

Finding Our Way as WAC-y Women: Writing Practice and Other Collegial Endeavors

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Abstract: This article describes our experiences as six faculty members at a mid-sized state college whose collaboration grew into a substantive endeavor to improve writing pedagogy and practice across our disciplines of English, Educational Studies, Instructional Technology, Educational Psychology and Counseling. Within our practice, we approach writing in a variety of ways, including: letter writing; writing as an advanced organizer; online journal writing; rhetorical writing; and writing for critical inquiry. Also embedded within our practice is our creation of and participation in a professional community of learners. In our conclusion, we consider both the personal lessons we have learned through this collaboration and the institutional policies and practices that can support and sustain this kind of work.

"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

— Harry S. Truman

In December of 2005, unsolicited by our institution, we — six junior faculty members across the disciplines at Rhode Island College — came together to talk about writing. While we teach within contexts of English, Educational Studies, Instructional Technology, Educational Psychology and Counseling, we are all teachers of writing. We know that in all of our college classrooms students are learning and not learning to become writers in some way, shape or form. As faculty, some of us come to writing with ease and pleasure. We write ourselves; we enjoy teaching writing and we see it as an integral part of our teaching work. For others of us, we come kicking and screaming. We know the value of writing and believe that it is important to the teaching-learning process, but we have a more difficult time thinking of it as a part of our explicit curriculum. We have all used writing in different ways, and we all want to use it, teach it, learn from it and do it better. With this in mind, we came together to talk about writing across the disciplines. What came of this collegial, collaborative experience far exceeded our expectations.

Though writing to learn was the catalyst for bringing us together, we have some important things in common, things that brought us together as colleagues and then as friends. First, we all teach at a state college with historic roots in teacher education that currently boasts its status as the largest preparer of educators in New England. Rhode Island College also serves as a "College of Opportunity" for firstgeneration college students predominantly from Rhode Island ([Rhode Island College, 2006](#)). Many of our students come to us lacking the knowledge and confidence they need to be good academic writers. Yet, many of them enter teacher education and school counseling programs at RIC, thereby increasing our

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motivation to teach and use writing across the disciplines, as our graduates become the educational leaders to the next generations of RIC students.

Second, in the process of coming to know one another as colleagues, we discovered that we share particular beliefs about teaching and learning. We have a common belief in the importance of dialogic classrooms, where teachers and students engage in open dialogue, where all voices are acknowledged and heard (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). We share the pedagogical stance that students bring valuable experiences and knowledge into the classroom, and that the classroom should be a space to humanize learning through personal connections, thoughtfulness, and trust. We also are committed to the imperative to sustain the intellectual nature of teaching and learning, especially as we see it eroding due to the strong political winds of "education reform" and "accountability" blowing across college campuses (Kohn, 2000; Christensen and Karp, 2003; McNeil, 2000).

Third, and perhaps more importantly — more potently — we are all pre-tenured faculty and, together as well as separately, we are each trying to figure out how to balance time, attention and thoughtfulness to our teaching with time for research, for writing, for scholarship. We bonded as "new faculty" — as women — before we knew each other as teachers of writing. And so, our common experience of being "strangers in a strange land" helped to form the nucleus of this collaboration.

Writing-to-Learn

In January of 2005, the year four of us were hired, Toby Fulwiler presented at the 9th Annual Faculty Development Workshop at RIC. Fulwiler reminded us that at its core, language, both oral and written, is used for two purposes: to communicate with others, in which case the form and language should be "correct" for ease of understanding; or to learn for oneself, in which case the form and language can and should be exploratory, digressive, personal. It was in setting up these purposes for writing — writing to communicate and writing to learn — that Fulwiler got all of us thinking about how we use writing for these two purposes in our teaching. We ask students to produce writing-to-communicate all the time, and we expect that their writing be "correct" for this purpose. What many of us don't do is use writing-to-learn in our classes — writing that needs not be a "product," writing that represents in-between learning, grappling with ideas, reflecting on experiences and understandings. Each of us went away from this workshop having planned at least one new way to infuse writing-to-learn in our teaching.

