

SSD 5-4-3: A Dialogical Writing Warm-up

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*The Silent Socratic Dialogue 5-4-3
Writing Warm-up exercise motivates
first-year developmental composition
students through dialogical writing
with immediate audiences.*

“Wait, what? You want me to write in her journal?” Marc was incredulous.

When it became clear that I did, Sondra, his writing partner, echoed, “He’s writing in my journal!”

The first time I assigned my twenty developmental writing students at Grand Rapids Community College their warm-ups, all went smoothly for the initial prompt: “Successes—write five sentences about your successes so far and those you anticipate achieving in college, work, family, friends, and hobbies. What have you accomplished, and what do you plan to achieve?”

Studiously, all twenty began, writing about athletic exploits, child-raising, mission trips, tours of duty, high school graduations, and overcoming criminal pasts. While they wrote, I walked among them, “eavesdropping,” reading over their shoulders. When most had completed five sentences, I returned to the front of the room and made a point of watching the clock until the second hand floated to the top (or bottom), and announced, “OK, finish your

sentence, and then switch journals with someone in your group. Read each others' writing. Skip a line, and write a one-sentence question to keep the written conversation going."

"You want me to write in her journal?"

"Yes. Ask a question to keep the conversation going."

"He's writing in my journal?"

"Yes. Write a thoughtful question about something he says to gain background, dig deeper, expand or clarify an idea."

Most had begun reading, clearly interested in learning their partners' stories. Marc and Sondra shrugged and turned to each other's warm-ups.

Again, as students finished a few minutes later, I announced, "Quality control: Write your initials in front of your question in your partner's notebook." After a pause, I resumed, "Back in your own journal, read your partner's question, and write a four-sentence answer."

They responded to one another's questions, explaining high-school teams and league championships, children's ages and stages, countries visited and disasters averted, degrees, infractions, rehabilitations, and dreams.

"Switch again. Read each others' answers, and ask another question to follow up."

"Wait, another one?" Marc shook out his hand and rubbed it with the other. He grinned, "I know, keep the conversation going."

When most had a second question written, I said, "OK, now write your three-sentence answer."

For their third paragraph, many wrote about their aspirations at community college, recording similar experiences to relate to their partners' successes. Already in this first warm-up, many were becoming more dialogic and attentive to audience and form. Sondra, who had numbered each of her first five sentences in a list, wrote her four- and three-sentence responses in standard paragraphs, unnumbered, to match Marc's.

"Congratulations!" I concluded afterward. "You have completed your first Silent Socratic Dialogue: Silent because it's written, Socratic because it's purposeful questioning to prompt thinking, and dialogue because it's conversing, keeping the conversation going. Silent Socratic Dialogue is designed for good writing, questioning, and thinking."

"So SSD is Silent Socratic Dialogue?" Marc pointed to the SSD that I'd written on our classroom whiteboard's itinerary. "I figured the WW meant Writing Warm-up, but I thought SSD was going to be something Super Sonic."

Implementing the Silent Socratic Dialogue 5-4-3

"What's 'The Other Grand Canyon?'" Cara asked, responding to the teaser for my writing warm-up prompt, noted on the board. "I've always wanted to see the Grand Canyon." She and Marie, her writing partner, discussed possible candidates for another Grand Canyon. "Is it in the Upper Peninsula?" Marie wondered.

Beginning the class, I asked, "Who has been to Yellowstone National Park? Do you know about Old Faithful Geyser and Mammoth Hot Springs? Does anyone know why it is called Yellowstone?" After sharing my story of hiking beside the Yellowstone River through the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone to the falls, I projected an image of Thomas Moran's famous painting that accentuates the golden walls of the canyon, designed to lure train passengers from New York's Grand Central Station over a century ago.

"Now write about your favorite outdoor place. Maybe it's someplace scenic where you remember an especially enjoyable visit, like hiking the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Maybe it's another favorite spot. Describe it in such a way that your reader would want to go there—like the train travelers from New York."

The Silent Socratic Dialogue writing warm-up technique places college students in a dialogic setting in which they construct the texts that explore, inform, and challenge each other through a succession of questions and answers. It validates students' voices, ideas, and interactions as worthy of study while engaging them in the interrelationships of reading, writing, thinking,

and communicating (Elbow 369). Students engage in dialogue internally with themselves as they select and explore appropriate topics, such as choosing and promoting a favorite outdoor place. And they interact externally with one another as they write to respond to a variety of texts and purposes as their writing prompts, partners, and questions change daily. Their personal conversations empower students to try new roles, express their voices, construct new meanings, reflect on their understandings, respond to each other's experiences and perspectives, and pose challenging questions (Fecho 6).

