marks in my course largely because she paid attention and had a solid formal understanding of essay structure and writing from sources. But like many first-year writers, her writing struggled for depth of thinking and analysis. Her case and students like her propelled me to bring directed freewriting processes, like the ones I observed Liz attempting, fairly regularly to my course. In my observation, I guided Liz through two separate freewriting processes, one that considered a reading, and one that would help her generate some ideas to write about for a rhetorical analysis essay. For each of the freewriting sessions, I gave Liz the following familiar freewriting instructions (taken verbatim from the observation recording): “Start writing and don’t stop; if you can’t think of anything to say in relation to the topic, just try to write something that captures what you’re thinking at the time, even if it’s just the repetition of a word. Don’t worry about spelling or punctuation—just try to write, try to keep your fingers moving, and try to keep yourself coming back to that question.”

The design of the freewriting prompts were based on processes like the ones described above: following Elbow and inspired by Hammond, Marsella and Hilgers, and others who advocate a rigorous freewriting process, I thought carefully about the steps and the language of the prompts. Going into this observation, I supposed that freewriting could serve as a means for discovery and as an exercise in thinking, capable of generating surprising insights and ideas from the writer. In other words, I assumed that the student writer would think and discover freely using these processes; they would help the writer pose questions about and come to understand a difficult text as well as generate several possible directions for an upcoming essay assignment. These processes, then, aligned with conventional uses of freewriting: for reading comprehension (Hinkle and Hinkle) and invention (for example, Stover, Elbow).

The first directed freewrite was composed on a computer in response to a text that Liz had never read. I chose Ed White’s “My Five-Paragraph-Theme Theme” (see [Fig. 1](#) [\[#fig1\]](#) for Liz’s full responses). This essay is a productively difficult one for students as White sharply criticizes the five-paragraph form while seeming in many ways to be advocating its use, including actually using the five-paragraph structure. I anticipated, in other words, that Liz would have questions about this difficult text. In the prompt I designed, the student was to read the selection, then pose a question to herself

about something that confused her, that she was unsure of, or that she wondered about. After freewriting in response to that question, the student was to read what she had written and generate a new question that would inspire the second round of freewriting. However, upon hearing the very first instructions, Liz paused and turned to me for help, as she didn't know what to write. What began as what I thought would be a thoughtful prompt highlighting questioning and discovery quickly became a dialogic exchange between facilitator and student writer.

In this second freewriting session (see [Fig. 2](#) [fig2]), I asked Liz to handwrite a freewrite in response to an incomplete sentence: "In my rhetorical analysis paper, I will" Liz was instructed to keep returning to this sentence, trying to finish it. Once done with the first round of freewriting, Liz read what she'd just written and then wrote a complete sentence summarizing some central point. This simpler, invention freewriting practice is what Elbow calls finding "the center of gravity," or what Marsella and Hilgers describe as the freewriting heuristic, the three steps of performing the (focused) freewriting exercise: freewriting, reading and reflecting to identify a center, and formulating an "assertion statement based on the center" (101). From that center, Liz conducted another round of freewriting that elaborated on that completed sentence. Liz concluded this observation session by orally reflecting on how her thinking moved and what she discovered in the process.

Discussions of directed freewriting promise movement and change, development and discovery. And it seems to be the mere act of writing in response to these prompts that would guarantee this movement. As Marsella and Hilgers write, finding the center of gravity "connotes change: as the writer's perspective, position, and writing experience change, so does the center of gravity of the prose being generated" (109). Going into my observations, I was interested in seeing if my student could experience and then talk about this process of change. Would I see that my "freewriting heuristic fosters exploration, discovery, and, ultimately, the confidence of having a considered position on a topic" (Marsella and Hilgers 104)?

Findings

First Round: (a question I posed, after Liz didn't have any questions about the essay: Is it possible that Ed White doesn't really believe in the five-paragraph essay?)