The following year, we presented as a panel at the 10th Annual Faculty Development Workshop. In our session, "[Beyond 'Read-a-Book, Write-a-Paper': Pedagogy and Practice](#)," we presented the variety of ways that we were experimenting with writing-to-learn in our courses across the disciplines. After attending our session on writing across the disciplines, Kathleen Blake Yancey, the keynote speaker, encouraged us to write together to document our coming together as new faculty, our collaborative and collegial journey toward better writing pedagogy, and our individual experiences as teachers of writing in our respective disciplines.

After the January 2006 workshop, we came together again to talk about writing, to share our strengths with one another and to work on the weak spots. In spring 2006, the College's Writing Board sponsored our group of six to present our best practices in writing-across-the-disciplines in a follow up to the January workshop. This session, the first of its kind, brought fifteen faculty members together to discuss how and why we use writing to build relationships in our classes, to construct a shared body of knowledge in the classroom, and ultimately, to provide possibilities for deeper learning and understanding. (The notes from this workshop are [available online](#).)

The workshop in May represented a highlight of our young careers in the professoriate. Veteran faculty enrolled in the workshop to learn from us. We received recognition on campus for our attention to teaching, to learning, to writing. And, through their invitation to present our best practices, the Writing Board gave

us professional confidence, credibility and exposure across campus as a reinvigorating force of Writing Across the Curriculum practice.

In this article, we present the fruit of this May 2006 workshop and of our experimentation in our teaching. We present the pedagogy and practice that we have all developed, as a result of learning from (and being inspired by) luminaries in the field of composition, and as a result of our investment in our teaching, our students' learning, and each other. We join the many voices who have argued that writing is an essential tool in meaning-making and in understanding (Berthoff, 1988; Britton, 1993; Elbow, 1998; Flower, 1979; Fulwiler, 1997; Moffett, 1992; Murray, 1982; Yancey, 2006). We write to think; we write to connect; we write to know what we know. We write here in our own teacher voices, each telling a story about how we have learned to use writing in our college classroom albeit in different ways. In what follows, we share our efforts, struggles and successes in being teachers of writing across the disciplines in sections entitled:

- "As easy as writing ever gets": Authentic voice and letter writing (Jennifer S. Cook)
- Writing as an Advanced Organizing Prompt (Mary Ellen Tillotson)
- Online Journal Writing (Monica G. Darcy and Susan K. Patterson)
- Rhetorical Writing (Janet Donnell Johnson)
- Writing for Critical Inquiry (Lesley Bogad)

"As easy as writing ever gets": Authentic voice and letter writing

I (Jenn) have been a teacher since 1994, when I started teaching English at the High School of Commerce in Springfield, Massachusetts. In preparing to write about why I use letter writing in my teaching, I dug through artifacts from my beginning days as a teacher to find an assignment titled "A Letter to Miss Cook." The handout outlines, for my students, the essential questions to address in their letters to me, letters I asked them to write me at the beginning of the year. Some student letters were tucked away with the handout, and as I read through them, I was reminded of how honest and how generous those high school students were in their comfortable letter-writing voices. I was also reminded of how I loved beginning the school year that way, with the gift of a letter.

Jump ahead twelve years, and here I sit, writing about the significance of building a community of writers, a community of learners, through class letters. When Toby Fulwiler conducted the workshop on writing-to-learn at our Annual Faculty Development Workshop at Rhode Island College in January 2005, I was re-introduced to the practice of writing class letters, something Fulwiler does as regular practice in his teaching. This time around, I better understood how this practice is connected to my beliefs in humanism and an ethic of care in the classroom (Elbow, 1995; Noddings, 1992).

Letter writing, as Fulwiler (1997) reminds us, is "as natural and easy as writing ever gets" (p.17) simply because everyone can do it and because everyone is familiar with it. As an egalitarian entry ticket to a course, letters not only provide the teacher with some back-story on her students but they also position the students as contributing members, as valued voices, as the integral components of the course. It is essential to the process that students have an opportunity to know that their voices are valued, to know that they are being heard, which happens when the teacher responds to the letters in some way.

