literacy link

Winter 2013

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Literacy Link
Winter 2013
Where Do You Write?

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The answer to that question is just as important as figuring out why we write. When we placed the call for essays addressing "Writing Spaces," we weren't entirely sure what the responses might look like.

Like any good Call for Papers, "Writing Spaces" can be taken several ways. Most obviously, it can refer to the physical locations in which we perform our writing. Right now, we are in our offices. A student has just entered Emily's office and he is sick. He'll miss class today, but Emily is trying to arm him with the information he'll need to succeed next week. Jason's space for writing is being influenced by the energy and activity that is always buzzing on Third Floor Brown. The coffee is fresh, too, and that always helps.

As writers, we are products of our environments. The previous paragraph doesn't happen if this computer is situated elsewhere. But our environments are equally impacted by our lives as writers. Writing can shape the activities that occur in the spaces around us—to create change, to generate new knowledge, to shape the world.

Just now, Emily called to Jason from across the hall. We do that a lot on Third Floor Brown. It improves our space, improves our teaching, and improves our writing.

The essays in this issue of Literacy Link each address "Writing Spaces" in a unique way, but what they have in common is an understanding that as the world pushes against us, we write in response. Then our writing pushes back.

--E & J

THE "PRACTICE" OF WRITING: UNLIKELY WRITING SPACES FOR "UNLIKELY" WRITERS

At a recent faculty meeting, the professors and instructors in the Department of Social Work looked wearily at each other and asked, "Why aren't our students better writers?" It is not the first time we broached the issue. In the thick, murky silence that followed, we all strained to hear the answer. What could have emerged was what students often tell us: "Because we don't need to write well to practice social work!" Fortunately, we did not accept that answer. In fact, in response to this question, two of our newest faculty members created an on-line APA module that teaches and tests our students' knowledge of APA style and format. It will be piloted this semester with the ultimate goal of making completion of the module a requirement for the program.

That evening, I thought about how my fellow colleagues took a stand on what I personally believe to be a vital issue in education today—what appear to be the declining standards of writing among our majors. Then came the doubts. As an academic in a professional-based program training students to first and foremost become professional social workers, I sometimes question the need to emphasize writing in our courses to the extent that we do. The principal educational objective of the social work program, according to our website, is to prepare students for beginning generalist social work practice.Why do our students, some of whom will never go beyond the Bachelor's degree, have to know the "ins and outs" of APA? Will knowing how to "cite a source" make them better practitioners? Will understanding how to create a well-formatted reference page help them do what they do best—be advocates for the most vulnerable of our society?

If I was truly honest with myself, I would have to answer "No" to both of these questions. I know that firsthand. Some of the best practitioners in my classroom in the past 6 years have been some of my poorest writers (and vice-versa). So why do I still hold on to the hope and belief that students in our program should graduate as writers who make us academics proud? I have two answers to that question that I would like to explore in this essay. First, there is the obvious answer: To be an effective social worker one must be an effective writer. There is also a less obvious and perhaps more provocative answer: The practice of writing makes one a better practitioner.

First, writing is part and parcel with identifying as a competent social worker. Others have written more profoundly than I about this topic, and some of their ideas warrant repeating. I believe our students should leave our program with the understanding that writing is a skill equal to the other more interpersonal tasks of social work. A member of the Commission on Social Work Practice, a subcommittee of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) commented, "If you cannot write it competently and accurately, it did not happen, either for the client or the agency" (Weisman & Zornado, 2013, p. x).

This example might sound extreme, but it gets at the very heart of our profession's mission. According to the National Association of

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Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics, "the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people" (NASW, 2008). This essential purpose cannot occur without effectively communicating our insights to others, both verbally and in writing. One of the topics that we emphasize in our beginning interviewing class, for example, is writing progress notes. As with many forms of writing, there is an art to successful documentation. Certainly, if my word choices are biased or judgmental of the client, I am not doing anything to "enhance his/her well-being." Furthermore, proper service documentation is critical in the field to ensure that the client's situation is correctly assessed and understood (Sidell & Smiley, 2008). In short, if our students cannot communicate effectively the needs of a consumer, how can appropriate planning and intervention for him/her take place?

