1995

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Sharon (1995) "What We Can Learn from Listening: College Students Talk about Writing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 17.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1532>

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What We Can Learn from Listening: College Students Talk about Writing

Sharon Thomas

Recently, a student at Michigan State University made the following statement: "Not only do the professors expect proper grammar and spelling, they want actual *writing*" (Portfolio Project, June, 1994). One of a group of students whose writing we are studying throughout their undergraduate education at Michigan State University, Anne is helping us to understand college composing from the viewpoint of those who are living through the experience: the students themselves. Anne and other students who are part of the Portfolio Project keep all their writing in portfolios housed in the newly established Writing Center at Michigan State University where they also meet every semester to talk and write about their composing.

Conversations with these students have been both varied and enlightening, and have contributed to the portrait of writing at Michigan State University that we are just beginning to sketch. Other students who have contributed to our understanding of composing at Michigan State University include the students who work as consultants or are enrolled in Writing Center courses or are affiliated in some other way with the Writing Center. Even though most of these conversations are still underway (and this article, therefore, is a work in progress), I would like to share what we are learning from them with our colleagues in the state of Michigan and beyond

who—like us—are working to find better ways to teach writing.

Significant Writing Experiences

One of our goals for the Michigan State University Writing Center has been to work with faculty and students to develop a culture of writing on our campus. We work to accomplish this goal through the support we provide both to faculty as they work to integrate writing into their courses and to students as they work to compose their assignments for those courses. Along the way, we try to study what we are doing or, as Loren Barritt has pointed out in an article by the same name, to engage in "Practicing Research by Researching Practice." Like Barritt and his colleagues from the University of Michigan's English Composition Board, we frequently engage in these research activities by asking staff members, as well as students and faculty in the Writing Center and beyond, to act as informants, to provide descriptions of particular significant events, to engage in what Patti Stock, our Director, has come to call "investment writing," writing that invests students in the study at hand.

For example, one way we begin the course students take to prepare themselves to become undergraduate writing consultants is to ask those students to describe a significant composing event, to tell us about some writing they have done that

was significant to them in some way. It could be school writing or their own personal writing or writing they have done for some other purpose and occasion. We are interested in studying the experience of composing from the viewpoint of those who have engaged in the activity.

When we collect these stories, students often tell about the first time they were encouraged to write about something they knew about, were interested in, or wanted to learn about. That theme, the opportunity to use their own resources and interests, is always present when we collect these stories. In the spring of 1994, when we collected these stories and went on to study them, we discovered several themes.

Writing that Results in Learning. Several stories were about writing that resulted in learning. One student, for example, had studied women in prisons and was astonished both at how much she had learned from this project and how interesting it had been. Her story reminded us of a piece by Stephen Lafer and Stephen Tchudi on writing about the Truckee River. By the time their writing group had researched the river, visited and interviewed people and groups whose lives were influenced by the river, attended various political action events connected with the river, and talked and listened and written, they were forever changed by the experience of writing about the Truckee River. Writing that results in learning is significant and transforming.

Writing that Results in Publication. Some students told stories about writing that resulted in publication. One had written a school editorial that was picked up by a Detroit paper. One had won a contest. One had written song lyrics that were published and performed. Thus, writing that results in publication is also significant to students. Here is a place they can see the consequences of their words.

Opportunities to Engage in Collaboration. Other students spoke of opportunities to engage in collaborative writing projects. Most of these opportunities occurred in classrooms, but when the act of composing was communal and resulted in sharing of experiences and ideas and the challenge of working through difficult issues with

support of peers, they found excitement in their composing.

Writing that Results in Social Change. Finally, some students shared stories of writing that resulted in social change. One had written a piece about the fate of animals in the local pound and felt she had saved some from certain death. Another woman, whose family farm was slipping into bankruptcy, wrote to her congresswoman and received not only a sympathetic reply but information on sources of help. Thus, students whose writing has had an impact on their own lives or the lives of others also found satisfaction.

Here are students for whom writing has become an important and essential part of their lives, mostly because someone asked them to write about what was important to them and gave them the opportunity to experience, first-hand, the power of writing not only on themselves as writers but on others as well.

Undergraduate Writing Consultants

In Stephen North's article, "The Idea of a Writing Center," he reports a study conducted at Indiana U of Pennsylvania by Malcolm Hayward, who discovered that faculty often sent students to the writing center to receive help with surface level issues such as grammar and punctuation. The peer tutors in their writing center, however, found organization to be the area requiring the most attention.

Informal reports from the undergraduate writing consultants (UWCs) working in the Michigan State Writing Center confirm these findings. Students frequently start a consultation with a request to the UWC to "just look it over and fix the spelling and grammar," but when the UWCs question their clients about their assignments and their purposes for writing, these clients ask consultants for more substantial responses to their writing. They want to know if their papers make sense, if they are convincing, if they need more information, if they need better introductions or conclusions. We suspect that one reason students ask for help with grammar, spelling, and punctuation is that they do not know how to ask for responses to other aspects of their writing. We grew more convinced of this possibility when we

began to conduct research with a group of diverse students who volunteered, as part of our Portfolio Project, to collect and discuss the writing they are doing during their undergraduate education at Michigan State.

