

Drawing on Writing in Studio Art

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For the past several years I have been assigning short written papers in some of my studio art classes. The papers were to be personal reactions, for the most part, to videos shown in class that dealt with various artists apropos to each class. Assigning written papers in a studio art class was moving into new territory virtually never attempted before. Certainly it was not common practice for any studio art instructor to demand anything written other than a student's signature on a finished drawing.

Yet I felt I must have some feedback from the students about what they were watching. So in order to discourage napping, lurching, math home working, etc., during the showings of the videos, I began to require short "reports" sometimes written immediately after viewing. My

students' attention spans bloated marvelously after that.

The papers were factual and mostly parroted the narrative dialogues. I spent my time correcting spelling, grammar and an occasional misquoting of facts. I then tried to encourage the students to reveal their personal feelings about the art works, the paintings, the sculptures, etc. It was OK, I suggested, to just write about one art work for the required paper. They didn't have to go on about trivial facts and incidentals or about numerous unidentified art works. This of course is what I would have appreciated the most, but it was difficult for most of my students. Their backgrounds were just not extensive enough in the visual arts to form opinions or to be critical of what they saw in the videos. Most students spoke in the superlative: "That was the greatest painting in the U.S.!" or "He was the greatest

painter of our time."

I knew I had to continue to require papers based on the videos. The students paid much better attention to the videos when papers were required than when they were not required. But I had to find a way that would make the papers more interesting not just for me to read, but for the students to write as well. Today in art, many traditional categories of expression have blurred boundaries between them. Painting may contain elements of sculpture or even sound, and so forth. Some categories of the visual arts may even contain the written word, ironic statements that border on or are indeed poetry. Though I never thought papers written after viewing videos would be the cutting edge of artistic expression, it did occur to me that encouraging the students to be creative in their

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What Makes Writing Difficult?

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I've long held hunches about the answers students would give to this question. This semester I have been asking the question directly as I've addressed various audiences: the students in my English 112 class, students in the College Success and TE 100 courses for whom I have been giving presentations, and students I've worked with in the Writing Center. Their responses have generated a Top Ten list of issues which most trouble SVSU students. Not every student will have difficulty with all ten, and the ranking of difficulty

may vary from student to student. But if identifying a problem is the first step toward solving it, then this list can be of value to all of us who are working to develop student writing ability.

The aspects of writing which SVSU students most often find difficult are these:

1. **Maintaining clarity and completeness of expression:** "I know what I mean but I don't know how to say it." Every writer struggles with this issue; inexperienced writers without a repertoire of writing strategies may feel overwhelmed by the disparity between what they would like to be

able to say and what they are actually able to produce on paper.

2. **Getting started and finding a topic.** One student observed that "gathering the info and writing the paper would be really easy if somebody just gave me a topic." Students recognize that it's difficult to write well unless they are engaged with the topic. But often they don't know how to find a topic that is relevant or that fits the scope of the assignment. Often their instincts dictate that bigger must be better, and they find themselves overpowered by the amount of information that must be weighed when

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Literacy Autobiographies

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I'm eight or nine years down the road from my initial interest in "literacy autobiographies." When I taught at Northern Illinois University in the College of Education's reading skills course 1990-91, a literacy autobiography was the first assignment of the semester. Students were asked to tell their stories of acquiring reading, writing, and spoken literacies as a means to understanding their role as students. I remember thinking that the term was "high falutin'" language for narrative, but nonetheless "literacy autobiography" does describe the kind of writing students were asked to do. It was about that time, too, that I read Mike Rose's literacy autobiography, *Lives on the Boundary*, a text that showed me what a literacy autobiography could be. It taught me, too, that the activity of telling our history with literacy was valid for professional academics, that it wasn't just a task for fledgling writers.

Since then, I have read other books that function as literacy autobiographies: Richard Rodriguez's *The Hunger for Memory*, Malcolm X's autobiography, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. I have begun to see that in many of the professional articles that I read and value, the writers spend time discussing their early literacies: Lynn Z. Bloom, in "Teaching my Class," emphasizes her story of teaching neighborhood children when she was a child; Linda Brodkey, in "Writing on the Bias," tells us that she came from the Quad cities of Illinois, from a household with scarcely any books, and speaks of trips to the library to supplement that lack. But more than this, books and articles that are not essentially about literacy acquisition become literacy stories for me. Acts of reading, acts of writing now stand out in relief to the central plot—characters with newspapers or readerly habits take on a new meaning; documents are foregrounded, brought in from the margins.