There is, of course, a more integral need for effective writing in the helping professions. Writing is a component of risk management (Reamer, 2005). Risk management is about protecting clients, agencies, and social workers with regard to potential and actual cases of complaints or litigation (Weisman & Zornado,

2013). If our students learn that their choice of words—how they write about a client—has everything to do with his/her safety, whether that means from a judge who will put her in jail or a referring practitioner who may impose the wrong intervention—the realities of risk management become clear.

For our more macro-oriented students, writing becomes even more instrumental as a tool for effectiveness and efficiency. In this day and age of increased accountability to funders and governing bodies, it is incumbent upon social work practitioners to justify their services in clear, "research-sound" ways. At times students will try to convince me that because they have no aspirations of being an administrator, writing won't apply to them. I gently remind them that all practitioners, from the intern to the CEO, should be able to justify why they do what they do. In this sense, line worker reports to supervisors are just as important as agency reports to funders. Effective writing is key to the narrative of evaluation at whatever level.

Putting aside the practical for a moment, I'd like to make a more philosophical argument as to why students in practice-oriented degree programs should claim writing as a valuable skill. First, good writing enhances critical thinking and critical thinking enhances the practice of social work. The Council on Social Work Education, our accreditation body, reinforces this link. One of its published standards, which all schools of social work are held to, is "to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments" (CSWE, 2010). It is no accident that the terms "critical thinking" and "communicate" reside in the same sentence. Critical thinking requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information. For example, we teach our students what not to include in a progress note as much as what to include so as to best

represent their clients to a court or government system. That decision has more to do with simply words on a page. It might impact the very well-being of the client.

Second, we teach our students to identify as professionals in the field. We emphasize the need for our students to pay attention to professional dress and behavior, for example, in their senior-year internships. It is no huge leap to suggest that writing is part of that professional identity. Students who use poor grammar or sloppy mechanics in their writing should be akin to those who violate the dress code or show up late to work. Shouldn't "professional" refer to all forms of behavior, both written and spoken?

Finally, students in field-oriented programs are expected to be held accountable for their work. Here I think about an assignment I give in my Research skills course—the Evidence-Based Practice presentation. Students in groups are required to determine a relevant intervention for an assigned case study that has the support of evidence in the literature. The process of gathering the research "data," (possible interventions that have been tried and tested on client populations), critically appraising these interventions to decide which one best applies, and writing a literature review that justifies that decision are valuable skills that bridge the chasm between the world of practice and research writing. My hope is that students leave the class recognizing that responsible social work practice is inimitably linked to the writing process. At the very least, I hope they realize that the logic and discernment a practitioner has to use in choosing an appropriate intervention are akin to the critical faculties needed for writing.

Justifying to our students why they should view writing as a valuable social work skill, as I attempt to do above, is no easy "sell." However, my hope is that our department can forge a serious conversation with students that frames writing as a professional skill for career and life. Writing for a profession like social work or nursing or occupational therapy is much more than simple mastery of technical language. It requires critical thinking, reasoned judgment, "out-of-the-box" thinking, and, most of all, time and patience. Aren't these skills that our students' clients deserve, after all? Perhaps the practice of writing is practice.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The editors of Literacy Link invite members of the campus community to submit articles for the Fall 2013 issue. Articles should be related to the theme, "Composing Communities." Articles may address a variety of literacy practices including such topics as issues, strategies, activities, research, critical thinking, writing across the curriculum, or book reviews.

Literacy Link is a campus publication that began in the winter of 1992 with the support of Dr. Robert Yien and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Founding editors Sally Cannon and Jenny Senft, in the first issue of Literacy Link, focused on three key areas of literacy: writing, reading, and thinking. Over the years, individuals from departments across campus have added to the conversation.
Articles for Literacy Link should run 500 to 1,500 words in length. Authors should follow either MLA or APA format.

Please submit articles to:
SVSU Department of English
Literacy Link
Emily J. Beard and Jason Kahler, Editors
7400 Bay Road Brown 326 University Center, MI 48710-0001

Submission deadline for the Fall 2013 issue is October 11, 2013.