At the beginning Ed White led on to believe that he does believe in this method of writing. He starts off by saying or explaining about what this method entails and how it works in his writing. Then he goes on to say or explain how it works. Introduction comes first, then the three supporting points then the conclusion, totalling to five paragraphs. How does this work if he is writing a rather long work or has to write page after page of an essay? Like for English class this year we have four plus pages to do for each essay and I'm not sure how this method would fit. No where in this passage has Ed White led me to believe that he does not believe in his own method. It seems to me that this method works for him every time he has to write a piece of writing. How has he written more than a dozen works by using this method?

Second Round: (after discussion and looking back at the text)

The way the material is being presented is contradictory at times. For the most part it leads the reader to believe he uses this method and sticks to it for the most part and uses it every time an essay or assignment presents itself. Evidence in the text also causes reasons to believe he doesn't believe in this method at times. It limits his writing which can affect his writing an essay or topic in a negative way. He may be missing a very important point that needs to be made in his writing but skips it because it falls outside the given formula or method of his five paragraph method. It can drastically hurt his writing if he continues to stick to those three main points. These points may not necessarily withhold throughout the whole essay. Other points may need to arise and be made known.

Written Reflection:

In the beginning, when I read through the first time this passage, I thought that the author believed in this five paragraph essay method and used it religiously. But as new points came up, I began to change my mind. I began to question his method and how he presented it at certain points in the passage. I went from one thought about the passage and almost did a complete change in opinion the second time through. It seems to me that, as a reader, it depends on how many times you read it or think about it to form a consistant opinion. Going into each free write, I had a new idea on what to think about and how to interpret the text. Going from one write to the next, they completely contradict themselves just like the passage does at times. In this way is how contradictory points come across in passages even by the best writers.

Figure 1. Liz's Directed Freewriting—Comprehension of a Text, Question-focused

From this observation, two main, significant findings emerged. The first was the emergent and unexpected ways that I, as the facilitator of the freewriting processes, had to direct and converse with Liz to generate questioning and exploration. Counter to much discussion of directed freewriting, the prompts themselves were not sufficient to get the student's thinking going. Also serving as a counterexample to conventional wisdom, the second major finding has to do with how the student, following the process I outlined, dealt with contradiction and competing lines of thinking.

One main assumption of this observation was that a directed freewriting process would develop and stretch a student's thinking. Both directed freewriting sessions can be said to have this effect; it is, however, open to debate the extent to which it was the writing experience itself that moved Liz's thinking. In delivering my prompt for the first round of freewriting on Ed White's essay, I was met with an immediate need to improvise. Liz, after reading the essay, was unable to pose a question she had about it. Her initial sense was that White was describing why he liked the five-paragraph form and thus she didn't have any question about it. Because Liz couldn't "find her own perplexity" (Hammond 89), unable to question her initial straight reading of White's satiric essay, I ended up having to supply her with a question that supposed the opposite of her initial sense about the text. Liz freewrote then on *my* question ("Is it possible that Ed White doesn't really believe in the five-paragraph essay?") and then reviewed her response looking for how her thinking changed. As the first round of her freewriting shows, though she did raise some productive questions about the essay (relating it to her own experiences), by the end, she was no more convinced that White might be criticizing the five-paragraph form. Even my interference, asking her explicitly to take up an alternative view, was not successful in changing her initial reading.

Articulating no change in her initial position, I decided again to improvise the second round of freewriting. I realized that I would have to guide her more than I had originally planned. In between the first and second freewrite, Liz and I first talked more about the text: I asked her to elaborate on some obvious contradictions in the text—that, for example, White was writing as a student in the text, but the afterword (which I had her read first) clearly states that White is not a student, but a professor. This led her to finally articulate a troubling question—in our conversation, not in her writing—of how White would use the five-paragraph-theme for "longer works." After she arrived at this contradiction, I asked her to go to the text to see if she could find some support for the idea that White was actually critiquing the five-paragraph essay. It seems that finding that textual support is what helps her thinking shift, as she begins the second round of freewriting with the bold new claim: "The way the material is being presented is contradictory at times." But far from arriving at a revelation about White's satiric critique, the second freewrite contains remnants of Liz's *very first* reaction to the text. "For the most part," Liz writes in the second sentence, "it leads the reader to believe he uses this

method and sticks to it for the most part and uses it every time an essay or assignemtn [sic] presents itself.” Liz seems to understand the point that the five-paragraph structure is limiting (“Other points may need to arise and be made known” that exceed the limited form), but thinks that White himself fails to realize that. She still, in other words, thinks there is a chance that White uses the five-paragraph theme.