And so it seems that I have come

back home to literacy autobiographies; I've been asking students in freshman composition to write these papers for two years now. I've also been asking my students in the Gender in Literature class to write their Gender Autobiographies, another variation of the literacy stories. I began asking students to write literacy autobiographies once more as a part of the English 111, Composition CSC (College Success Course) because I thought it was critical to the course to have students assess their backgrounds in education. They've been at it for twelve years or more when they come into our composition sequence, and they have plenty to reflect on and draw from. Last year I saw some particularly impressive stories: students who felt they needed to represent their entire ethnic group for their high school classes; students who learned that family trauma interrupted their own literacy growth; students who understood that the assignment made the student the "subject of his or her education." That, I think, was a truly breakthrough moment: the student saw that he was the subject of his own personal literacy, when his previous research papers had focused on Other subjects. The student discovered that "I'm the subject of my own literacy" in the larger sense, an insight shared with the whole composition class.

Students are learning similar things this year in English 111, but we are doing things somewhat differently this semester. We have read *The Color Purple* and have watched the movie made from the novel in order to contextualize our conversation about literacy. The assignment asks students to "tell the story of your own literacy, or to tell a small corner of that story. Roughly defined, a literacy autobiography is a story that focuses on issues of language learning. In its broadest sense, it is a story about an experience in learning to read, write, and speak."

The assignment is elaborated in the following way:

Your work is to draft a paper in

which you select and tell a literacy autobiography of your own. I've written similar texts in which I tell about classroom moments that illustrate something about my journey to literacy. Sometimes teachers figure into the stories—portraits of teachers or dialogue with teachers or incidents with teachers. Sometimes family members come into literacy stories—competitions with siblings, expectations from parents. Sometimes non-school spaces become the places where literacy happens—tutoring situations, work environments, or other locations may be where literacy happens. Sometimes the media function as our teachers: consider that there are many who say that "Oprah" is our real teacher or that Disney instructs us in profound ways.

After giving out the assignment sheet, the class does some intensive brainstorming to see what might be appropriate to this assignment. After working in small groups to elicit stories, students begin thinking of things that happened in their education: "Book It" programs for reading, competitions (lots of those), scenes of reading with parents, grandparents, involvement with tutoring children younger than themselves, etc. The assignment makes room for all manner of literacy development; it allows for safe, predictable papers, and it also allows for some real evaluative and reflective work to be done. This semester, I've had students become indignant because their high schools' approach to literacy was to pass students: "It was all **cake**," the student wrote. Other students reassessed their high school experiences and re-valued those educational moments. One particular student recalled having read a novel and then having recreated in costume that particular historical period. Students tell stories of private school experiences, public school moments, good teachers, bad teachers, good placement, bad placement, educational triumphs and failures.

The twist this year is that I am asking students to assess, after they

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writing might make for more interesting papers to read.

Therefore the first new written assignment in a combined beginning and advanced painting class was to be a one-act play based on three differently influential artists of the 20th century: Thomas Hart Benton, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol. The play was to be set in a New York bar at a time when all of the characters' lives overlapped. The play was to be

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constructing a paper.

3. **Maintaining focus and achieving coherence.** How hard it is for students to discard the irrelevant or unsuccessful words and ideas and sentences they have so laboriously wrought! Some students fear that if they take apart a paper that is poorly organized, they might not be able to get the pieces back together again. And the effort required just to find language to express complex ideas may make student writers unwilling or unable even to consider what readers need to understand their texts.

4. **Constructing appropriate introductions and conclusions.** Students struggle with introductions and conclusions for several reasons. They may have learned only one or two basic strategies (I recently read one lengthy introductory paragraph composed entirely of rhetorical questions). And even when students have learned varied strategies, they may not understand what type of introduction or conclusion is appropriate for what type of paper. A case study will require a different opening than a position paper, but students may not have a clear sense of what those differences are. And though a summary may provide closure for a piece of writing, it may lack the final impact the writer intended to achieve.