For more information about Literacy Link, visit www.svsu.edu/literacylink

"WRITING TO GET THINGS DONE" – STORIES FROM RPW 300

Responding to student requests in the mid 1990s, English Professor Emerita Kay Harley took the lead when ENGL 300 was changed from Advanced Composition to Writing in the Professions. Influenced by James Britton's concept of transactional writing, she became intrigued by the phrase "writing to get things done." Harley and the other developers of Writing in the Professions, including English faculty Phyllis Hastings, Leslie Whittaker, and Gary Thompson, recognized that using the power of writing to effect positive change in a business environment would be more valuable to many students than would a generic course in composition. When the Department of Rhetoric and Professional Writing was spun off from the English Department in 2010, ENGL 300 went with it, re-christened RPW 300.

In the effort to make the new course a meaningful addition to the curriculum, Harley and her colleagues developed the approach used in my class Fall 2012 class: each student would select and implement a single semester-long project, using many different forms of professional writing. Students wrote their own résumés, various forms of business correspondence, exploratory essays, portfolio plans, meeting notes, questionnaires and surveys, and annotated bibliographies, on the way to developing sets of customized deliverables for their real-life clients. The organizations served by these projects included non-profit groups, small businesses, and SVSU programs. Each set of findings or recommendations was based on academic research, a literature review, and assessment of best practices in the relevant field.

When I introduced the concept of the master project in September, most students frowned in confusion or developed the sudden onset of clammy hands. Someone asked, "Do you mean we will write our letter of inquiry to a real person?" However, over the next three months, the projects became not only possible in the minds of the students, but feasible, and finally actual. I asked students to keep a weekly journal, not limited to thoughts about their RPW course, but focused on an awareness of the act of writing itself as a form of problem-solving, noticing the way that writing influences thought.

Many students were inspired by looking back on their own experiences: How could a high school better prepare students for university life and learning? How can I strengthen voluntarism among employees in my workplace? Some students were inspired by altruism: How can I help a local volunteer fire department receive greater financial and volunteer support from the community? How can I help a literacy council gain resources for teaching adults to read?

Quite a few students ran into roadblocks getting the green light for their projects. One individual had a rough time getting in touch with her potential client, as the result of poor internal communications within the target

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agency. One student received the go-ahead, but with additional information decided that the challenge was too meager and changed course. Some students' proposals were accepted but then stalled by the difficulty of scheduling meetings with decision-makers. But I welcomed all these obstacles. My goal was to approximate the world of work as closely as possible for the students; and certainly it is not unusual to encounter delays, frustrations, reversals, and mix-ups when trying to get things done at work.

Other students met ready acceptance and enthusiasm from their clients. Rather than stand in the parking lot after work or class and complain to friends, these students developed proposals to improve specific conditions or processes based on their familiarity with an organization, program, or business. Without exception, employers, SVSU programs, and organizations (eventually) said yes. No student needed the backup plan that I was willing to make available in case nothing panned out. There was no danger of plagiarism in this class. Each project was so specific and topical that there was no availability of papers to copy. How could a student plagiarize his own résumé, a set of questions for specific panelists, or the design of an improved system for managing the fields of a local 120-acre farm?

Because I wanted students to choose their projects based on some affiliation, cause or purpose that they cared about, I did not insist that their client come from the non-profit sector. I referred to "master projects" more often than "service-learning projects" because some students chose to benefit a small business rather than a charitable organization or a disadvantaged group. Upon the premise that a rising tide lifts all boats, it can be argued that improving the profitability of a small business benefits its community. Some students selected an SVSU-related project, working with, *inter alia,* improving student-campus book store communications, broadening intramural sports opportunities, and expanding the social media presence of the admissions office.

I tried other approaches to help the class make the connection between RPW 300 and having a compelling presence in their eventual workplaces. One of the most successful from the students' standpoint was the time we spent listening to a panel of five professionals, representing the corporate world, alternative energy, entrepreneurship, nursing, and education. All of our panelists attributed a portion of their success in the workplace to their mastery of professional writing. Based on the panelists' biographical sketches, the students had developed a questionnaire for them a few weeks earlier; and afterwards, each student wrote a set of meeting notes, in many cases citing verbatim quotations from panelists who had made particularly deep impressions. Students suggested holding the panel earlier in the term because listening to the panelists was so inspiring. As a result, my Winter 2013 class will hear their panel about midway through the term.