Because the writing warm-up is a formative writing sample, I assess it for quantity, not quality. Sometimes I initial individuals' writings as they complete their sentences in class. Twice each semester, I collect their journals to tally sentences and assign grades based solely on sentence-totals, usually requiring twelve sentences ($5 + 4 + 3 = 12$) per day for a "Pass." Depending on a class's aptitude, the required number of sentences may be adjusted, but the number should be sufficient to stretch students' abilities and expectations. Periodically, after we've completed a writing warm-up, I'll remind students to review and count their sentences.

As they master the habit, students thrive on the variety-within-routine: they know what to expect, yet they anticipate the novelty of each day's new topic and partner. While guiding and redirecting as necessary, I try to keep my interjections at a minimum because my goal is to keep their writing student-initiated and self-sustained with less teacher-leading and dependence.

Just as students enjoy guessing what the titles of writing prompts may signal when they arrive at class, at times they want to continue their written conversations orally afterward.

After class, I overheard Marie, who wrote with Cara about their favorite places, catch up with Tina to ask, "Where did you go for SSD?"

Organizing the Silent Socratic Dialogue 5-4-3

To introduce another Silent Socratic Dialogue writing warm-up, I described the brown, Acme-brand, cowboy boots that I had

bought in Denver on a dare with some buddies. I shared a story of our wearing them for weekends on-the-town. I noted their comfort and convenience (no laces to tie), and their awkwardness (heels and no traction, designed for stirrups, not to negotiate snowy city foothills). "OK, now describe your own favorite footwear in five sentences," I assigned. "Boots, sandals, running shoes, slippers—what do you most enjoy? What stories can you share?"

Felicia was writing about wearing flip flops to Holland State Park beach, soaking up the sun at the Lake Michigan shoreline where she camped to celebrate graduation with other seniors from her high school. Mitch, her collaborator, chose his infantry boots because, even though they're not his favorite footwear, they reminded him of his pride in serving his country and his army buddies on a second tour of duty in Iraq.

Our daily writing warm-up generally follows the same SSD 5-4-3 format: 5 sentences—partner question—4 sentences—partner question—3 sentences. The instructions typically proceed along the same six steps.

1. Write five sentences initiated by a writing prompt. (4-8 minutes)
2. Switch journals with an assigned partner, then read the five-sentence warm up, skip one line, and write a one-sentence question to continue the conversation. Initial your question in your partner's journal for quality control. (3-4 minutes)
3. Write a four-sentence response to your partner's question. (3-7 minutes)
4. Switch again. Read the four sentences, and ask another question. (2-3 minutes)
5. Write a three-sentence answer. (2-6 minutes)
6. Read each other's answers. (Jensen 1)

I vary the times allotted each portion according to the speed at which students tackle each. At the semester's beginning, I generally allow more time to write, and steadily constrict it as the

semester progresses and students gain comfort and proficiency. Some demanding prompts may require additional time for students' explorations. The adaptive timing helps to assure them of completion, and it breaks what for many is a difficult undertaking into manageable parts, foreshadowing the writing process that we will apply to more formal essay writing later.

When they switch notebooks, I repeat, "Ask each other a 'thick' question, starting with 'Why...?' 'How come...?' 'What do you think about...?' or 'What would you do if...?' Avoid any question that can be answered with a simple yes/no or true/false because your partners need a four-sentence answer. Help them keep the conversation going."

When Mitch stopped writing to ask me, "How do you spell reconnaissance?" I suggested, "Don't pause for punctuation, spelling, capitalization, or corrections because you might forget a good idea. SSD is like a first draft, so keep writing what comes to mind. Add any related stories or situations you can, and give the names, places, dates, and details to make it relatable."

"What do you like most about Holland State Park?" Mitch asked Felicia.

"Why did you join the army if you knew we were at war?" Felicia wrote him.

Writing Dialogically

Responding to the prompt, "Home is where...", Thanh, who immigrated eight years ago, described the hilly, forested terrain of the Nguyen region of Vietnam. LaTysha, who was born and raised in Grand Rapids, wrote about her family reunions in Detroit. Less interested in Detroit's SMART buses, Thanh asked instead about The Rapid, Grand Rapids' public bus transportation system. "Which bus goes to Woodland Mall from GRCC? Does it leave the Lyon Street or Fountain stop? How would I get from the mall to 36th Street?"

As they interact, students apply thinking skills to adapt questions and responses to real audiences for Silent Socratic Dialogue. They have to communicate clearly, consider unanticipated questions, and address diverse perspectives. The SSD approach

gives students an immediate, live audience that brings real-world issues to classroom writing. GRCC's student population is diverse racially, ethnically, economically, vocationally, socially, and generationally, so each new pairing requires adaptations for audience.

