

# Using Freewriting to Make Sense of Literature

**F**or a 2015 workshop with pre- and in-service secondary school English teachers in New Delhi, we asked our colleagues to bring a short text from their curriculum to anchor the day's activities. They arrived with a copy of Stephen Spender's poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum"; the fourth and final stanza reads as follows:

Unless, governor, teacher, inspector, visitor,  
This map becomes their window and these windows  
That shut upon their lives like catacombs,  
Break O break open 'till they break the town  
And show the children green fields and make their world  
Run azure on gold sands, and let their tongues  
Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open  
History is theirs whose language is the sun. (Stephen Spender Trust 2015)

The text, the teachers explained, was required reading for twelfth-graders (senior secondary) and, for their students and for themselves, a struggle. Part of the challenge for teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) working with a literature-based curriculum is striking a balance between teaching the text or series of texts and creating opportunities for communicative interaction. To begin with, a poem such as Spender's is hard to read. The syntax is unconventional—e.g., "History is theirs whose language is the sun"; so too is the imagery Spender employs—e.g., "... and let their tongues/Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open." Often, students simply want to know what the poem means—or is supposed to mean. Obliging, teachers explain line by line, stanza by stanza, with a culminating series of comprehension questions, frequently in a multiple-choice format. If students still do not "get it," they turn to the Internet in search of an explanation; and, in the case of the

Spender poem, a recent Google search for "An elementary school classroom in a slum analysis" rendered 13,400 results. We argue, however, that in a communicative teaching paradigm, it is not enough to teach what the teacher believes the poem to mean—or what someone told us it means. Rather, reading complex texts is an opportunity for students to engage in deeply personal meaning-making processes.

Here, we return to our previous discussions about engaging young adult readers in the literature curriculum (Murray and Salas 2014a, 2014b, 2014c) to argue that freewriting—and the sense of inquiry it generates—can be used with secondary-level English language learners as a way of introducing them to the exploratory, open-ended thinking that reading literature requires. To clarify, we do not propose freewriting in and of itself as a substitute for local, regional, and national traditions that

the literature curriculum carries with it. Rather, here we propose freewriting about an unfamiliar text as a powerful starting point for readers to make connections: text to self, text to text, and text to the world. Moreover, when such freewriting is operationalized in collaborative, interactive formats, it can create new attitudes towards reading literature by supporting that activity as one of individual and collaborative inquiry.

We begin this discussion about freewriting and the literature curriculum with a brief overview of its origins in English Education as well as contemporary discussions about its potential benefits for the literacy classroom. Drawing from a robust body of *writing-to-learn* literature, we outline how freewriting and the literature curriculum works, its formats and variations followed by a set of strategies for sharing and responding to freewriting in ways that elevate it as participatory analysis. We anchor this discussion of freewriting about the literature curriculum with the Spender poem. However, we encourage teachers and students to try freewriting with the various texts they encounter—poetry, prose, fiction, and even non-fiction.

### WHY FREWRITE WITH LITERATURE?

In the EFL secondary classrooms where we teach—in Charlotte, Kamloops, and New Delhi—there is a long-standing chicken-or-egg argument as to what comes first in academic writing. For some, the gold standard is a sequence starting with parts of speech, moving to types of sentences, then to clauses, to the paragraph, followed by open and closed thesis statements, and then to the essay in its multiple forms: the expository, the persuasive, the descriptive, the argumentative, and so forth. In such classroom and curricular contexts, academic writing as a communicative performance is delayed or doled out in small portions until students have demonstrated a mastery of the bits and pieces of academic writing. For others rejecting a *back-to-basics* approach, academic writing is a process of meaning making, a *whole-language* transaction between

our existential selves as writers and the world(s) we construct and re-construct on paper. It is about putting ideas on paper and working them out as we go—a process.