One of the qualities of Generation Y has been described, by Canadian digital entrepreneur Tod Maffin among others, as a search for meaning. Daniel Pink, in *A Whole New Mind,* names the sense of meaning as one of the signal capabilities of right brain thinking. In Thomas Friedman's The World Is Flat, the author opines, in effect, that a cat may look at a king. In Remix, an argument for free access to certain forms of intellectual property, especially in the wired world, Lawrence Lessig opens the way for imaginative appropriation of the work or thought of others, properly credited, in online community spaces. In combination, these three concepts (the search

for meaning, a flattened world, and free access to certain intellectual property) mean that undergraduates may propose and accomplish with relatively few resources outside their own ingenuity and work effort a study leading to recommendations for an improved process or the solution to a real-world problem. For some of my students, the problem was identified by the client, as when the owner of a Christmas tree farm asked his student employee how the business might improve worker training. In some cases, the initiative lay with the student, as when a member of my class offered to study retention of participants in the SVSU Honors program.

Teaching RPW 300 has challenged me as an instructor. I have needed to guide students to right-size their projects, overcome roadblocks, and follow through (even after the end of the semester). The most important element of this approach to teaching is preparing students to think about how to be of real service to their partner organizations, which deserve no less than a set of usable recommendations based on research and analysis that make the findings valid.

Asked for her reflections about the course today, in SVSU's 50th year, Harley observes that "courses need to evolve with the times." She reflects that in RPW 300 "we shifted to use of word processors fairly early; we need now to accommodate other digital forms of communication;" while the course's "basic principles of purpose, audience, and form remain the central principles grounded in English and Rhetoric."

Service-learning has been a popular trend in U.S. education since the days in which RPW 300 was conceived. But, in a 2012 article, English professor Jill Zasadny of Minnesota's St. Cloud Technical and Community College, observes "It's true that there are a lot more how-to's out there than there are have-done's." And Paula Mathieu, in Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition, warns of the pitfalls awaiting academics seeking to do good by attempting to meet the needs of a community group within the span of a single semester or seeking to reap professional benefit from community engagement.

The term "service-learning" often evokes images of hands-on projects in the fields of health or human services. Thinking of good writing as the vehicle for being of service inspires some students and puzzles others. Michigan Technological University educators Toby Fulwiler and Robert Jones have observed that "Students who practice transactional forms of writing in their classroom will have lots of opportunities to practice it on their jobs." The space in which my RPW 300 students carry out their transactional writing is that fertile area where academic research and thoughtful analysis have the opportunity to improve the lives of real people. Students who write to get things done find meaning in taking these initial steps toward transformation.

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USING WRITING TO LINK DOING AND KNOWING: REFLECTION PAPERS IN SERVICE-LEARNING

In the past couple of decades, service-learning has grown in popularity in higher education. Thanks, in part, to organizations such as the Campus Compact and the Corporation for National and Community Service, more faculty members are incorporating service activities into their classes. At this stage, there is a significant amount of research demonstrating the many benefits of service-learning, which include enhanced student learning (e.g. Astin and Sax 1998, Eyler, J. S., Root, S., & Giles, D. E. Jr. 1998, and Strage 2000), career development (Vogelgesang and Astin 2000), and enhanced student satisfaction (Astin and Sax 1998.) Importantly, service-learning is more than just volunteering. Successful service-learning activities have an explicit set of learning objectives and writing is a very common way in which service activities are linked to learning.

One frequently used writing exercise is the reflection paper. Ideally, the process of reflection and writing takes place before, during, and after the service activity although this can vary depending on the type of activity itself. Short activities, such as volunteering for an afternoon, may only involve a single, short reflection paper. At the same time, semester long service-projects such as the planning and construction of a community garden, may involve multiple reflection papers. The Campus Compact has a set of recommendations regarding the structure of reflection assignments (Rama and Battistoni 2001.) They provide detailed descriptions of how an assignment can be designed from start to finish in a manner that encourages student learning. They recommend that assignments properly contextualize the reflection, connect service and coursework, coach students, balance challenge and support, structure communication, and involve continuous reflection. Importantly, they highlight the importance of finding a balance between providing assistance to students and challenging them to encourage intellectual development.