Portfolio Project Students

Students who participate in the Portfolio Project, initiated in the fall of 1993, keep all the writing they do, both for classes and for themselves, in portfolios housed in the Writing Center. In addition, they meet regularly every semester in the Writing Center, to talk and write about their writing. These written reflections and transcriptions of their talk about writing are also collected. Early on in this study, we discovered that students could talk very easily about the ways in which writing was helping them learn and understand the subjects they were studying. They were less capable of talking about what they were learning about writing.

In the most recent discussions with these students, now beginning their third year at Michigan State University, we have found a significant change in their conversations. Bob, for example, said that, at first, he found writing about his own writing "weird." Now, he says he is much more aware of his writing processes. He thinks about why he is saying what he's saying and how it will affect his readers. He thinks about audience and purpose. His expertise as an editor has also developed so that he can now catch patterns of problems in his writing such as the use of transitions and the inclusion of enough support for his assertions as well as problems in grammar and sentence structure. As with any language acquisition, this ability to talk about writing develops only over time and only when students are given the opportunity to talk and write about writing.

From the beginning, however, Portfolio Project students, many of whom are also clients in the Writing Center, have talked about one significant aspect of their writing: how the writing they were doing in the university was different from the writing they had done in high school. According to the students in the Portfolio Project, the instruction they received in the schools they attended before coming to Michigan State University pro-

vided a good basis—for the most part—for their college writing; however, the college writing they have composed during their first two years in Michigan State University has led them to recognize they need to develop new areas of competency and understanding.

Research and the Five-Paragraph Essay. Students in the Portfolio Project reported two common types of writing experiences in high school: the five-paragraph essay and the research paper. Many students claimed knowing how to write a five-paragraph essay gave them some structure so they could concentrate on what they were trying to say without having to worry about how to say it. Students who reported that their professors did not accept the five-paragraph essay format frequently maintained that knowing how to write one meant they knew how to advance a thesis, develop topic sentences, and organize their paragraphs.

The research paper received mixed approval. Although some students claimed learning how to do research was a useful strategy for several types of college writing, others indicated that the research projects they were asked to do in college often included surveys, interviews, opinion polls, case study problems, and other forms of field research, including use of the Internet, that were very different from the traditional library research they had encountered in high school.

Communication of Ideas. Several students also suggested that in high school the five-paragraph essay provided a template that they only needed to fill in with other people's ideas, other people's research; whereas, in college, they were expected to do more than follow a format. As Chris pointed out, her college professors not only expected her essays to be much longer than the ones she had written in high school, they also expected her to get her own ideas across. They were actually interested in what she was trying to say, and they wanted her to make her message clear. Steven agreed. His college professors wanted to know what he thought. And Ryan pointed out that his college professors wanted more than the research statistics he had provided in his high school papers. They wanted Ryan's own opinion. Of one

professor in particular, Ryan said, "I mean, he wants to see how you can write, not just stats or all facts. Don't just look it up in a book. Think yourself and write it down. That's the biggest difference" (Portfolio Project, June, 1994).

Greater Elaboration. Many students talked about providing more elaboration in their college writing. In their college papers, they had to go into more depth than they were asked to do in high school. As Robin pointed out, "The writing we did in high school, I thought I always had to have one point, and it looked like that was your focus, and I felt like you couldn't really branch out into different ideas" (Portfolio Project, June, 1994). Or as Anne pointed out, college professors "demand the writer dig deep into their work" (Portfolio Project, June, 1994). Students also said they were expected to develop their ideas more fully in college and to work with their peers to do so. As Rashida explained, "I think the writing we did in high school wasn't...talked about as much as it is on a college level. Here you get to talk...more about your ideas, and you get to listen to other people to gain more ideas" (Portfolio Project, June, 1994).

Professors' Expectations. Early in the project, when students had recently received their first grades, much of their discussion centered on their professors' expectations. They thought college professors were very demanding, that they discouraged generalizations and unnecessary words or ideas. They did not accept "Engfish," and they wanted students to make sure they got the facts, that they said what they meant to say. As one student put it, "Just say what you mean to say." "Just say it and [don't] mess around" (Portfolio Project, June, 1994).

AL201 Students

Another set of students from whom we have learned about composing at Michigan State University are the students enrolled in the Arts and Letters course, Writing Tutorial (AL201). This course, which is taught in the Writing Center, is designed to assist students enrolled in the writing-intensive course, U.S. in the World (IAH201), a required sophomore-level course. Students who receive a 1.5 or 1.0 in their first-year composition

course may either repeat their composition course or enroll in AL201 in tandem with IAH201. In the Writing Tutorial, students work together to understand the texts and videos from their U.S. in the World class and discuss the written assignments they are composing for this class. In addition, these students also meet one-on-one or in small groups with Undergraduate Writing Consultants working in the Writing Center.