For this latter group, freewriting is a brief, exploratory exercise, with pen, pencil, or keyboard, emphasizing the creation of unbroken language in constant motion—without stopping, without thinking too much, and without editing (Elbow 1998a, 1998b, 2000). Theoretically, freewriting owes a great deal both directly and indirectly to the understandings of Vygotsky (1978, 1986), a Soviet psychologist whose English translations roughly coincided with the materialization of the writing-to-learn movement in U.S. English Education. The tools of language, Vygotsky (1986) argued, are not mere representations of thinking but also a mediational means to achieve that end:

Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them. Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things. Every thought moves, grows, and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem. (218)

While writing to learn means different things to different people, what these perspectives share is the notion of the writing process as a means for solving problems, for making connections, and for establishing relationships. In other words, writing is thinking aloud on paper. Or as Emig (1977), a seminal figure in college composition and communication, explained almost 40 years ago, “writing represents a unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique” (122). Words on paper afford the review, manipulation, and modification of knowledge as it is written and learned; writing “through its inherent reinforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain marks a uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning” (Emig 1977, 125). Similarly, Murray (1984) framed words on paper as symbols of and for learning—allowing us “to play with information, to make

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connections and patterns, to put together and take apart and put together again, to see what experience means” (3).

Although the writing-to-learn movement advocates writing in all of its forms (National Writing Project 2005), it is, nevertheless, popularly associated with freewriting. Championed in the work of Belanoff et al. (2002), Elbow (1998a, 1998b, 2000), Fulwiler (1987a, 1987b), Goldberg (1986), Heard (1995), Macrorie (1980, 1984), and others—freewriting surfaced as a practice forefronting the right of women and men to record and/or generate their own ideas on paper (and today, across screens). That said, freewriting in classrooms and its relationship to academic writing has been controversial since its beginnings. One of its earliest critics, Hillocks (1986), dismissed freewriting as “doodling with language” (176). Others have associated it with an exercise full of false promises (Ackerman 1993), dubious groundings in pseudo-research (Smagorinsky 1987), and privileged, middle-class assumptions about the ways children learn (Delpit 1995).

Despite these criticisms, in our contexts we have used freewriting successfully as a way of helping young adult readers explore and make sense of complex texts. With Goldberg (1986), we have used freewriting for students’ “‘writing down the bones’—the essential, awake speech in their minds” (4). Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine (1991) call freewriting “what you get when you remove almost all of the normal constraints involved in writing” (xii). Macrorie (1991) compared the process to digging: “We find surprise, and a voice. Then we can revise it: sort the dross from the gold” (188). Recognizing that freewriting is sometimes generative and sometimes not much at all, Elbow (2000) recommended that freewriters “just write and keep writing” (61). Although freewriting suggests a suspension of

“rules,” below we outline three principles that teachers might consider when incorporating freewriting into the secondary literature curriculum.

### 1. FREEWITING ABOUT THE LITERATURE CURRICULUM IS STRATEGIC.

Freewriting with classroom texts is something that instructors can turn to strategically. Instructors can begin a class with freewriting; as students enter and settle, the process can create a space for reflection and focus on the learning to come. It can also be used to introduce a new reading, as a means for students to explore and articulate what they already know. For example, with the Spender poem, an initial freewriting task might simply start with three minutes of writing about the prompts “elementary school classroom” or “slum.” What comes to mind when we begin writing in response to such prompts? What associations do we make? What memories or lived experiences do the categories generate on paper?

We have found that the traditional emphasis on writing as a performance measure used mainly for assessment can lead learners away from writing practice. Sometimes their experiences with writing have habitually been fueled by anxiety and doubt. To have students begin freewriting, simply write a prompt on the board and set a timer for two or three minutes.

In freewriting about the Spender poem, we followed an initial reading of “An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum” with a series of vocabulary-building exercises, followed by freewriting using the prompt, “let their tongues/Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open.” As facilitators, we chose this particular prompt because of the vivid imagery and, frankly, because we ourselves were unsure of what it meant or what it could mean. Thus, freewriting in this case was a way

of picking up a dense piece of the text and examining it closely.

