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Liz deBeer

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FILLING THE SILENCES: USING INTERVIEWS AND FORUMS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Liz deBeer

I am a writing instructor at Rutgers University, Newark, NJ, which is a state university sitting in a large city. I teach composition to many non-traditional students who often get their knowledge from non-traditional places (places other than the American academy) – the streets, foreign countries, work places: everyday life. Only a small minority of my students live on campus; most commute by bus, train, or car. Most work. Some are married and a few have children. Many of these students are people of color, many are recent immigrants, and many are first-generation college students.

My job includes teaching these students to do research for their papers by using outside sources. To do this, I invite their streets, their workplaces, and their personal lives into the classroom by asking each student to conduct interviews and present forums. These methods encourage non-traditional students to consider non-traditional sources (as well as traditional ones) worthwhile. By exploring sources beyond the card catalog, by going outside of the university and into their own environments, these students recognize that their experiences, their surroundings, and their voices are valued in academia.

I want to hear students' oral and written voices, and to do so invite silence into the classroom—a silence my students must fill. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* introduced me to the idea of silences that need to be filled: the silences that are created when students in honors and basic writing classes alike are encouraged to think on their own. In too many classrooms, the silences are those of students who are typically disengaged in the classroom; they feel neither pressure nor desire to fill silences, so they remain quiet. Bartholomae and Petrosky address this situation early in their book when they state their teaching goals: "A course in reading and writing whose goal is to empower students must

begin with a silence, a silence students must fill" (7). In sum, they feel a course should be "designed to give students access to the language and methods of the academy" (9). As these goals are also my goals, I use the interview and forum assignments to first create the pressure of silences and then help my students to fill those silences by accessing their own worlds as well as the world of the academy. My goal is to diminish these students' intellectual inhibitions and to motivate them to discuss ideas, theories, and writing techniques in the classroom. The interviews invite them to use their interaction with others to fill the silence of the assignment; the forums invite them to fill the silence of the classroom itself.

Ann E. Berthoff's *The Making of Meaning* supports Bartholomae and Petrosky's points when she stresses the importance of "developing authentic occasions for writing" (27). She writes, "Skills are learned— really learned— only when there is a reason to use them" (28). The interview and forum assignments are not perfunctory exercises meant to perfect what Berthoff calls "subskills" (28) like spelling and comma usage (23). Instead, they create silences that constitute "authentic occasions for writing" by motivating students to say something meaningful to them and supporting their statements with legitimate research.

With these goals in mind, I begin the semester with the interview assignment. Students are asked to conduct an interview and to form the responses into a profile of the person interviewed. They are to write it in essay form—not simply list questions and answers—and must write in third person. The interview assignment has many benefits. It teaches students how to ask questions that produce results and how to take good notes. It also teaches them the value of using sources as well as introducing them to the complexity inherent in writing about an "authentic" topic, as Berthoff calls it. Students mold an essay similar to modeling clay; a profile of a person can take many different shapes, depending on the angle the author chooses. Another beneficial aspect of this assignment is that it encourages students to work on their projects in steps; it's almost impossible to pull an all-nighter when the student must make an appointment, conduct an interview, and write a profile.

Usually, I pick a topic for the class to focus on, such as working. To prepare them for the assignment, I ask them to read the chapter on interviewing in William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*, which encourages students to "get people talking" (81), to focus on the "human element" (81), and to be

concise (89). I also xerox a well-written profile so students have an idea of what I am asking them to do. We discuss the clipping in class, noting the lead, the conclusion, and the ways the author has molded the responses into a story.

Then I teach them how to interview because it's not as easy as it seems. As a journalist, I know from experience that the interviewer must have prepared questions, especially when the experience of interviewing is new. I devote an entire class to exploring how to ask questions, beginning with who, what, where, when, and how. These questions evoke the hard facts: discovering what people do, how they began working in the field, and where they think their futures lie. Next, I explain the importance of asking thoughtful questions that elicit anecdotes or strange facts. The interviewer may ask why the source is wearing a Mickey Mouse tie clip or where that source plans to go on vacation. After I introduce these ideas, the class interviews me. This gives them a chance to experiment with interviewing. They must take notes and then, together, we write a story. I begin with the lead and each student verbally adds a line or two. This experience simulates the interview and prepares them to write their papers.

Then I let go and allow students to proceed on their own to conduct their interviews and to write. This is when the silence begins that Bartholomae and Petrosky advocate. It doesn't *feel* like teaching because I am not doing anything. But it is teaching, for if I am truly teaching these students to be writers, I must let them write, which is always a solo act. I cannot make appointments for them, I cannot ask questions for them, and I cannot write for them. As writers, students must fill the silence. And they do. It is an empowering experience for them to get an assignment where they must work hard and creatively on their own.