5. **Creating interest in the reader.** Writers want their ideas to be taken seriously; they recognize that a reader who is bored is unlikely to do that.

based entirely on information observed and heard in the three videos, though I did not discourage students from seeking more information. Predictably, some of the papers were factual and parroted the video's narrative. Only now, the main characters were doing the parroting.

However, some of the papers were truly creative, as if a veil had been lifted from the eyes of these students. They didn't just capture the ambience of a New York bar; some plays created the booze-filled banter of these artists as much as one

But inexperienced writers may lack sound strategies to engage reader involvement, filling a paper with generalizations but omitting the details, examples, and specifics which bring a paper to life.

6. **Maintaining correctness.** Anyone who works with novice writers is likely to be frustrated with the number of distracting errors. There may be any number of reasons for the errors. Certainly carelessness is one reason. But there are others. Analysis of student errors often reveals a pattern; 70-80% of a student's errors may actually be the same error repeated numerous times. A student who confuses plurals and possessives will likely handle them incorrectly every time, unless the student learns to recognize the difference and changes the way he or she thinks. Research further shows that student errors may actually increase when students face more difficult writing tasks; it is as if the complexity of the new writing task temporarily shuts down their control over grammatical structures.

7. **Documenting and using source material.** When first they begin to integrate sources, students with limited experience in writing often create a kind of "encyclopedia pastiche," with plagiarized passages and numerous errors in documentation formats. Few will have been exposed to APA or any formats other than MLA prior to college writing.

8. **Creating an academic voice.** This is my term; students are likely to describe this as "keeping control of

could imagine.

I emphasized that the artists eventually had to get down to talking about art, theirs and their companions' or art in general as well. What I read was not just quotations by the artists in the videos, but the students' personal reactions to the artistic styles interwoven into the paraphrased narrative. I got several favorable comments about this assignment from my students after these papers were handed in for grading. That was a first for the writing assignments. ●

my paper." This problem is related to the use of source material. Often a student's own voice is lost when he or she begins to integrate research. The paper may become little more than a collage of research-based quotations, paraphrases and summaries, from which the writer's purpose and persona have completely disappeared.

9. **Maintaining conventions in the disciplines.** This is perhaps one of the most perplexing problems for students, especially those whose mental model of writing is "one size fits all." One student observed that she "didn't even realize these kinds of things existed." Most instructors have spent years learning the conventions of their disciplines; these have become almost automatic. But for students these expectations are often completely invisible. If, for example, students have been drilled in the use of active voice verbs, the passive constructions in a formal science report will feel foreign and "wrong." And though they may recognize that a business memo is quite different from an engineering report, they may not be able to identify what those differences are, or why they exist.

10. **Believing writers are born, not made.** Students for whom writing is difficult often shrug and say, "I'm not a good writer," suggesting that their current state will remain forever true, and thus must be accepted. Even when I point out that not a single writer was born knowing how to write, they still believe that writing must be less difficult for others than it

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“Ten Strategies for Designing Critical Thinking Tasks”

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English Department

Think with me for a moment of the teacher's role as that of coach or guide in a course, then consider the stimulating task of designing critical thinking assignments. I believe we have the task of leading our students in active learning to use the course concepts to confront problems, gather and analyze data, prepare hypotheses, and formulate arguments. From Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, I've summarized a list of five strategies and examples for designing critical thinking into course work as exploratory writing, as micro-themes, as study group projects, as questions for in-class discussions, and as small group tasks (although this list is far from exhaustive).

1. Tasks Linking Course Concepts to Students' Personal Experience or Previously Existing Knowledge

Before a problem or concept is introduced formally in class or readings, consider awaking a student's interest by connecting the concept to personal experiences. Cognitive research has shown the learner will link the concept to previously known material and explore how this is similar to and different from what the learner already knows. The more this new information is linked to what the learner knows, the easier it is to learn:

Describe times in your own life when you have experienced role strain and role conflict. What are the key differences between these terms, and why is the distinction useful? (Sociology)

Think of examples out of your own personal experience to illustrate the uses of vector algebra. You might consider such experiences as swimming in a river with a steady current, walking across the deck of a moving boat, crossing the wake while water-skiing, cutting diagonally across a vacant lot while friends walk around the lot. Use one or more of these experiences to explain to a friend what vector algebra is all about. Use both words and diagrams. (Mathematics)