Because students otherwise tend to clump, like-with-like when choosing themselves, and gravitate toward the same seats every class, I normally arrange the classroom furniture into groupings of four and randomly reassign students to new groups about every four classes. Within these quadrants, each selects a new partner to write with, choosing a different one until everyone has worked with all others: again, variety-within-routine. I've experienced that as they become more comfortable with one another and get better acquainted with more classmates, many students genuinely enjoy coming to class, even arriving early and staying late to chat, plan, and study together. Attendance patterns strengthen. Occasionally, some adopt the role of peer-monitor and text any group members who may be absent or running late.

Collaborative work contributes to developmental students' growth in social and emotional skills as well as gains in critical thinking. It involves all students as actively engaged participants when they are assigned new partners continuously. "[I]t does not sacrifice content but rather facilitates a deeper understanding of the material through directed analysis and relevant application of the information while simultaneously building EI {Emotional Intelligence} domains of self-awareness, social competence, and self-motivation" (Osterholt and Barratt 2010).

After Thanh and LaTysha finished their warm-ups, LaTysha turned to the other members of their group as well as a few other students from adjoining groups to get directions from campus to the mall so she could write them down for Thanh.

"Here, I've still got a ride left on my student pass. You take it. I don't need it." James, across the room, caught Thanh after class.

LaTysha and Marquis arranged to walk with Thanh three blocks to the Lyon and Division bus stop to ensure that he caught the Number 6 from campus to the mall.

Selecting and Designing Prompts

Confessing myself a Chicago Cubs baseball aficionado, I asked students to respond to the question, “Why do we love to watch or participate in sporting events?”

Dorothy, a retired grandmother of five, wrote about her through-thick-and-thin love of the Detroit Lions and her household’s fall season, Saturday-night ritual of stocking the pantry and refrigerator for Sunday’s game-time arrival of her brood and a few neighbors. She exchanged with Amber, a dually-enrolled high-school student, who professed no interest in the National Football League.

Besides the writing warm-up prompts in my introductions, I’ve used projections of art work, music clips, YouTube clips, NBC News mash-ups, current events, TV theme songs, movie soundtrack excerpts, film clips, kitchen utensils, courtroom judgments, cultural quirks, natural scenes, restaurant reviews, local festivals and events, museum exhibits, historical anomalies, biographical traits, aphorisms, and many others. Variety, albeit variety-within-routine, is the spice.

One of my current favorites involves projecting an essay from the website www.thisibelieve.org, such as Jennifer Thompson-Cannino and Ronald Cotton’s “Finding Freedom in Forgiveness” or Sarah Adams’s “Be Cool to the Pizza Delivery Dude.” These essays have the advantage of printed as well as oral text, the authors reading their own aloud (Moran 75). The provocative themes readily elicit students’ responses: “Which crime is unforgivable: rape or condemning an innocent man to prison?” “Does the effort I expend on my job, more than the kind of work I do, determine my value as a person?”

“With all the concussions and brain damage, do you think football should be banned from high schools?” Dorothy asked Amber.

“What would happen to all the students who only come to school to play sports?” Amber rejoined.

Making a Difference

Just as I begin the semester asking students to write about their past achievements and projected accomplishments, I usually conclude with a short series of writing warm-ups called “Make a Difference!” challenging them to take on a mentoring role for new students, the position that most of them were in themselves just three months earlier.

Responding to the prompt, “Now that you’re at end of the semester, what advice would you give to incoming college freshmen to ensure their college success?” Teresa was advising incoming freshmen to write and read daily because the practicing of these skills makes them better in every subject they take.

Stephen, her writing partner, recommended that new students attend all the classes because missing even one two-hour class makes it difficult to catch up. “Even if you have to hurry to get to class from work and you’re trying to spend some time at home with your family, make sure you attend classes, so you don’t give up your plans while you’re trying to hold your life together day-to-day.”

While Silent Socratic Dialogue is engaging with developmental composition students, I have used it in advanced composition, education, and content-delivery classes, too. Although I haven’t attempted it yet, I expect SSD 5-4-3 could be adapted to online courses using discussion threads, instant messaging, or student group modules on a college’s learning management system. SSD 5-4-3 also should work well with a flipped classroom model: as a collaborative classroom activity, it could be used to guide students in applying or analyzing course content learned individually out-of-class.

In addition, Silent Socratic Dialogue projects a confidence on the part of the instructors, assurance that they can facilitate a dialogic classroom, that their chosen pedagogy to develop a community of learners is worthy of pursuit in college, and that their students’ interactions, ideas, and deportment are intrinsically valuable.

Concluding her paragraph, Teresa observed, “When your

kids and boyfriend see you spending your time studying, writing, and reading, if you stick with it and guard the time every day, they sometimes try it, too, so you're showing a good example for them as students, also."

"When you work full time, grab an energy drink and go straight to class every time, so you keep the door open to your future. To get your certificate or diploma you have to get to classes and do the work," Stephen finished.

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