Fulwiler (1997, 2005) extends the practice of letter writing by giving teachers permission to respond to students' letters, by acknowledging her role in the building of community and connection in the classroom. In Fulwiler's model (1997), teacher and students are engaged in the back-and-forth of letters each week: each student writes a letter and, usually, the teacher responds with one letter to the class, often highlighting excerpts from students' letters or distilling their letters into themes or issues of note. Of significance here, I think, is that the nature of letters is invitational.

Letters are invitations to respond, to share, to open up, which is why they are such an important part of building a classroom community and a classroom ethos. Letters require that you attend to things, big or small, and that you explain yourself. In these ways, the back-and-forth of letter writing gives teachers and students a real reason to write, a real reason to care, a real reason to attend to language and audience and purpose. Letters inspire authenticity, as best described in *The Letters of Heloise to Abelard* (Schuster, 1940), "What cannot letters inspire? They have souls; they can speak ... they have all the tenderness and the delicacy of speech, and sometimes even a boldness of expression beyond it..." (p.35)

In the last two years at Rhode Island College, I have used class letters in all of my freshmen composition courses, in a literature and film class, in a course on teaching writing, and in student teaching seminar. Students often cite the letters as their favorite part of the course, commenting in the course evaluations that they liked having a regular conduit to their teacher, a place to check-in, to "be real." I've found that letter writing improves my practice, as it alerts me to what students do not understand and allows me to make sense of what they do understand. It also allows me to get to know them, intimately, if you will, in a space often reserved for girlfriends and boyfriends, grandmothers, mothers, and pen pals.

One example of how I use class letters is from a first-year composition course I teach, a course called *Writing 100: Introduction to Academic Discourse*. During the last thirty minutes of the first class, I ask students to write me an impromptu letter, which they give to me before leaving class. Their letters to me are in response to my prompt

Tell me about yourself as a writer. What do you feel confident about? What concerns do you have? What has been your past experience with writing?

I collect and read the letters, and I take notes while I read them all. I try to notice commonalities in their experience, themes in their writing lives. Then, I write one letter back to the class, and provide them with excerpts from selected letters, enough to give them a sense of their peers' experiences with writing. Here is an excerpt from my letter to my fall 2005 Honors *Writing 100* class.

Thank you for your letters and for your honesty in expressing to me your strengths and weaknesses as writers... As I read your letters, a few themes became apparent to me in regards to your ideas about writing. I was struck by how many of you wrote that you are not writers, that you are not creative, and that you prefer writing with a prompt, specific guidelines, and a rubric. As a former high school teacher, and as a college writing professor, these three assertions are bothersome to me. How is it that you can claim you are not a writer? I want to know the story. How do you know you are not creative? I would like you to tell me that story as well. And how is it you know you prefer one type of writing over another? What is involved in "preferring?"

Though I read my letter aloud in class, students take the letter home and then write letters (#2) in response, which they bring to the next class to hand in to me. In these letters, they not only have a chance to respond to my interpretations and questions, but they also have an opportunity to make sense of the data on their own. This back-and-forth at the beginning of the semester and, by the nature of the course, at the beginning of these students' college careers, helps to demystify academic writing, helps to build community in the class through shared experience, and helps to inform me, as a teacher, how and where to start with each group of students. These excerpts from the second round of letters help to illuminate how this process works for my first-year writing students. I think it is worth noting that these students are in the Honors Program at the College:

When we wrote our first letters, I thought I was the only one in my position. After hearing other peoples' concerns, I realize that I am not alone. I think these statements from our letters show a complete lack of confidence in ourselves (KM).

In high school, grades are king...They can get you into or keep you out of the college of your choice. They can determine how much money you get for college. They can determine what classes you take...And while most of our teachers told us to forget about the grade, and concentrate on learning, few truly practiced what they preached...It seems, in the end, you're always forced to care about the grade (KN).

I enjoyed reading your letter because I learned that I was not the only one who gets nervous to write...I think the excerpts from our letters tell the story of a person (sic) who has been conditioned to write a certain way by high school teachers and enters a college writing class feeling insecure about writing on their own but willing to break free of the mold (EB).