2. Explanation of Course Concepts to New Learners

To ask students to explain course concepts to a new learner is one of the easiest ways to design critical thinking tasks because the student is empowered as the teacher and encouraged to search for ways to explain the concept to this "new learner." As the role of "expert" (at least the student knows more than the "new learner"), this task helps the student escape the student-to-examiner role that many writers find paralyzing:

Explain to your Aunt Jean why water stays in a pail when swung in a vertical circle around your head. (Physics)

Using easy-to-understand language, explain to a new diabetic what is meant by the glycemic index of foods and why knowing about the glycemic index will help the diabetic maintain good blood sugar levels. (Nursing/nutrition science)

Explain to another student how reflective writing could or doesn't need to include components of argument, description, example, and comparison contrast writing. (English Composition)

3. Thesis Support Assignments

By giving students thesis-governed writing using a controversial issue to support or attack, the student discovers knowledge as tentative and in-process where divergent interpretations of reality compete for allegiance. The critical thinking skills required for a practice exam, a short essay assignment, or a collaborative learning exercise demand the writer attend to opposing views while gathering evidence in support of the view. Groups could be asked to gather evidence for a "believing and doubting" exploratory task, then asked to develop an argument for and against the thesis.

People suffering from schizophrenia or manic-depressive disorder should/should not be forced to take their medication. (Nursing/medical ethics)

After all of Hamlet's shilly-shallying, Fortinbras is just what Denmark needs. Support or attack.

(Literature)

Read the accompanying handout on how historians evaluate the credibility and reliability of primary documents. Based on the criteria set forth in the handout, determine whether Pericles's Funeral Oration is/is not reliable evidence. (History)

4. Problem-Posing Arguments

With this strategy, the teacher gives the students the question, which they have to try to answer through thesis-governed writing or to contemplate through exploratory writing or small group problem solving specifying an audience.

An hourglass is being weighed on a sensitive balance, first when sand is dropping in a steady stream from the upper to lower part and then again when the upper part is empty. Are the two weights the same or not? Write an explanation supporting your answer to this question to a fellow student who is arguing for what you think is the wrong answer. (Physics)

As part of the communications arm of a local hospital, you are asked to create brochures posted to their homepage to explain the kinds of care available to patients in Central Michigan. Write an explanation of the kinds of information and ways you would organize the information so you would educate the largest population of people. (Nursing/writing)

5. Frame Assignments

These assignments look similar to the old dance lessons where the instructor pasted the footsteps on the floor. This assignment has a topic sentence and an organizational frame that students flesh out with supporting evidence and appropriate generalizations. Students report learning a lot about organizational strategies and they see how structure can stimulate ideas and arguments to fill the open slots of the frame.

In the last act of Hamlet, Hamlet seems to have changed in several ways. First, Hamlet (development) ...Second, Hamlet (development) ...Third,...Fourth,etc. (Literature)

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is for them. Unless they see writing as something they can learn to do more successfully, they may give up and accept the poor grades—and future career limitations—imposed by their attitudes.

What is the point of creating this list? I find it helps me in several ways.

When I read a particularly frustrating piece, I may be tempted to transfer that frustration to the student, assuming that he or she should have been able to do a better job. My assumption may be correct. But I need to remind myself that few students choose to be underprepared. If their writing background is limited, they may indeed not have had experience with many of the complex kinds of tasks I expect them to complete. They are more likely to be successful when I

- explain the process for developing this type of paper;
- provide models for the paper, for appropriate introductions or conclusions or headings or graphics or transitions;
- make explicit the conventions of the assigned genre or type of writing;
- anticipate some of the difficulties identified above and “head them off” when I introduce the assignment, perhaps by taking a few minutes to brain storm topics, then narrowing and focusing a few examples in class; or by pointing students to citation formats; or by suggesting potential authoritative sources; or by referring them to a handbook or tutor to re-program their use of plural and possessive forms.

The list also helps me remember that when novices face unfamiliar challenges, their first recourse is to fall back on

Strategies

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To solve the problem of homelessness in America, we must realize that not all homeless fit into the same category. In fact, we ought to specify X categories of homeless. First, (development)... Second, (development)...