During this phase, I devote some of the class period to their questions and to journal writing. The latter might involve asking students to write about the people they interviewed without consulting their notes; while they write, I occasionally interrupt with suggestions like "Compare the person to an animal or a spice," or "Describe the most surprising thing about that person's job," or "Describe that person's voice." This type of journal writing helps students with the task of forming their essays out of questions and answers. Many want to simply list the questions and answers for their final drafts, but, as Zinsser points out, "this isn't writing" (87). Journal assignments encour-

age students to write about the interviews in their own words and to add only the best quotes in appropriate places.

Initially, I am unable to know exactly how students are fulfilling this assignment outside of the classroom. During this period of silence, I am rarely asked to be involved other than to provide guidance, support, and deadlines. Occasionally, a student panics and asks me for advice. One such student wanted to interview a co-worker at the pharmacy where he works. He was afraid to work on his own and wondered what he should ask his colleague. I suggested that he begin with the beginning: When does she wake up? How does she get to work? What does she do when she first gets there? The student nodded and left me alone to worry. (As it turned out, my fears were groundless. The fearful student told me later that once he had asked his co-worker to describe her day, she told him so much that he had to cut some of it out! He wrote well and told me the reason for his success is that he had something to say. He had struggled to find something interesting to write about and had in fact filled the silence well. He had become a writer.)

On the day the drafts of the reports are due, the students swap their papers and review them, responding to a list of questions I give them (i.e., What can be omitted that will make this paper stronger? What should be added? How can the paper be better organized?). After reviewing the papers, reviewers discuss their comments with the writers, and I answer a few general questions. Then they go home to revise. When they hand in their final drafts, the papers are usually interesting to read, although many often lack polish. The papers usually show that the students asked pertinent questions and struggled to organize the answers so that they told the subjects' stories. They reward my trust in the students.

The next time I invite silence into the classroom is for the forum presentations, which are like sophisticated interview assignments and which involve a small group of students giving oral reports as a panel to the rest of the class. Forums are a classroom technique that involves a small group of students researching a topic and presenting their findings to the rest of the class. Forums encourage students to research topics by interviewing experts, performing polls, and analyzing trends. Students are prepared for the forums because they have already learned to take notes, ask questions, organize data, and write reports from the interview assignment.

My classes are usually composed of 25 students; I divide them into four forum topics. When I introduce the forums, I pass around four sheets of paper with each forum topic on it. The first five or six students to sign up become forum leaders for that topic. (I call all the members of each group leaders.) The object of the assignment is for each forum leader to research an aspect of the same topic, make a five minute presentation, and ask the class questions to spur discussion about the forum topic.

I always use forums in conjunction with a reader and a nonfiction book, because the forums prepare students to read the book closely and form the groundwork for their final research papers. One of the most successful combinations is when I use *Our Times: Readings from Recent Periodicals*, edited by Robert Atwan, and *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*, by W. D. Ehrhart. I choose forum topics that build on the inherent controversies in both the reader and the memoir. For example, *Passing Time* includes male/female controversies, domestic violence, male violence, and the Vietnam War: These subjects are the forum topics. All of these topics are also addressed in *Our Times*. My selection is based on the following criteria: Is the topic diverse enough to discuss for a whole class period? Are there accessible sources? Would the students be interested in researching the topic? While I always select forum topics, each student decides on which topic he or she will work and on what angle or focus to concentrate.

My classes meet twice a week for 80 minutes, and each week is devoted to one topic. So when I use *Our Times* and *Passing Time*, for example, the students spend one class period discussing essays in the reader about one topic and the second class period listening to and discussing a related presentation. After they complete their oral reports, the forum leaders hand in typed versions of their presentations. The other class members are asked to write short analyses of each forum, due the class after the forum is presented. After the forums are completed the students turn their attention to the memoir, and after reading it they write their final papers, which juxtapose their research with information obtained from the memoir.

Each forum project should fill the entire class period and be based on student presentations, but I always prepare a few questions too in case the forum is completed early (that is yet to happen). Prior to their presentations the forum leaders meet a few times during or after class to insure that their research does not overlap. I meet with them to provide a list of viable sources

including hotline phone numbers, relevant professors, and pertinent periodicals. I also include some questions that they might want to ask. Many students devise their own questions to ask sources that are not on my list, but my list gives them direction. They hand in written proposals for my review which I return with comments.

Then the silence begins as students begin their research. And again my worries begin: Will students present enlightening information? Will they be able to control the class? Will they present complex information simply enough for others to understand? Will they be motivated to do significant research? During a period of silence, I might find several of my students in the library looking for data. In one instance, I found one of my strongest students working with the student who had confronted me about the interview. They were both working on the Vietnam forum and thought that it would be productive to do their research together. This discovery confirmed my belief that the forums encourage collective learning where the weak can learn from the strong students (and vice versa). Since all forum leaders feel responsible for the forum's outcome, students rely on each other.