These honest statements from my students are painful to read. They present a titanic challenge for the college professor: to care, to open up, to invite dialogue, to be vulnerable. In one simple letter writing activity, my students and I have exchanged a lot of data and we have wiped the tables clean, so to speak. As a writing to learn exercise (Herrington & Moran, 2005), letters have provided my students a still-sacred conduit for unveiling their anxieties and fears, preconceptions, misconceptions, ideas, and opinions. Letters have given me and my students another medium to make connections and a space for them to further develop their personal narrative, their story of their experience.

Letter writing is also an informal "assignment" that can easily be adopted. Asking students to write letters, and writing one (or many!) in response, is something that any teacher can learn to incorporate into their teaching. My collaboration with my five colleagues has resulted in each of them adopting this practice. And, after teaching the workshop to RIC faculty in May 2006, I heard from several participants about their successful use of letter writing--how it opened their class up, how it led to good discussion, how it made them feel more connected to their students' experiences as learners in their courses.

But, what does letter writing have to do with *academic* writing? It helps to make better students, students who are more thoughtful, more reflective, students who pay attention on purpose. These kinds of students make better writers because they have practiced the art of paying attention and of writing it down. For example, students in my English course, *The Lives of Teachers in Literature and Film* write several letters to me throughout the course of the semester. In their letters, they usually comment on the most recent film or article we've discussed and its impact on their thinking. After reading a few chapters from a text that introduced students to the "cumulative cultural text of teaching" (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), one student, Stephanie, responded in her letter to me:

It is incredibly fascinating and scary to imagine how much baggage comes along with telling someone that you are a teacher.

Here, Stephanie shows me her ability to frame a theoretical concept ("cumulative cultural text") with her relational understanding of "baggage" and even degrees of "baggage." In this way, my students' letters to me provide a space for them to make sense of what they're learning and how what they're learning. Interestingly, some students also comment in their letters to me about how the class suits them pedagogically or methodologically. Here, Brian reflects on our critical analysis of the representations of teachers:

Critical analysis of why things are the way they've become and, more importantly, of how to change what we find to be inequitable is very irrelevant to a great many people I talk to...Maybe

the house so firmly built, they just don't feel like chipping away at the foundation because it might too badly shake up their already uncomfortable homes...

This kind of writing and reflection in an English class — low-stakes, reflective, dialogic — gives students an opportunity to make meaning of their experience in my course and allows them to practice metacognitive thinking, a type of critical thinking that is crucial for college writers who are constantly switching rhetorical models, audiences, and purposes. And letter writing--to the instructor, to each other--is a rather "painless" way to reveal the portals to student thinking, attitudes, and learning, portals that can lead to deeper understandings and connections.

Writing as an Advanced Organizing Prompt

How do I make this material come to life? This is the question I (Mary Ellen) find myself asking again and again as I face the curricular content and objectives of any one of a number of my graduate classes I teach in early adolescent development and educational psychology. Too often, my own graduate experience was marked by periods of detachment as I faced scores of empirical articles and scholarly tomes which felt lifeless in their perspective and hollow without context. I would argue (with myself) that it was necessary to digest, analyze and synthesize the body of research at hand. As a new teacher, I was faced with a similar dilemma. Beyond the strictly epistemological bent in my questioning (Harding, 1991), I really wanted to know how to make sense of content within context; how to teach with meaning. It was this search that led me to think specifically about the use of writing to expand meaning within context. Using writing exercises in my college teaching has now become a passion for me as the direct result of my exposure to Toby Fulwiler's (1986) challenge to incorporate writing into the "business" of teaching.

When I considered the best way to teach graduate students about adolescent development with this challenge in mind, it occurred to me that drawing upon the experiences and memories that are available to the learner might work. Chris Stevenson (2002) writes, "the best way to study early adolescence is by becoming acquainted with young adolescents" (p. xiii). With this in mind, I considered that one of the best ways to understand adolescence might be to remember one's "own" adolescence. Drawing an explicit connection between one's phenomenological recollection of adolescence and course content seemed to be achievable through the use of one writing prompt in particular. Therefore, I asked a class of approximately 25 graduate students taking a course entitled *Teaching and Learning in Middle School* to respond to an ambiguous, open-ended prompt. I chose a prompt that would allow for the writers to connect to a time in their lives but would allow great latitude in the expansion of their thoughts. The assignment was to write freely in response to "When I was 10 (or 11, 12, 13 or 14)." I wrote along with them to refresh my own recollection of those early adolescent years. Every time I teach, I write with them.