In my experience, reflection assignments are not necessarily time consuming to design and, at least in the field of sociology, more and more textbooks are including service-learning assignments and ideas. In fact, the logistics of coordinating the service project itself are often more challenging than the development of the writing assignment. The most common reflection assignment I use involves an informal, short reflection that requires students to relate their service-activity with a specific class topic. For example, for the past few years I have had students spend a class period sorting garbage from an SVSU dumpster to quantify recycling habits of students. Prior to the experience, we talk about topics such as consumer culture and the social production of waste. After the experience, they are required to describe their activities and what they saw and relate it to the idea of consumer culture or environmental quality.

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In my SOC111: Introduction to Sociology classes, I have required that each student identify a non-profit where they will spend 5-10 hours during the semester volunteering. They then have their choice of how to relate their experience to the class material and the exact connections vary depending on where the students volunteered. Since an introduction to sociology class covers such a wide range of topics, from social stratification to environmental pollution, there is inevitably some connection that can be made (although I provide some prompts to assist with this

Photograph courtesy of University Communications

process.) Reflection paper topics have varied from descriptions of the culture and language of the organization where the student volunteered to reflections on the role of religion in social change.

The most intensive service-learning projects

with which I am involved are part of the SVSU Foundation Scholars Service-Learning Corps. This group of students is required to spend the winter semester and three weeks in the spring planning and implementing a service project in partnership with a community organization. These students draft grant proposals, create presentations, and write a series of reflection papers on the experience. In addition to learning about sociological topics like social stratification, organizational socialization and culture, and group dynamics, students also learn formal writing skills such as grant writing, budget development, and professional communication with community partners.

Students are definitely challenged to think about what they learn throughout the process and thematic coding of two years of final reflection papers highlights student learning in the areas of leadership, small group interaction, and diversity. Students learn by doing. One student commented that "First and foremost, I learned more about working and communicating with a group." Another student noted, "At the end of this project, I can say that I have learned what type of leader I am, experienced how to effectively engage myself in the community, and gained an insight of what an individual can gain from service to society." Fundamentally, the projects demonstrated to the students that they have the ability to shape society. As one student stated simply, "it opened my eyes to see that now I could help."

For the reasons I have previously touched on, I think that more faculty should consider incorporating service activities into their classes. While service activities may lend themselves more easily to some disciplines than others, there is a great potential benefit for students and community partners alike. Importantly, these activities must be more than simple volunteerism and it is important

that student learning be explicitly a part of all service-learning activities. As I have touched on here, writing reflection papers is a relatively simple, yet, effective way of helping students connect their service and their learning.

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COLLEGE WRITING:
A SPACE FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Classroom strategies that generate writing worth reading contribute hugely to our impact as teachers, as research consistently demonstrates. Richard Light's 2001 book, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, concluded that writing engaged students in course learning more than any other teaching strategy:

> The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students' level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students' level of interest in it—is stronger than the relationship between students' engagement and *any other course characteristic*. . . (as cited in Bean, 2011, p. 1; italics mine).

A 2008 joint study by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), in which 23,000 students in 82 four-year universities were surveyed about their university writing experiences, likewise concluded that faculty can "increase student learning by . . . assigning meaning constructing writing projects, and clearly explaining their expectations." Many other studies have reached similar conclusions.

Though this relationship between writing and student engagement has been clearly established, developing student writers is, as we know, no easy task. Many students enter college without adequate writing capabilities, underprepared for the writing challenges they face. Fourteen weeks of instruction in First Year Composition (ENGL 111) lays a basic foundation for college writing, but as Bergmann and Zepernick's 2012 study found, many students "do not draw sufficient rhetorical expertise from their FYC [First Year Composition] courses to understand that

'effective communication' is a product of more than mechanical correctness." Research by Bain (2012) and others has demonstrated that this problem is typical across courses, as many students struggle to transfer strategies from one context to the next. In other words, if they are to develop as competent writers and thinkers who see writing as a means to learn course concepts and engage in the issues of their field, students need both effective coaching for transfer as well as consistent opportunities to write—at all levels of the curriculum.