Freewriting can also be used as closure to reading—short reflections on what the poem came to mean after multiple readings and re-readings. Later that afternoon, for example, we returned to freewriting with the same prompt to tease out what we as readers had come to understand about the poem three hours later.

## **2. FREEWRITING ABOUT THE LITERATURE CURRICULUM IS SHORT AND EXPLORATORY.**

Setting a time limit to freewriting is important—sort of like setting a goal of 50 meters for a sprinter. The idea is that the writers will give it their all for that brief 180 seconds—writing without stopping or “thinking about spelling, grammar, and mechanics; not worrying about how good the writing is—even whether it makes sense or is understandable (even to oneself)” (Elbow 2000, 85). When freewriting is too long (in terms of time), writers begin editing their work. This may lead students to overthink what they might want to say and potentially freeze up. Thus, whether freewriting is focused (with a prompt) or unfocused (without a prompt), it generally works better when the time allotted for the writing is under five minutes.

Although traditional writing strategies often emphasize students’ staying on topic, freewriting invites and celebrates digression. We have found that by letting go of the rules for a few minutes, even the most reticent writers can surprise themselves with a word or phrase in their freewriting that generates new meaning. In reflecting on freewriting as a practice, students have told us that it is liberating to write whatever comes to their minds and to realize that with the censors off, they can write. Brief and exploratory, freewriting has one elemental rule—not stopping, even if that means writing and rewriting a word or making nothing but circular motions. Or as Macrorie (1991) famously advised, if writers have nothing to

say, that “nothing” begins with “n.” That same letter is a starting point for words to follow. In other words, write “nothing, nothing, nothing” and see where “nothing” leads.

## **3. FREEWRITING ABOUT THE LITERATURE CURRICULUM INVOLVES TEACHERS AND STUDENTS.**

It is important for teachers to engage in freewriting with their students as a way of modeling the process of meaning making we are advocating. That means that when the timer starts for a three-minute freewriting session, teachers should start writing too. It is even better if the teacher’s first attempt is clumsy or awkward. It is a way of modeling the difficulty of putting thoughts on paper—a challenge that even a teacher who knows a lot about writing still embraces. Having a teacher write with students sends a strong message that reading and writing are life-long processes. Moreover, engaging in writing with the whole class intently freeing their thoughts on paper makes the writing process exciting for students who see the results of short, exploratory, concentrated practice.

## **SHARING, RESPONDING, AND REWRITING ABOUT CLASSROOM TEXTS IN COMMUNITY**

Writing to learn insists that writers not only produce texts for teachers and then receive a few scribbled comments in the margins and a grade. Rather, as Elbow and Belanoff (1989) have claimed, writing is better realized as an act of communication with others. Once students (and teachers) become comfortable with freewriting without the pressure of needing to produce a perfect text, the products of freewriting are useful to initiate discussion, generate ideas, and exchange perspectives. This can be done in small groups—or anonymously, by piling pages of freewriting in the center of the room and having each student pick one and read something from it that he or she finds relevant or interesting. This can also have the unintended effect of building confidence for the writer, as someone is selecting something interesting from his or her writing.

Sharing writing can also reinforce listening as an important component of learning and discussion.

Optimally, writing processes are realized with peers collaboratively engaged in writers' workshops or other participatory formats. Rather than grading students' freewriting individually, we suggest approaching writing for meaning as a communicative event that begins with an individual putting words on paper and follows in a helping/sharing circle format wherein writers (teachers included) share their words on paper aloud to a live audience. The read-aloud is both an oral publication and a starting point for more writing.

Elbow and Belanoff (1989) suggest a series of strategies for sharing and responding to writing. Three of these strategies that we have found particularly generative are (1) listening to and enjoying the freewriting of others, (2) pointing to energy spots, and (3) asking questions about what was almost said. We summarize these three strategies below with examples generated from the Spender poem.