When Liz had finished the two freewrites, I asked her to write a few sentences of reflection in which I asked her to consider how her thinking changed. Liz’s first comments would suggest that she did experience and see a movement in her thinking as she says, “In the beginning, when I read through the first time this passage, I thought that the author believed in this five paragraph essay method and used it religiously. But as new points came up, I began to change my mind.” What Liz’s reflection fails to reveal, however, is what these “new points” were. She doesn’t elaborate on what causes her to shift her thinking. Significantly, though, during our interview time, when I asked Liz if she felt like the process on the text helped her learn something or discover she didn’t feel like she initially knew, she said, “my opinion I guess changed about the text because once I read it through I thought one thing and then *once we started talking about it* and I started seeing those certain things, I kind of basically just changed my mind” (emphasis mine). Tellingly, it seems that Liz found movement in her thinking in our conversation, rather than through her freewriting. Though Liz affirms that the process generated new ideas, examining the content of her freewrites, we see that Liz ends the first round of writing much in the same place she started: she questions White’s ability to always use the five-paragraph theme (“How has he written more than a dozen works by using his method?”) but yet just before this she also insists that “No where in this passage has Ed White led me to believe that he does not believe in his own method.” Liz has, it seems, failed to begin rectifying these contradictions in the freewriting space—the great question she has posed has failed to move her from her original position.

Dealing with contradiction or competing lines of thought played out significantly in the invention freewriting sessions as well. In this focused freewriting process, I began by asking Liz “where [she was]” in terms of composing her Rhetorical Analysis essay for my course. Liz revealed that she hadn’t really started work on the essay, but had the text in mind that she wanted to work with (Anne Lamott’s “Shitty First Drafts”) and had read it several times.

First Round: In my Rhetorical Analysis Essay I will... Start as always by drafting, organizing my thoughts into a list style document of form. In Lamott’s essay I will focus on her style of writing, how it is unusual, how she casually speaks to her readers in a humorous way. She uses unfamiliar styles and ways to reach out to her readers in ways we as readers are not used to. She uses the humor, type of language that keeps the readers attention or interest. Show how I agree with most of her essay by supporting my thoughts with hers, & show her techniques in how she formed her essay.

Second Round: In my RA essay, I will focus on the unusual style of writing. (*Liz generated this completed sentence first before the second freewriting session began*): One of examples that support this idea is her title to the essay “Shitty First Drafts” Right away we know this is a different piece of writing. She is also very judgmental of those other writers who claim to have very well written first drafts. Very critical of them because they are different from her. She also is extreme about it because she brings up that God even hates these people. Humor also has a large part in this essay.

Figure 2. Liz’s Prewriting Freewriting Sessions

To prompt this freewriting session, I asked Liz to continue to attempt finishing the sentence, “In my Rhetorical Analysis, I will . . . ,” explaining that she might consider “what a Rhetorical Analysis is,

what you want to say about Lamott's text, or what you think is rhetorically interesting." I also reminded her of the low stakes and the likelihood that she wouldn't know how to finish the sentence by saying, "if you don't know yet, that's OK" and "just try to finish that sentence in any way you can, and keep returning to that sentence."