For students, developing competence as academic writers may likewise be no easy task. When they are in unfamiliar territory, even strong students struggle. In the Fall 2012 semester, for example, the Writing Center conducted 2,535 individual tutorial sessions with students ranging from incoming freshmen to graduate students. Similar to previous semesters, students most often requested help with two aspects:

Assistance Requested	Percentage of WC visits
Understanding the Assignment	21.2
Developing Ideas	20.6

Though the Writing Center also assisted with organization, grammar, formats and citations, and ESL issues, nearly 42% of these student writers, freshmen through graduate students, identified their primary issues as understanding an assignment or developing appropriate content for an assignment, the very basics of any writing task! Though the Writing Center can provide essential support, students' potential success or failure as writers ultimately traces back to the contexts in which they learn to write: the expectations, strategies, and guidance they receive from

their instructors. We also know from our Writing Center session records that when faced with unfamiliar writing tasks, many students will revert to previous types of writing as their default mode, whether these are appropriate for the task or not; it's easier to draft a paper in a mode they are familiar with, rather than take on the challenge of an unfamiliar writing task.[1]

These issues are not necessarily correlated with GPA, as over 46% of students we worked with in Fall 2012 carried a GPA of 3.2 or higher:

GPA	% of Writing Center users
2.7 - 3.2	29.6
3.7 - 4.0	24.0
3.3 - 3.6	22.3
< 2.6	20.2

As these data indicate, students from all levels of ability often struggle even to understand or begin some writing tasks. Regrettably, those who become frustrated frequently try to determine the minimum they must complete to pass the course--and then disengage from serious learning. However, we also see evidence every day that with effective coaching from faculty, coupled with assistance from the Writing Center as needed, students can make impressive strides toward becoming both proficient writers and more engaged students.

Research on how the brain learns provides additional insight into students' learning processes. *How Learning Works* (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010) and Nilson's *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* (2010) outline several important understandings of how learning occurs that relate directly to the development of student writers – and to their engagement:

[1].These data exclude first-semester freshmen, who do not yet have a college GPA, as well as those students who have no GPA on record.

•   People learn by "connecting new knowledge to what they already know and believe" (Nilson, p. 4). Of course, to have insight into what students know and believe about concepts in a course, we must find a way to discover that. Many types of informal in-class writing-to-learn activities (e.g., one minute paper, blogs, micro-essays, reading logs) can provide such insight and help us target both our instruction and our feedback to students over the course of the semester. Bean's book *Engaging Ideas* has an entire chapter of such informal writing activities, which, as the NSSE study indicated, are a "high-impact practice" for engaging students.

Student beliefs about writing can sometimes work against their progress. In my fall freshman Honors Writing course, for example, one young woman nearly failed the course because she couldn't get past the 5-paragraph theme paradigm that had been drilled into her in high school. Though none of the six papers we wrote could fit into the 5-paragraph paradigm, she used it anyway! In spite of detailed assignment guidelines, rubrics aligned with the guidelines, models provided for each assignment, and peer review, she clung to her model until nearly the end of the course, when she finally realized that the shape of her papers needed to be determined by answers to the very questions I had outlined the first week of class: Who is your audience? What is your purpose? What genre is this writing? How do you need to shape this piece of writing to respond appropriately to those factors? Like many students, she had not understood that the context for writing determines everything else. She wanted a formula to follow, and nothing more.

That student was not the only one struggling
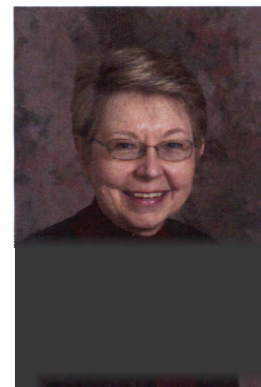
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mightily to leave behind her high school write-to-the-test, single-draft model of writing. Anyone who teaches freshmen or introductory courses in a major is likely to have to confront many such misconceptions as we help students build new mental models for different discourse communities and develop new writing strategies appropriate to their goals. Sometimes it is only in retrospect that students finally "get it." Only in her e-portfolio reflections at the end of the semester was I sure this student had gained the understandings she needed: "I am so proud that I have changed as much as I have this semester. . . . I understand now that something I say to myself makes sense, but doesn't necessarily make sense to other readers. I have to keep working on my topic sentences as well as the flow of the paper."

Making these types of mental connections and seeing evidence of their own growth empowers and motivates students.