### **Listening to and enjoying the freewriting of others**

Listening to and enjoying the freewriting of others is simply having the writers read aloud what they have written in the preceding three minutes, to either a partner, a small group, or an entire class. For example, "let their tongues/Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open" generated for one participant a series of questions:

*Writer #1:* Does he mean that we should read books all the time? What kind of books? And when? How long? I am really confused [a line of scribbles]. Let the writer say whatever he feels; children cannot read books all the time. And by using the word "tongue" does he mean from page one to the end? It's all very confusing [another line of scribbles]. What about those kids who don't want to read books? Can we force them to read books so thoroughly? It's all absurd. The poet should be clearer.

For another participant, the same prompt brought questions but also childhood memories:

*Writer #2:* Let their tongues run naked into books. This is a strange image—a naked tongue—it makes me think of someone licking a book. When I was little we had scratch and sniff books. For example, there was one story about chocolate and you could scratch the image and it would smell like chocolate. I remember reading one of these. I must have been 8 years old. Children are hungry for books.

For another, the prompt took her in a different direction:

*Writer #3:* Let their tongues run naked into books. Let them be free in their thinking and let them explore the world themselves. Let them be independent. Let them be a free bird to fly wherever they like. Don't thrust anything on their simple minds. Don't overburden them with thought. Don't create doubts in their minds. Don't push them with anything. Let them go through the white and green pages.

Listening to these three very different responses, the audience is not required or even encouraged to respond to the writing. Rather, they simply listen and perhaps applaud at the conclusion of the reading.

Writers will sometimes begin their reading with a preamble—trying to explain their intent or apologizing for what is to come, and perhaps not reading what they have written but explaining what they were thinking. Insist that writers simply read—without explanations or apologies; the audience listens attentively. Reading our work aloud to someone in front of us—no matter how long we have worked on the piece or how many times we have read it silently to ourselves—brings out things that we had not noticed before: a misplaced word or an awkward sentence or another idea altogether. Likewise, the nonverbal responses that the

piece generates help us to gauge the effect of the freewriting on others and point to possible direction for revision. Even more, simply sharing is a way of affirming that writing is a communicative act, something that often gets lost in the classroom.

We recommend that teachers first ask participants to share their writing in small groups. Afterwards, the teacher might solicit a couple of volunteers to share with the larger class. Do not force anyone to share with the larger group. If students are reluctant to share, teachers can begin by sharing their own freewriting.

### **Pointing to energy spots**

Pointing to energy spots is another adaptation of an Elbow and Belanoff (1989) strategy that we have found particularly generative early on in the freewriting process. At the end of two or three minutes of freewriting, read your work aloud and ask listeners to point out an especially strong word or phrase or image. Elbow and Belanoff (1989) clarify that what listeners identify as an “energy spot” within a freewriting passage might not be a main idea—or the gist of the writer’s intent. Rather, the word, phrase, or image is a moment in the reading that has the potential to generate more writing. Listeners can identify multiple energy spots, which could become new prompts for additional freewriting. The initial freewriting examples on “let their tongues/Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open” generated points of energy that prompted two more minutes of freewriting.

For Writer #1, the energy spot “Can we force them to read books so thoroughly?” generated:

Why should students be asked to read? Students should read because that is how they are going to become human in the real sense. A well-read human being can have many advantages in life. He/She will be able to negotiate his/her way through the difficulties of life. Of course, there are the basic advantages of reading. You become literate, you get a good job and earn a lot of money. But beyond these,

it is also the elevation of a person to a level where he/she can relate to the complexities of life.

For Writer #2, the energy spot “Children are hungry for books” generated:

Devour. I’m not sure if I can remember devouring a book but I do remember devouring the internet back in 1995. It was completely new for me and I would travel to visit my sister on the weekends and spend hours surfing the internet—it’s a hunger I have for news, for images, for mail. Let their tongues run naked into books.

For Writer #3, the energy spot “Let them be independent” generated:

Learning is generally initiated by the teacher in the classroom. The books are said to be the tools for learning. For once, let the child have it as a tool in his hand so that he can carve his own worldview [line of scribbling].