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produce a first draft, the impact of race, gender, or class on their literacy stories. After initial resistance to race, gender, or class having impact on their literacies, students are astounded to find that many times race, gender, or class issues are written all over their papers, and the new reading leads to some substantive revision of their papers. Looking at their own writing through a new perspective allows students to reassess their writing and their literacy; it also allows them to write more and to write more critically.

It seems to me that this assignment is more than just an assignment for an English class. I have already extended the range of the literacy autobiography to the Gender in Literature class, a general education course. It strikes me

tried and true strategies they have used in the past (like the plot summary or “encyclopedia pastiche” which may have been acceptable in previous settings). If I want them to develop new rhetorical strategies, I must teach them.

I also structure assignments with peer review so that revision must occur; many writing problems arise when students haven’t learned to revise. If they subscribe to the “writers are born” philosophy, students will need to develop both the attitude and the strategies that can move them toward greater proficiency. Students may have a writing process which moves from first draft to spell check to handing in the assignment. They may not understand the full range of revising: adding, deleting, reordering, rewriting. They may not recognize that a first draft is writer-based, a writer’s first attempt to spill out his or her ideas, to have something to work with. If they want to move to reader-based prose, writing developed for the understanding of the reader, they will need to revise, paying attention first to global issues such as focus, coherence, development, clarity, then to local issues such as sentence structure, transitions, word choice, and the like. Then, when they have finished revising, they will need to edit for grammar and mechanics and, finally, proofread. If I permit students to submit first drafts as finished papers, both the students and I are likely to end up frustrated.

What should be a teacher’s role in confronting student writing difficulties? When I asked my students for feedback on a draft of this article, one student was quite explicit: our role must be to “help [our] students to achieve their academic goals.” Perhaps this role can best be summed up in the words of Malkin Dare, of the Organization for Quality Education, Ontario: “Students tend to get better at things when they are shown how to do them and get a chance to practice what they have been taught.” ●

Third,...Fourth, etc. (Sociology)

Work Cited

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey, 1996. 121-32. ●

that it is possible for teachers in many disciplines to take the basic assignment and retool it for their own content and course goals. Literacy autobiography is a natural for courses in the College of Education, and I would guess that it is a common assignment in that school. I often talk of multiple literacies, literacies that are acquired and taught outside of the traditional classroom—social literacies, geographic literacies, media literacies. And students come to us with many of these literacies in place. I can envision those who teach music, instrumentation, or music theory asking students to write their “Music Autobiography” in which they tell of their first time inscribing a treble clef or their first time at a concert, etc. I can imagine math teachers assigning a “Math Literacy Autobiography” in which students discuss their early

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moments with math concepts, or flash cards, or factoring binomials (or not being able to...). I can imagine an art teacher making use of a similar assignment in which those early moments with drawing, sidewalk chalk, or a first trip to an art museum become the focus of the paper. I can see the literacy autobiography extend out to most all fields, in the ways that writing in the disciplines should.

I suggest that many of us teaching in various fields would find value in asking students to do literacy autobiographies for a number of reasons. First, for purely pragmatic reasons, such a paper would be a place to assess how well students handle the basics of written communication; second, students would make clear where they are with the particular literacies to be developed in that course—teachers would know where students have been and what sorts of experiences they had had; third, the assignment validates the student as a learner, one who has had backgrounds that we might not have been able to assess; fourth, and maybe most important, the literacy autobiography is an opportunity for students to write and reflect on their own roles as students and learners. It might be profitable for us to write our own histories of literacy; it strikes me that this article may be a piece of my own literacy autobiography—telling myself what I value about literacy. It's an important way to pay critical attention to the work we do with students; it's a way to pay critical attention to their intellectual growth and our role in that process. ●

the SVSU **Literacy Link**

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Printed by

Saginaw Valley State University
Graphics Center

The SVSU *Literacy Link* is published two times per year. If you are interested in submitting an article, please contact Jim Geistman at ext. 4156 or Lynne Graft at ext. 4030, or mail your contribution to SVSU Department of English, 7400 Bay Road, Science 354, University Center, MI 48710. The *Literacy Link* e-mail address in hjg@tardis.svsu.edu or lrgraft@tardis.svsu.edu

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