Other incidents suggest the value of the project as well. One day a student came to class with a small parcel and pulled a book out of the bag, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan—a book recommended to her by the chair of the women's studies department, whom the student had interviewed for the women's movement forum. This showed me that the forums provide students with the incentive to explore other departments—to even interview the chairperson! This is truly interdisciplinary learning. Another student—a male working on the domestic violence forum—interviewed a campus advocate for student health services. He received several pamphlets which he used in his presentation. The advocate was so excited that she called me on the phone to ask what was happening in my classroom that students were coming to her for information.

The forum experience can profoundly affect the written product which comes out of it, even for students who don't entirely take responsibility for a good presentation. In one class, a student had done nothing for her presentation and simply chatted for a few minutes about the topic in general terms. Another twisted the data about date rape and domestic violence so that it sounded like the violence was due to the victim's flirtatious behavior. Yet, in both instances, the students tripped but did not fall; learning from their peers' presentations and reactions, they corrected their errors for their

final papers when they consulted their sources again. Much of this learning process occurs during discussion periods which follow the forums, when the students who comprise the audience challenge the forum leaders' research or analyses. (Even a blunt comment such as "Why do you always call the rape victim 'she'?" can lead the presenter to reconsider his or her writing. When the silence is filled by an audience talking directly to the writer, it can be a device for profound learning since the audience is actually talking to the writer.)

When some students have minor problems with their presentations typical of all beginning writers, such as presenting too much in too little time, making rough transitions, or analyzing inadequately, most are able to correct their errors for their final papers. This is partly due to their peers' verbal reactions and partly due to the written evaluations I give to students.

One of my favorite presentations was by an 18-year-old black male who was analyzing the prevalence of crime in the project where he lives. He interviewed 20 males: 10 who live in his project and 10 who attend Rutgers. He asked several questions about whether his subjects would resort to violence and asked whether his subjects feel "racial hatred." He concluded that the people living in the projects feel the most racial hatred and are the most likely to use violence because they have fewer alternatives. Later, this student told me that he had planned on dropping my class because he had always hated English and had never been asked to analyze anything he was really interested in. I considered this a major success: this student filled the silence because he had something to say and was given the opportunity to say it.

Three of my colleagues visited one of my classes to witness the Vietnam forum. Each forum leader presented research about the war. One had interviewed a Vietnamese man who lived in Vietnam during the war. Another discussed the anti-war movement in America. A third reported on a book, which he read on his own, written by a prisoner of war missing in action, while a fourth presented an interview with his uncle, who is a Vietnam veteran. Two other students reported on the politics of the Vietnam War—one from the American perspective and one from the Vietnamese perspective. The visiting professors barraged the students with questions and the students answered. One of my proudest moments was when one student redirected a question to another forum leader who was better equipped to answer it. Later, one

colleague told me that he thought the class seemed much more like an honors class— not a 101 class that included basic writers.

Many students commented on what they learned from the forums in the informal reports they handed in after each forum. Some were critical: "I tended to, however, learn more from the people who analyzed their information rather than the ones who dictated the information to the class." Or "... at times, I seemed overwhelmed by statistics. ... I think that those people who used such means as charts, graphs, and the board to stress their statistics gave the most successful presentation." Another wrote that "when [forum leaders] read off a sheet of paper, they were boring. ... I feel you must get the audience involved." These students' comments show that they were able to learn writing principles from the forum presentations: about audience, about style, about clarity, and about the use of quotes and facts.

Other students' comments were more consistently positive. One student wrote, "Forums are an excellent learning device. ... Students taught students about what they had researched." Another concluded, "The forums ... forced the speakers to really know their topic. ... I feel that a majority of the people got really involved in their subjects, enabling them to learn more about it than if they just read it out of a book. Also, the forums showed that how you say your information is important. You must try to catch the interest of your audience." Another observed, "Often times, students complain that classes are monotonous because of the way the teacher teaches, what the teacher teaches, etc. With the forums, students were able to teach through different methods. I enjoyed the forums that the students did with visual aids like charts and the interviews and skits. It shows that the students know what they're talking about because they took the information and applied it to their topics." A fourth concluded, "The forums give a chance for students to participate verbally and not just listen to the teacher."

These comments show how eager students are to fill the silence of the classroom if they are given a focus and have commitment to their topics. It still surprises me how enthusiastic students are when preparing their presentations, even though it means they have to work much harder than if the teacher lectures. Not only do they enjoy the process, but the forums prepare students to write papers by encouraging them to research the topics thoroughly. Forums also expose the students to resources and background information that can help the students throughout their lives. Most importantly, the interview and forum assignments allow students to use their own

resources in the classroom by doing what they know best, such as talking to people, using the telephone, reading magazines, and interpreting their worlds. This helps students to realize that they can research papers, make presentations, and be classroom leaders. Most importantly, it helps them realize that they can write. It gives the students confidence, for if their own experiences and their own worlds are welcome in the college writing classroom, then they belong there too.

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Liz deBeer is a freelance writer as well as a writing instructor at Rutgers University.