• A second principle of learning is that students are most successful when we scaffold their learning. This means "start where your students are" (Nilson, 2010, p. 5): assess the capabilities of students entering the course with course outcomes in mind. When we compare what students know at the outset against the outcomes they must achieve by the end, we can then sequence writing assignments and other learning activities appropriately. As Ann Beaufort's (2007) research demonstrates, students achieve the greatest gains when faculty create sequential, developmentally-sound writing tasks first within individual courses, then across courses in a major and across departments. Multiple SVSU departments (e.g., geography, political science, criminal justice) have worked to develop coherent learning patterns for students in their departments.[2]

This sense of knowing where they are going, feeling prepared, and being encouraged for the task are significant factors in student motivation. In contrast, the two greatest demotivators, according to Nilson, are an instructor's negative attitudes/behaviors and a disorganized course structure. Well-designed assignments linked to course outcomes, appropriate encouragement, and attention to writers' individual needs not only set the stage for significant growth; they also reduce the likelihood of plagiarism, a sure sign that a student is not engaged in the course.

• A third relevant principle of learning involves the mental operation of metacognition. Significant learning requires that learners actively monitor their learning and reflect on their performance, but metacognition does not necessarily develop on its own. Instructor feedback is crucial in helping students assess their strengths and weaknesses and develop appropriate strategies. How do we generate metacognition? Multiple approaches can work. The benefits of rubrics have long been established (see Appendix C in *How Learning Works*). For example, a rubric for each assigned paper, based on the goals and genre of that paper, can be used in two ways: for students to self-evaluate their paper and for the instructor to provide his/her feedback. Another strategy is to include metacognitive/reflective questions, perhaps on the same rubric: *What was your biggest challenge in writing this paper? How did you decide what research materials to use? How did your research and writing impact your understanding of this course concept? What new skills did you develop when writing this paper? If you had to write a paper of this type again, what changes would you make in your writing process?*

Still another method to enhance metacognition is brief individual conferences with students,

[2] *Examples from some of these departments are posted to the CI instructor V-space page. I will be happy to enroll anyone who requests it.*

especially after their first paper; this may have more value (and be more time-efficient) than a whole page of comments. Conferencing is also a best practice to engage students in the course. In fact, all of the practices typically associated with successful coaching of student writers—thoughtfully sequenced assignments, models of successful/unsuccessful papers, feedback that leads to revision, class discussion of writing strategies and student texts, and individual conferencing--contribute to the metacognitive impact that leads to student growth and engagement. Effective teaching facilitates metacognitive learning.

Will this need for best practices in writing instruction change with the new Common Core Michigan state standards for Grades 1 to 12? The standards have defined "College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing" thus: "To be college and career ready writers, students must take task, purpose, and audience into careful consideration, choosing words, information, structures, and formats deliberately." All of us would agree. These standards integrate writing as a learning activity in all subject areas, a step in the right direction. Curriculum, however, cannot ensure engagement in learning. Given the class sizes and pressures to teach to the test that currently prevail in many secondary schools, it is unlikely that all students in your classes will come to college with these writing abilities already developed.

Thus our commitment to students' development as writers will continue to be essential. When we see writing as the space where students can most deeply engage with the learning in our courses, it can strengthen our teaching and set the stage not only for students' consistent growth, but for their future engagement in the critical questions of their professions. Our goal is not only to generate student engagement now,

but to prepare students for a world in which their writing is likely to play a critical role in their future success.

Photograph courtesy of University Communications

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THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE; A FEW OBSERVATIONS

In their travels abroad and growing acquaintance with new countries and cultures, our students should understand that their customary conduct, even if accompanied by dictionary-perfect translations of English into a foreign language, may not be acceptable to "natives" of other countries whose customs differ from our own. Thus, for instance, it should be noted that the kissing of ladies' hands in Europe has nothing to do with a desire to seduce the kissee, that an innocent hand gesture may get one into serious trouble in Russia, and that bowing is a sign of good manners in Japan.

While familiarity with the local customs in a foreign country is vitally important to a visitor, he or she can also face great challenges trying to understand what is being said. Misunderstandings may arise simply because of the complexities of both languages and because of cultural differences between the 'natives' and the foreign observer. Naturally, the potential for misunderstanding increases dramatically if the translator is not fully conversant with both languages. Serious distortions and even a loss of important information may result from a faulty or insensitive translation. For instance, the difference between the familiar second person 'you' and the formal form of address used in European languages presents difficulties to our students. This is because the form depends on whether one person or more are being addressed. The familiar 'you' is used only in speaking to close friends and children, while in other situations its usage is considered insulting. Even the slightest sign of disrespect for a foreign culture should be avoided.