### **Asking questions about what was almost said**

Here, participants listen to a peer read from a short freewriting passage to describe what is “almost said” or what they want to hear more about. Again, this generative sharing/responding strategy is intended to help a writer who has just begun putting words on paper to identify another starting point for writing by hearing what an audience wants to know more about.

Peer feedback about what the audience wants more of can help the writer to clarify his or her thinking and writing. In the case of previous prompts, responses included requests for clarification and examples, along with questions: “What does it mean to be a real human?”; “Why do you think you devour the Internet and not books?”; “What do you mean by ‘tool for learning’?” Writers are not compelled to answer the questions immediately. Rather, the questions are starting points for more writing.

In each of the three adapted Elbow and Belanoff (1989) strategies we have presented

here, writing is followed by reading, which is followed by more writing and talking about the writing and the text at hand. That is to say, after a round of sharing and response, students and teachers take up the writing once more for another three to five minutes. We have found the combination of freewriting and sharing/ responding to be a powerful way of building adolescents' engagement in reading complex texts and their confidence in making meaning of and connections to literature. Reading combined with freewriting emphasizes teasing out an idea on paper—seeing it from different points of view and engaging through our lived experiences with an issue or text or an idea. Such writing, we argue, is exponentially more meaningful when it is shared with peers in an open and collegial forum.

### **FREEWITING AND ASSESSMENT**

As with most writing activities, freewriting about texts and sharing and responding to such freewriting takes practice. At first, students might fall into the trap of framing sharing and responding as an “assessment”—trying, like many teachers, to identify the mistakes or correct the errors within a composition. However, the idea of sharing and responding and rewriting is to recast writing as an exploratory, shared process. In the same way that the construct of “rules” pushes against the spirit of freewriting, so too does the notion of assessment. For this reason, as opposed to grading freewriting, we encourage teachers to frame freewriting activities as spaces where learners are encouraged to read, write, and think deeply about the thoughts, images, and emotions contained therein. At the same time, secondary readers and writers can also benefit from focused, individual feedback from teachers. In large classes, however, the sheer number of writers and the potential number of pages of freewriting each writer might generate during an academic quarter or semester make it impossible for teachers to commit to providing feedback each time to everyone.

What we suggest is to have students submit periodically a single piece of freewriting that has been shared aloud to the class, elaborated

on, and expanded based on peer feedback. This might happen once a quarter or semester—with each student selecting a particularly generative freewriting passage for a teacher's focused feedback that combines a narrative response to the student's writing (e.g., “What I like most about this freewriting is *x*” or “The image of *y* and the description of *z* make me think about 1, 2, and 3”) and a simple grade of complete/ incomplete. In assessing freewriting, we want to consider the process rather than the product of writing, so assigning a letter grade or a percentage may be counterproductive. Alternative strategies for assessment might include the compilation of a freewriting journal where students collect significant freewriting passages across an academic year, prefaced by a reflective introduction. Again, in terms of feedback, we recommend that teachers respond in narrative format, talking about the ideas and the writing—its strengths, its imagery, and its limitations—without the burden of a grading scale. In other words, we recommend that teachers, instead of simply assessing freewriting, respond to the thinking aloud on paper.

### **CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF THREE MINUTES**

We began this article with a brief overview of freewriting—its origins in English Education as well as contemporary discussions about the potential benefits of “writing down the bones” as a springboard for textual analysis. Drawing from the tradition of writing-to-learn literature, we outlined broad principles for operationalizing freewriting with a literature curriculum followed by a set of strategies for sharing and responding to freewriting in ways that elevate it as a generative communicative activity for building context and making connections with the literature curriculum.

Interacting with the literature curriculum at the secondary level is a complex process that requires an understanding of the basics. However, an underemphasized “basic” is that engaging with the literature curriculum is an act of connecting. What we also know for sure is that freewriting in the English language classroom reframes interaction with the

literature curriculum as an exploratory, open-ended, communicative act of thinking aloud on paper and then sharing and responding to that thinking with others.

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