Over the past three years, we have sometimes asked these students, near the end of the course, to provide advice for future students enrolled in the Writing Tutorial. Even though some of these students arrived at Michigan State University not as well prepared as many of the Portfolio Project students, the advice they gave future students emanates from similar concerns.

Greater Elaboration. Like the students in the Portfolio Project, AL201 students emphasize the need for elaboration in their writing. Cara, for example, pointed out that the reading and writing in IAH201 require "much critical thinking" and "more in-depth thought." "It involves using all the knowledge you have acquired at one time or another." Mitch, in his description of the writing required for IAH201, also suggested strategies for success:

A major part of getting a good grade in IAH201 is based on the inquiries that you write for your class each week, especially your expanded inquiries that are due twice during the semester. There are two ways to help you prepare for your inquiries: 1) by taking good notes on the videos and 2) by keeping up on your readings and studying at home. If you can take good notes and study, then you should be able to get a good grade on your inquiries.

When you write your inquiries, all of the studying you have done should pay off. If you have organized your notes well and have a good idea of what you are studying, then writing your paper should be very easy. You should remember that you are only going to get out of your paper what you put into it.

Helen provides similar advice:

At first I did not think that taking notes on the readings was very important. It is important, though. The notes from readings and videos

will really help you when it comes time for the Expanded Inquiries, midterms, or finals. You will need to use very specific examples in all of these writings.

Several students also mentioned the use of group notebooks as a means of discussing ideas with others through writing. Originally, notebook groups used actual spiral notebooks to share ideas on teacher-assigned topics. At the beginning of each week, one person started a conversation in the notebook and then passed it on to the next person in the group. Each day a different member provided the next part of the conversation, and at the beginning of the next week the cycle began again. Later, the spiral notebooks were replaced by e-mail for these written conversations.

Many students found this work useful both for developing their own ideas and for seeing how others developed ideas. They thought these notebooks forced them to read in order to write and allowed them to see how others interpreted what they were reading. They also thought writing in the notebooks each week helped them learn how to think because they had to focus on class issues and that helped them develop an understanding of the course videos as well as the course readings. They said they wrote what they thought first, then they had an opportunity to read other people's responses to what they had written. When their turn came around again, they could integrate into their new entry what they had learned from the others.

Communication of Ideas. Like the Portfolio Project students, these students also recognized the need to communicate what they understood. As Helen pointed out, "Not only must you memorize the facts and figures, but you must understand what was happening and be able to explain it to others." Or, as other students suggested, you had to learn to *think*, not just memorize. They reported they needed to learn how to make connections, to tie together the readings, the videos, and the class discussions. They had to learn to use critical thinking and writing skills.

Student Voices

According to these students, then, the five-paragraph essay and the library research paper were common high school experiences, but students found them to be only somewhat useful in college. They report that their college papers not only have to be longer than their high school papers, but in their college composing they are expected to do more than fill in the forms. They are expected to present their own opinions and ideas, to make connections between and among readings, class discussions, and other materials, and to give evidence of their own thinking and understanding.

Part of accomplishing this communication of ideas to others includes greater elaboration. Students told us their college professors insist upon more depth in their writing, but at the same time they want writing that is clear, concise, and to the point. Several students described the talk that goes on around their writing. Many faculty members ask students to spend time developing their ideas through discussion, often with one another and in both oral and written forms. Both peer response writing groups and e-mail discussion groups are becoming more common learning activities.

According to the students enrolled in a course to prepare themselves to become UWCs, opportunities to write that invite collaboration or result in learning, publication, or social change are among their most enticing and significant composing experiences. These are the experiences, they claim, that draw students to writing, that aid their understanding of the power and value of writing, and that invite students to become writers.

K-12 Teaching

Conversations with the students like the ones described above have informed the understanding of composing on the Michigan State University campus that those of us who teach writing are beginning to develop. When students are given opportunities to write about what they know about or are interested in, or to use writing to make a difference, they become writers. Important, too, are the opportunities to work collaboratively and to engage in dialogue both

about ideas and about the composing process itself. Often, at staff development programs, conferences, and workshops, in our conversations with Michigan teachers, we hear similar stories of student success, clear evidence of the commitment to composing that we all value.

Clearly, these students' experiences suggest that the increasing investment in writing made by K-12 teachers in Michigan can not only provide a solid base for success in college, but could also provide those important experiences that invite students to become life-long writers.

Note: In the fall of 1992, Michigan State University made the transition from quarter terms to semesters. An integral part of that transformation was the establishment of a vertical writing program. The former, three-term, first-year composition program was replaced with a one semester, four-credit composition course in American Thought and Language, followed by a writing-intensive, sophomore-level course in Integrative Studies in Arts and Humanities, U.S. in the World

(IAH201). In addition, the administrators and faculty in each of the fourteen colleges within the university undertook the task of developing writing-intensive courses within their disciplines. In order to provide support in these endeavors to both students and faculty, the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements also recommended the establishment of a writing center.

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