Still, the incorrect use of a foreign language is much better than no foreign language at all. Depending only on one's native language, even a language as well-known as English, would inhibit one's ability to understand and become acquainted with another culture. Showing foreign people that you are learning their language indicates to them that you believe it is worthy of study, that the foreign visitor cares about them. This is why, in the Vatican, the popes routinely use foreign languages in their greetings to the world (Benedict used 60) in order to appeal both to the mind and to the hearts of the faithful.

Religious leaders are not alone in their effort to influence people through their use of language. In his interview with the BBC's Katty Kay, (Jan. 17, 2013) General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of US forces in Afghanistan, bemoaned the lack of foreign language proficiency among American troops there which, he said, would have made a 'huge difference' in their mission. As it happened, the Americans had only a 'cursory understanding' of Afghanistan when the operation began.

Literary translations are in a special category for they require preservation of both the meaning and the aesthetic value of the piece. Special care and sensitivity is vital here. It is well known that translations may diminish the impact of a story or a poem, or, which also happens, increase the effectiveness of the original. These changes may occur because of the different associations and connotations of words and turns of phrase in different languages. It sometimes happens that, when using foreign sources in translation, we notice their inability to stir students' interest, while in the author's native language they come through as inspirational. On the other hand, silly and unimpressive quotations in one language, may transform into examples of wit or profundity in another.

Perhaps one of the best examples of the problems faced by a translator of literature was
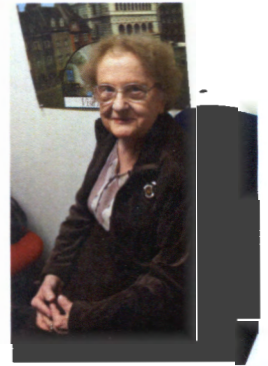
Anna R. Dadlez, Ph.D. Professor Saginaw Valley State University

expressed in the 19th century by Prince Jozef 'Pepe' Poniatowski, an avowed literary expert and an admirer of the fairer sex. 'Translations are like women', 'Pepe' declared. 'When they are beautiful, they are not faithful; when they are faithful, they are - alas - not beautiful.' He explained that his example did not include men, who, although very inclined to be unfaithful, in no way qualified to be objects of beauty. Poniatowski's British enemies (he was the right hand man to Napoleon Bonaparte and a Commander of the Polish Legions in France) translated these sentiments into a down-to-earth complaint: 'you can't have your cake and eat it too.'

The power of a translator to render the interpretation according to his or her liking has not been explored by Western politicians. Yet, on the international stage, where appearing in the best possible light is vital to the national interests of the countries involved, a skillful translator may intentionally change the meaning of the message without necessarily violating dictionary and grammatical rules. Rumor had it that the best paid and the most watched professionals in the USSR were the official translators.

One has to acknowledge that botched translations and the incorrect use of foreign languages do not necessarily cause ill feeling. They may even enhance intercultural understanding, for they often show that even powerful countries are not immune to error, and not above appearing comical. Thus, when President Carter's words of greeting to the Polish people in 1979 were mistranslated into Polish, we read: 'When I abandoned my native country, the US, this morning, due to my lust for Poland..' Somehow, this mistake endeared Carter to Poles, and the President became a hero of Polish journalists. The more recent gaffe of Hillary Clinton in which 'overcharge'

was used instead of the correct 'reset' (when she spoke of the U.S. resetting ties with Russia) did not complicate American-Russian relations. In fact, it made them less formal.

While traveling in foreign countries, most of us have met with the efforts of native business people to attract tourists and with the inventive ways they do it. Entire websites are devoted to well-meaning entrepreneurial gaffes. Last year, a dry cleaner in Poland tried to reach female English-speaking tourists with these encouraging words: 'Ladies! Drop your pants here, for best results!'

While the accuracy of translations is, of course, of primary importance, mistakes are unavoidable. Sometimes they are quite amusing. Upon discovering the misunderstanding, the parties tend to be more relaxed and the atmosphere becomes more conducive to negotiations. Humor is international and can open many doors. While trying to preserve the essence and truth of the original, let us laugh together with our foreign friends at the occasional innocent mistakes.