

Redefining Writing

My exploration – and exploration it has most certainly been – throughout this unit has been challenging, nebulous, and changing. Like any good exploration, I have followed what has seem to be the most profitable path at the time – and sometimes this has stood me in good stead, and sometimes it has not. But regardless, this journey has done what all good journeys do: it has broadened my horizons, challenged my preconceptions, and forced me to both clarify and re-evaluate what I think. This winding path has led me through several of the questions that our class set out to tackle. I began with the link between writing and the community. I wended my way through the muddy waters of how writing has traditionally been defined and thus taught, and touched on the way in which meaning in writing is created. And now, in the end, I find myself at the question, “How can we motivate our students to write?” It is only by undertaking the journey that I have that I believe I could have reached an answer to this – an answer which I now attempt to reproduce.

Let me start, as is logical, at the beginning: with what I thought first upon being asked these questions; with the beliefs that were stretched and moulded and refined. My initial impressions focused on the idea of writing as a collaborative process, of writing being something intimately and inherently linked to community and a sense thereof. Writing, I decided, has an inherent sense of “I want to say something to *someone*”; it’s speaking (in a broadly defined sense) not just to make noise, but to communicate; to say something *to* someone. It has a purpose. This idea prompted me to question: How does that purpose inform the process? How does the differing purpose of various forms of writing inform the sometimes differing processes we must use to create an end-product? And how does this sense of an audience when we write contribute to the idea that writing is collaborative? Now, at the end, I would like to clarify further: that the purpose is not merely to communicate *to* an audience. The purpose *is* the audience, and the audience is the purpose. To whom we write is why we write.

Various class members have raised the argument that there are types of writing that defy this: journal writing in particular. When we write in a private journal for no one else to read, they argue, there is no audience; the writing is private. I would argue, however, that all writing implies an audience – even if it is only yourself. It is this kind of writing that is involved in the

‘writing to learn’ movement: we write to learn what we think. Sometimes, we cannot know what we think until we see what we say, and journal writing, free writing, or whatever you like to call it, is a way to do this. We *are* writing to someone: we are writing to ourselves, to tell ourselves what we think and to unknot what things mean to us. It is important to know, though, that this kind of writing is as much a learned skill as any other kind. Now, after three years of seriously pursuing a career as a writer, free writing is one of my most important and frequently used tools; but it is something I had to *learn*. To write without censorship takes courage, and courage is learned through practice.

The idea that writing equals communicative purpose equals audience certainly supports the notion that writing is inherently linked to the community. But what of collaboration? Does this idea that we write for an audience implicitly support this notion of collaborativity? In some senses, yes. The collaboration may not occur in the physical act of writing – although with platforms such as wikis increasingly available this is becoming increasingly common – but according to reader response theory, it most certainly occurs in the creation and derivation of meaning for and from a text. We can never say everything we envisage when we create a text; inevitably some things will be left out. I suspect that at the core, this is the primary reason why writers *continue* to write, in fact: because no one story can ever tell it all. But a unique system is created because of this. Although the writer is the creator of the text, the reader is an equal participant in creating the meaning. It is they who fill in the gaps, collaborating in the writing process with the text-creator. Writing always has an audience, and it’s not until what is written is read that it fulfils its potential and a true meaning is discovered.

I asked the question, how does the purpose inform the process? I answer now: entirely. In creating a text, we are constantly making decisions about what to put in and what to leave out. These decisions may be based on our intuition regarding what sounds best, what is most necessary, and so forth – but fundamentally these decisions are based on our purpose. Why we write will determine what is most significant to include, and although I speak here of the deeper level of the meaning of the text, the principle is equally applicable to the structure and formatting: why we write, the audience we write for, will determine the format our writing will take, and the structure of our thoughts. When I am writing a science report I am conscious of the ‘noun’ my writing is supposed to create; I write an introduction, a section on

methods, I give the results and provide a discussion or conclusion as to their significance. My language is formal and my thoughts objectified. When I write a novel, on the other hand, my language is gentler, lyrical, poetic; the story is subjective, told through an invented consciousness – and because my purpose is to tell a story, the resultant writing-noun is completely different.