While Liz confessed no direction in our conversation before she wrote, she was able to articulate a clear "center" in the second sentence of the first round of freewriting. Here, she comes to the focus on style ("In Lamott's essay I will focus on her style of writing"). How she gets here is largely unclear; in other words, this assertion doesn't follow from the previous statement about the process she plans to use ("drafting and organizing my thoughts into a list style document or form"). Liz largely commits to this center, making it the focus of the second round of freewriting, a session she later characterized as "support for the thesis" (on Lamott's style). In our verbal reflection about this freewriting process, Liz explained that through the process she articulated a plan for writing and realized now that her focus was going to be on style. Indeed Liz later turned in her paper focused around Lamott's "unusual style." Here Liz's thinking surely moved: she started not having a direction and, in the course of the freewriting process, articulated one that she used in drafting her essay. Also, in the end, Liz's reflection would suggest that she saw her freewrites as elaborating on one point, but I would question whether there aren't competing lines of inquiry at play—for example, humor, though not unrelated to style, seems to compete for centrality in both freewriting sessions. Thus, in addition to asking students, as Elbow advises, to "find the center" we might also consider asking them to find the outlier—that idea that doesn't fit—to see where following that strange, contradictory, or seemingly insignificant idea might take their thinking. Here it's clear that Liz was most comfortable sticking to the first point she comes to and elaborating on that, rather than exploring other possibilities. Where might have Liz's thoughts traveled if she hadn't rested on style and spent the freewriting time elaborating on it? How did the freewriting process urge her to rest on style and work to develop that first idea?

In our interview about both processes, Liz confirmed feeling as though her own thinking had in fact "moved" during each the freewriting sessions. With White in particular she felt a great change from her initial position as she said in the interview portion, "at first I thought he was constantly . . . for his method and then I thought at the end that he's kind of inconsistent and contradicts what he says throughout his text." Liz makes a quite interesting connection between the contradiction she eventually saw in White and the contradiction she discovered in her own thinking as she concludes in the written reflection, "Going from one write to the next, they completely contradict themselves just like the passage does at times. In this way is how contradictory points come across in passages even by the best writers." This strikes me as perhaps the most valuable insight either of the freewriting processes has elicited: Liz here comes to appreciate the value of contradiction. However, the impact of this realization fails to complicate Liz's thinking about her paper in the second round of freewriting as there she believed herself to be developing one line of thinking on style, rather than asking how, for instance, style might compete with or challenge a focus on humor.

Discussion

On the whole, observing Liz freewriting, examining her freewriting, and talking with her about it was in many ways disappointing to my original suppositions about the capacity of freewriting as a thinking practice. Liz wasn't *automatically* using this writing space to interrogate or grapple; she didn't automatically come to view freewriting as a means to critically think about a topic as I supposed she would (if I just prompted her in the right way and described clearly what freewriting is). She didn't make substantial discoveries nor did she seem to articulate anything that surprised her. She didn't make her thinking more complex; in each freewriting session, her writing showed her eager to

grab on to the first idea she had and develop it. She didn't take up contradiction, even when I explicitly set her up to do so.

Moreover, the deviation from my prepared prompts raises the problem of leading the freewriting practice of a whole classroom of students. To the extent that either of the sessions was successful in getting Liz to advance a line or lines of thought, that success may be in some part reliant upon not just the *writing* process she engaged in. Rather, I feel like I helped push her thinking through dialogue that met her thinking where it was. Of course, in a room with twenty-five students rather than one student engaged in the process, the language prompting the freewriting simply couldn't account for their individual initial thinking and thus may not work to propel them forward. It now seems to me that, in addition, my concern for the language prompting the freewrites should indicate the degree of structure, instruction, and practice the students need in order to see any benefits from the freewriting process. As Elbow notes, "Free exploratory writing . . . though we must learn to use it, is always available" (*Embracing Contraries* 59). In other words, though freewriting seems personal, writerly, and simple, and as Elbow says, always "available," we still have to *learn* to do it. Though not conclusive, this preliminary study shows the extent to which first-year students need coaching in this mostly unfamiliar mode. Freewriting then is not to be considered natural or organic or easy, and students are most likely to conceive of this practice as only beneficial for generating an idea that can be put to use. Though I can't say I now know the best ways to prompt these directed freewrites, I know that terminology like "finding the center" isn't sufficient for a beginning freewriter to act upon. Moreover, steps of a freewriting process like "finding the center"—arguably, a step designed to make freewriting more rigorous and more thinking—might actually inhibit free and productively contradictory thinking. Out of this problem, then, I would also conclude that students need much practice in the freewriting process. Students really need a means of understanding writing in a whole different way. How do we get students to take full advantage of the freewriting space itself? How do we get students to see and experience writing in a different way?