The task works in much the same way as a projective technique, familiar to me via my training in psychological assessment. A projective technique is a traditional assessment tool used in the assessment of personality. Based, on the projective hypothesis (Rappaport, 1967), the theory supporting this tool suggests that when people try to understand vague or ambiguous unstructured stimuli, their responses reflect their needs, feelings, experience, prior conditioning, or thought processes. I noticed that student writings in response to this particular prompt did, indeed, reflect their thoughts about adolescence and revealed their beliefs and prior experiences. The personal narratives that they created were the result of using the ambiguity of a personal prompt that connected them to the domains of personalized adolescent experience.

To my surprise, I found that the writings could also easily be used as an advanced organizer (Mayer, 1984). An advanced organizer is an instructional strategy used to help learners recall prior knowledge and to connect this knowledge to new information that is presented. It is an introduction of new material that serves as a bridge between what is known and what is being taught (Ausubel, 1978). As my students wrote, they created, through their recollections, connections between their experience or prior knowledge of

adolescence to what I would have them learn. In fact, I found that the course content, which examines the physical, emotional, social and intellectual characteristics of early adolescents and the impact of society on these adolescents, was reflected clearly in my own and my students' writing. What an exciting discovery!

As I considered what students could learn from their reflection, I realized that they might use the information gathered from this ambiguous task as a scaffold upon which further course content would apply like Jenn proposes above. They might reflect on the content of their writing to formatively assess their current understandings of adolescent development. For example, K. P. wrote:

13 was the year I first fell in love. It was the kind of love that I was sure no one had ever felt before...it was like magic but I remember feeling sick to my stomach a lot so it was sort of like getting the flu too. I used to talk to my girlfriends on the phone about my newfound love... they would advise me about these matters of the heart...

This writing assists students in understanding the increasing importance of social relationships and the concomitant cognitive changes involved in, for example, the egocentrism and personal fable created by teens during this crucial period of adolescent development (Elkind, 1985). This allows the writer to link new information with existing knowledge in a meaningful way, an important learning principle (APA, 2006).

Students are also active learners in this writing-to-learn process. It may be that the novelty of the task stimulates motivation to learn more about the domains of adolescent development. The task elicits very personal prior knowledge and creates opportunities for students to elaborate and connect prior knowledge to deepen their understanding of course content, which are key additional elements that facilitate learning (Woolfolk, 2006). Students fasten course content and therefore, fasten my objectives for them, onto a personal scaffold that they create in their narrative. In the end, they use this task as a summative tool in reflecting on their understanding of the domains and experiences of the early adolescent. Later in the semester, students produce a summative piece: an interview with an adolescent that allows them to continue to understand and write about connections between phenomenological experience and our base of understanding of adolescent development.

All of this in a simple prompt? I think so. The task created a connection between me and my students. They knew I was writing, and I would choose sometimes to share my thoughts from my projective with them. Like Monica concludes below, this modeling further strengthened connection and ultimately the engagement necessary for course content to become meaningful. This writing assignment might be considered risky because of the personal nature of the task. On the other hand, the personal nature of the task stimulates learning in a number of ways that I have discussed. My goals for my students are never far away from my understanding of learner-centered principles that I teach in my undergraduate educational psychology courses (APA, 2006). For example, of these 14 psychological principles, *we know that learning complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience* (para. 1).

Writing certainly helps us think (Greene, 1994). It is not simply therapeutic to reconstruct our personal stories; the narrative can assist us learning in new contexts and concepts. Simply put, as I have discovered, material comes to life through meaningful connection and reflection. The use of personal narrative as an organizing prompt can assist learners in creating this meaning and giving life to course content that is vital to their understanding of early adolescents. On a personal note, I gained great insight from the organic experience of collaboration with my colleagues; it allowed me to uncover the many ways this process connects the psychology of learning to student learning via writing-to-learn.