Our students are not unaware of this. A plethora of studies have appeared in the last few years expressing concern over a perceived interference between students' increased social writing and their academic writing (see Thompson 2009). The concern is that all this social writing – which other studies show to be increasing the volume of writing students undertake beyond any previous level – and its associated forms of language – text speak, lolkat, etc – will make students illiterate in the academic diction, and unable to write a formal essay. Clive Thompson (2009) disagrees, and so do I. The advent of online social networking is doing amazing things to people's willingness and inclination to write. People who self-professedly hate writing will sit and type out thousands upon thousands of words to friends, families, and the internet void in an attempt to be connected to other people; connected to people, communicating to people, writing to communicate, writing for an audience, the audience is the purpose... Thompson argues that students today are more aware than ever of their audience, because in the ruthless world of the internet where anyone can speak, only those who have something of value to say and treat their audience with respect will be heard (see Zemanta 2009). Our students know to whom they are speaking. Our job is to provide the why. This being the case, is it not logical to expose them to the different purposes of disciplinary texts? Doesn't it make sense to challenge them, to extend them further, to make assessment relevant by showing them that it is not for 'the teacher' that they write, but for the teacher in a certain context, for the audience of a particular content, within the standards of a certain discipline?

But it's not enough to simply tell them who they're writing to. Even a purpose, on its own, is not sufficient. Just as writing cannot be taught if it is conceived of only as a noun, an end product, a thing static and not interactional, so the process needs to be more than simply an end point. We must demonstrate to our students *how* we write, in the verb, the process,

the doing. I decided early on that this was how writing ought to be taught. Traditional definitions of writing lead to a traditional approach to teaching. If writing is confined to only the words on the page, the final result, the polished product, then naturally this is all that will be taught. But I hope I have demonstrated by now that there is far more to 'writing' than this. Writing is something we *do*; it is a verb, and it is that process of verbing that I believe teachers should focus on. It's been my focus for a few years now, since I *am* a writer – and in being a writer, I've learned best not by analysing the end product, by looking at writing-the-noun (although that too has been necessary), but by examining my writing *practices* – by analysing what it is I *do* when I sit down to write, to create: to *make* writing-the-noun.

What is it, then, that I do? What *is* this process called writing? While a large part of this is discipline specific and thus should be taught by the individual classroom teachers – science teachers, for example, demonstrate to your students the *act* of writing a science report; show them how you begin, where you research, what you decide to keep and focus on and *then* how you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard – a large part of writing is also the same wherever you go. Fundamentally, I believe, there are two aspects of writing. Renee touched on this in the week fourteen tutorial when she said that she realised that she was a maker, and that you can make writing, too. Our brains are divided into two spheres (for an interesting video demonstrating this, see ctshad 2008), and we each contain two very different ways of thinking. The first step to any writing is to call into play what has been fondly termed throughout the centuries 'The Muse'; that source of subconscious inspiration that defies logic and rationality and boundaries. This is free writing; this is where we learn about what we think by seeing what we say when we're not censoring; by listening to who we are when the lights are out and the microphones off. The second step is to call in the 'Inner Editor'; our conscious, rational brain who knows not to dangle participles, end with a preposition, confuse tenses, misspell words, confuse concepts and muddy the waters of logic – in short, who knows how to polish the rough gems that our subconscious provides. To be a writer, you must not only know how to use both parts of your brain, but also be able to control them: to call them into play each at the appropriate time, and to hush them when they're not required.

In the end, my core question has been here all along: How can we enthuse people about this wonderful, creative act that we call writing? We can do it by revealing the true nature of that which we're attempting to teach, by demonstrating that the sole purpose of writing is not the creation of a finished, standardised end product, but to journey, and through that journey to communicate new thoughts, new ideas, both to our selves and our external audiences. The purpose of writing is to challenge how we think, to explore our own subconscious, to create with absolute abandon. When people, students, realise that *this* is what it means to write – how can they fail to appreciate it? When they understand that the fundamental purpose is to communicate not the right answer, not the correct format, but *themselves*, they cannot fail to take ownership and make it theirs – because that is what writing is: it is ours. It is mine, it is me – and it is us.

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