This is not to say that there weren't visible benefits in this reflective and analytical freewriting process. Liz was able to articulate a direction for her essay that she then followed through on. She was able to reconsider her thinking about a new text. In hindsight, Liz understood freewriting as a prewriting activity. Liz's commentary on the usefulness of this process centered in some part around "focus" and, further, that it made tackling a writing assignment more manageable. In response to the question "What do you think the purpose of freewriting in this way is?" Liz said,

Probably a sense of prewriting so to speak because it kind of channels your focus towards the task at hand instead of having to worry about formulating a legitimate essay so you're able to write and keep writing and thinking over and over about it and keep thinking about what comes to mind and then at the end you can kind of review it and see the direction your thought went and then go from there in the sense that um it kind of makes the task a little more easier. . . it's not as overwhelming as the assignment is.

Liz seems to see the freewriting process much like Elbow characterizes it in "Desperation Writing" in *Writing Without Teachers*—that of the need to cook out on the table. Liz sounds a lot like Elbow indeed when she says, "I can take my thoughts and go from there into the essay instead of having so many different things in your head at once and you have them, the majority of them down on paper so you can kind of see it in front of you instead of it all being in your head." It really is no surprise that Liz sees freewriting as a valuable form of prewriting. A kind of wandering, informal, chaos can really only be conceptualized within the prewriting stage of the conventional understanding of writing process; under the familiar model of writing, exploration is only permitted at the beginning; we "begin writing" when we've decided fully what we want to say. As Liz confirms for us, this use is indeed to good effect. But this doesn't exploit the full potential of freewriting and it certainly doesn't

live up to the promise of directed freewriting to change writers' minds.^[5] ^[#note5] How do we get students to take full advantage of the freewriting space itself? How can we help them use writing as a process of discovery, a way of thinking critically and creatively? How do we get students to see and experience writing in a different way?

As a practitioner working with my own student in this observation, delivering prompts exactly like those I'd used in college writing courses, this single case was sufficient for me to become highly critical of the promises of directed freewriting as the panacea of freethinking. Certainly more research that observes writers engaged in the directed freewriting process would be an extremely beneficial contribution to scholarship on this pervasive practice. Though this single case can't unilaterally prove that college writers will always struggle to find contradiction and creative thinking in freewriting, it *does* undermine the guarantee that freewriting will generate freethinking. As this case provides a clear counterexample to this repetitious conventional wisdom on directed freewriting, practitioners and pedagogues should be cautious in what they assume will be happening as students take to freewriting. In the final section of this essay, I discuss how this experience has made me rethink my own freewriting pedagogy.

Cultivating a Freewriting Sensibility in the Writing Classroom

There is great promise in directed freewriting processes. Conceiving of freewriting as a thinking practice assumes a certain important relationship between thinking and writing, as Elbow articulates: "Writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn't have started out thinking. Writing is, in fact, a transaction with words whereby you *free* yourself from what you presently think, feel, and perceive" (*Writing Without Teachers* 15). And while a directed freewriting process is a valuable way to exercise this relationship, there is a need to be cautious in the assumptions we make about the way our students perceive and act upon the relationship between thinking and writing. We can think that we are engaging our students in a rigorous thinking process by carefully describing what freewriting is and what it's for, by telling them not to think about an audience, by prompting the freewriting sessions in just the right way. But the fact is that it may not be easy for students to fully exploit the freewriting space to ask perplexing questions and move freely from one idea to the next. As Elbow rightfully reminds us, we have to first "*manage to get* [ourselves] writing in an exploratory but uncensored fashion" (*Embracing* 59; emphasis added). We have to think about ways to make students befriend writing, to value complexity rather than simplicity in their writing, to play around in and explore with writing, all things which simply don't happen automatically upon our prompting.