Online Journal Writing

During my first few semesters of teaching in the counseling program at my college, I (Monica) found that much of the written work I was receiving was not to a standard I considered acceptable for graduate work. Most of the Master's level students I had in my classes were returning to school after a long hiatus from their Bachelor's degree. Approximately 60% of the graduate students in my classes were 30 or older and the quality of their writing often paled in comparison to my undergraduates. I found that I was comfortable guiding students to contend with the content of their new profession, however I also had a role in teaching the skills necessary for the counseling candidates to appropriately communicate academically and reflectively. It didn't take me long to acknowledge that I was a teacher of writing along, whether I liked it or not.

My introduction to incorporating writing in my classes began when I attended Toby Fulwiler's workshop during the College Writing Board's Faculty Development Workshop. As a new faculty member, I recognized this event as a mandatory, one-shot professional development day. I was surprised to find that 1) I liked the ideas about using writing as a vehicle for reflection, and 2) the ensuing discussion with colleagues solidified ways I could introduce more writing in my classes. Jenn (above) and Lesley (below) both described to me methods they use to improve academic writing and create safe cultures of learning in their classes. When I mentioned my ideas about reflective journals to a colleague (Susan), she prompted me to consider online technology as the method for delivery of journal assignments. She told me that the format of online journals was believed to enhance the learning of traditional journals because it introduced a component of a public space. When students' work is open to classmates, it allows students to get feedback on their ideas and can aid in building a community of learners (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). Students who believe they are performing for their peers as well as their teacher will take longer to get their facts straight and respond intelligently. It raises the stakes for the learner and, in theory, moves the learning to a higher level.

When Monica (above) approached me (Susan) with questions concerning online journaling, we discussed the importance of determining the purpose of the writing before choosing the online tool. Emerging evidence indicates that writing may be enhanced by using web-based tools. You need only take a peek at a blog or a [My Space](#) page to understand the power of the Internet. It allows its users not only to write text, but to link to others who agree with us (or who disagree with us), to add images, to add music, to add video, and to ask for suggestions and feedback. Web-based writing tools are motivational, generally constructivist in nature, and can give students a wider, more authentic audience. (Kajder & Bull, 2004; Brooks, Nichols, & Prise, 2004). There are currently three types of online writing spaces that are free and relatively easy to use: discussion boards, blogs, and wikis. While each provides an opportunity for students to write, the instructor should decide, based on need, which of the three tools she wants to use in her classroom.

For me (Monica), the decision to use a discussion board was the best method to engage my graduate counseling students in journal writing. It provided a way to incorporate some technology in my classes, the set-up was straightforward, it allowed me to direct the conversation, and it introduced that component of public space for the sharing of ideas. I wasn't convinced this method in and of itself would enhance academic writing or the quality of APA style writing skills. As a beginning point, however, I was content with its purpose in engaging students in reflection around the content of their new discipline as mental health counselors.

With [Google Groups](#) as my discussion board tool, students responded to different types of prompts that ranged from content-related questions to reflection on topics that interfaced with a student's personal experiences. The assignments were low stakes – entries were required but not graded. I found that student responses to weekly journal prompts were generally well thought out and showed insightful reflection. I made comments to each person's journals at least once to either affirm their well-stated opinions or to redirect those whose interpretations were a bit astray.

When asked at the end of the semester what they thought of the experience, students' responses were positive. During one semester, I categorized responses from students in a graduate level counseling course and found that 94% stated that they liked the assignment for a variety of reasons: it gave them an opportunity to express themselves, they learned about themselves, they connected new information to their own learning, they heard other opinions, and the quiet students found a venue for speaking up. The few students who did not like the assignment were frustrated by technology snafus or their own tendency to forget weekly assignments.

Several student comments help underscore the achievement of some of my objectives for this journal component of the course. One important goal for incorporating journals was to give students the task of organizing their thoughts, integrating concepts and manipulating ideas which can reinforce the ways that a student understands material (Morrison, Ross & Kemp, 2000). When one student wrote that "I explored areas I might have just thrown to the side," she validated my belief that journals require students to incorporate new material into novel ways of thinking. Not only did I have a chance, as the instructor, to catch a glimpse of the way students were incorporating material early in the semester, I could also see the students' processes of deciphering material as they formulated new personal understandings. For some students, journals provided an expanded opportunity to investigate material, to use writing to explore ideas at their own pace and at their own level.