As a freewriting pedagogue, I'm still thinking about how best to implement freewriting in the classroom. I've continued to exploit freewriting as a process, having students use freewriting at various stages of a writing projects development: to generate ideas, to commit to a direction, to revise a draft, or to get the writing started. I also like to have students use freewriting to think in the classroom, to quickly respond to a reading or topic. Through my reconsiderations of freewriting, I've come to make more conscious decisions about the whole classroom relationship to "writing." I've begun to move away from seeing freewriting as a practice that I "give" to my writing students, and toward a freewriting *sensibility* in which I create experiences where writing feels different than they may have experienced it before. There is certainly more critical thinking for us to do as facilitators of freewriting, but I list here some of the ways I've been working in my own writing classroom to set the grounds for freewriting to become as easy and generative as its conventional wisdom would suggest:

- Freewrite with them: To access the modes of thinking possible in freewriting, we might model for them the moves made possible in the freewriting space. This could mean sitting at the front of the class and doing freewriting as we'd like it to be done—quickly and unthinkingly. Doing the writing alongside students also may disrupt the sense that this activity is simply busy work

or an exercise “that’s good for them” imposed upon them by a teacher. Freewriting alongside writing students sends the message that freewriting *does* something; it generates ideas that one didn’t have before. When I ask students to freewrite before a discussion of a reading, I like to ask them to share what they were thinking about in the writing, and I take this opportunity to emphasize that I myself realized something new in the freewrite session that I didn’t think before.

- Show them freewriting: Seeing the freewrites of others would no doubt encourage the looseness and play we want to see in freewriting. Because we often allow that no one will ever have to see our freewriting, I have begun showing my students my own freewrites, to reveal the contradictory, wandering, and sometimes utterly droll nature of mine. Highly affected by the conception of what writing is at school, students often have a hard time truly freeing their writing and thinking and this modeling could go a long way to sanction the kind of important metacognitive and playful frame of mind necessary to make the most of the freewriting sessions.
- Direct them as they write: Cultivating a freewriting sensibility might be most like cultivating a mindfulness sensibility in a yoga or meditation session. I’ve adopted a kind of directive voice during freewriting sessions as inspired by meditation sessions and CDs because it seems that it’s so easy for writers to fall back into the default way we usually use writing in our everyday lives: carefully, deliberately, and for coherent communication. Talking to and redirecting writers as they write underscores the differences of the freewriting mode. We might, then, verbally (re)direct students to ask them to begin exploring the opposite of their present considerations, reminding them to keep the pen moving, urging them to meditate on whatever’s coming to mind. If I am not freewriting with my students, I will walk around the room and, in a low voice, remind them of what we’re trying to do. I quietly repeat the tenets of freewriting. I urge them to ask a question about what they’re writing and then answer it, or to suddenly suppose the opposite.
- Use timed writing in new ways: In my freewriting pedagogy, I have most recently experimented with timed writing exercises. I don’t think these would be considered freewriting practices exactly, but they are exercises that complicate student writers assumptions of how we use writing and disrupt the deliberation and care that most accrues on their conceptions of academic writing. I give the students the beginning of five sentences and give them just sixty seconds to complete all the sentences. I have used this exercise mostly as an early invention activity; for example, in one of my writing courses, my students were going to write an essay in the style of the “This I Believe” personal essays. So after exploring associations with the word “believe,” students created the beginning of sentences of their own choosing, like, “I believe . . .”; “My personal creed is . . .”; “I have faith in . . .” I make a big deal about the time, projecting a stopwatch on the media screen in front of them that dramatically blinks red as the time expires. Emphasizing the time while deemphasizing the quality or the results of the exercise (I have the students do several rounds of this sentence generating) helps students experience the “unthinking” quality of thinking on the page that can make freewriting so generative. What I’ve liked best about this exercise so far is that my student writers have articulated struggling between competing ideas for development and changing their minds about what they *thought* they wanted to write about. Feeling the pressure of time makes the act of writing more likely, it seems, to generate something surprising or unexpected, one of the primary goals of a freewriting sensibility.

This list represents only some of the possible ways to garner freewriting sensibilities in college writers. Certainly more practices, and more research, can be conducted to understand how freewriting practices of various sorts might be incorporated on a broad, rather than discrete, basis in the college writing classroom. [\[6\]](#) [\[#note6\]](#) At the conclusion of this essay, it’s important to insist upon caution in understanding freewriting as a discrete practice on par with outlining or webbing. In order for

freewriting to be maximally effective, it must be practiced in a classroom context in which writing, discovery, and exploration are continuously linked. Moreover, teachers who administer freewriting of various sorts should consider observing up-close, as I did, how their students respond to the specific prompts and processes freewriting entails. This study demonstrates the potential for great discrepancy in the teacher's intended outcomes for a freewriting process and the student's actual experience in performing it. Finally, freewriting is not a value-neutral activity; there is a set of assumptions that inform freewriting for freethinking, and college writers will likely not make those assumptions automatically. Instead of assuming the difficulties of thinking through freewriting, facilitators of freewriting should consider how those practices can be explicitly aligned with the wider lessons about what writing does and what writing is in the classroom context.

Conceptually, we need to be vigilant in helping student writers see writing in more dynamic and messy ways. Most student writers have a public and purposeful relationship with writing, seeing it primarily as a means to communicate, rather than as a means to discover or think about something. There is a great capacity for our students to think through freewriting—to “[see] the shabby side of an old idea or perception for the first time, [see] around it to its limits, [see] it in perspective, [see it] as a subsidiary of something else—and thus [let] go a bit” (Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* 46)—and we can help them do so only by helping them to think both about *and* within freewriting.

Notes

1. Reexamination is important, too, as freewriting has become a part of pedagogy outside of writing instruction, including psychology (Hinkle and Hinkle), large-lecture pedagogy (Bean), and reading comprehension (Blintz, Soldner), for just a few examples. Many of these studies evaluate the effectiveness of freewriting, and while generally these outcomes are positive, sometimes the results are ambivalent. In the Hinkle and Hinkle study, for example, freewriting generated equivalent outcomes to “focused thought” practices for learning course content. In spite of this ambivalence, Hinkle and Hinkle suppose then that freewriting might demonstrate bigger gains when the measure isn't factual recall but is directed toward “more divergent aspects of cognition, such as application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation” (34). As Hinkle and Hinkle echo, more research attention can be paid to the relationship of freewriting to thinking processes. ([Return to text.](#)) [#note1-ref]
2. The origins of freewriting are of course not only attributed to Elbow. Mark Reynolds in “Freewriting's Origins” notes that the practice originated in Ken Macrorie's work in the 1960s and then in Elbow's work in the 70s (81). In *Uptought*, Macrorie cites the influence of Dorothea Brande's 1934 publication, *Becoming a Writer*, in which she argues for the writer's two-sidedness, the conscious and the unconscious sides, and further that to tap into that unconscious side, the writer ought to “hitch your unconscious mind to your writing arm” (qtd. in Reynolds, “Freewriting's Origins” 81). When we say freewriting though, we most commonly think of Elbow, who has written about freewriting extensively throughout the course of his career. ([Return to text.](#)) [#note2-ref]
3. Elbow uses these descriptors to generally capture the project of *Writing With Power*. ([Return to text.](#)) [#note3-ref]
4. The observation took place near the end of the term; Liz signed a consent form to participate, understanding her participation or decision not to participate would in no way affect her grade in the course. Liz granted me permission to reproduce her writing and her words from the interview. ([Return to text.](#)) [#note4-ref]
5. For yet another example of a freewriting advocate espousing the thinking potential of freewriting processes, take Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*. He writes: “Consider this example. You believe X. You write out your belief or perception or argument that X is the case. By the time you have finished you see something you didn't see before: X is incorrect or you

see you no longer believe X. Now, you keep writing about your perplexity and uncertainty. Then you begin to see Y. You start to write about Y. You finally see that Y is correct or you believe Y. And then finally you write out Y as fully as you can and you are satisfied with it” (22-23). [\(Return to text.\)](#) [\[#note5-ref\]](#)

6. See, for a potential example of this, Timothy Brigg’s unpublished thesis, “Toward a Pedagogy of Freewriting,” in which he suggests that freewriting can become the central activity that leads to the production of academic prose forms. [\(Return to text.\)](#) [\[#note6-ref\]](#)

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