Another student comment lends support to the task of critical thinking; "(i)t is very easy to hear a lecture or read a chapter but to actually examine one's thoughts, ideas and explain them can be eye opening to even ourselves." Journals required this student and others to take a deep and personal look at what they were learning and how it connected to their own experiences. Writing about their learning may prompt students to analyze assumptions and beliefs that influence their judgments (Griffith & Frieden, 2000). This type of self-analysis is crucial to the emergence of a reflective practitioner, and, in the long run, may guide them in developing deeper self-awareness (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985).

A third instructional objective of journals in my counseling classes is to monitor a student's journey along a continuum in which they find increasing integration of their own beliefs and theoretical affinities (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Dewey (1933) described reflective thinking as a state of doubt and an act of searching. Developing the skill of reflective thinking is a good approach to dealing with the indeterminate and swampy situations often encountered in the real world practice of counseling (Henderson, 1998). One student echoed her classmates when she wrote that journals "helped me feel part of a community. Everyone is responding to these questions in their own way. It seems like we are all on the same journey throughout the semester in learning about theories of counseling, but also reflecting on our own inner process." While developing their own perspectives in counseling, online journaling seems to provide a forum for students to check in with me and their class colleagues about their process of navigating the swampy situations of counseling.

In an effort to encourage the development of reflective practitioners (counselors who have the skill to reflect in action and reflect on action) (Shoen, 1983), online journaling has provided a modern and creative avenue to student expression. While using public online journaling with graduate counseling students, I am encouraging students to do some internal monitoring before posting responses. The students generally like the assignment and it gives me a peek at their thought process. I can see their development as thinkers around the concepts of counseling; the concerns they have as emerging professionals; what they believe a client brings to counseling; the role they believe they can play as a therapist; what therapeutic focus they will take; what kind of professional they want to be. What I am introducing with online journaling is an opportunity for students to develop the metacognitive skill of self-reflection which encompasses observation, interpretation and evaluation of their own thoughts, emotions and actions (Bennett-Levy, 2006). They can begin the process of checking in on self cues and develop further self understanding which are both so pivotal for the professional counselor.

The incorporation of online journaling in my graduate counseling courses has promoted a level of personal expression both among students and between student and professor that is usually lacking given the constraints of a traditional classroom setting. It has opened up new ways for me to assist student learning. I have yet to investigate if I have improved academic writing skills for the students in my classes. Report writing, research papers, article synopsis - none of these are addressed in online journaling as I have designed it so far. For future journal prompts, I intend to develop a more step-wise process for better writing; each journal entry will be a component that can be incorporated into a larger assignment. I intend to provide mini-lessons (possibly online) that highlight analytical skills, critical thinking about research, and details of APA citation. In the meantime, I thank my colleagues for their input about the importance of actually teaching writing as a necessary skill in counseling courses. I no longer see writing as an add-on skill that takes away from important class time dedicated to presenting content.

Rhetorical Writing

I (Janet) come to writing with passion and fear. There are the heady first days, when seeds from an idea seem to sprout so quickly it's impossible to imagine how far or fast they will grow. Then, there is revision: the shock comes again that writing is *work*, that it takes weeding and watering and a careful eye on the weather.

Teaching writing can be a similar experience. As an English teacher at an alternative high school, and later as a graduate student teaching English education and composition courses at the college level, I spent hours developing courses and assignments designed to appeal to my students. I found this creative endeavor to be just as stimulating as my own writing process, but this time the students were the judges instead of my college instructors or dissertation committee. While it was comforting to blame my students if they turned in perfunctory papers, I knew there was more to it. Often, their lack of engagement was because I did not provide them with enough voice and choice. Since then, it has been my goal to design — and teach my pre-service teachers to create — such enticing invitations to write that no student could possibly resist doing her best.

Last year I joined the Educational Studies Department at Rhode Island College with this aim in mind. I taught the general secondary education methods course and undergraduate and graduate courses in the middle level program. These classes focused on literacy across the curriculum, and presented me with my first experience instructing pre-service teachers from science, math, social studies, and foreign language, in addition to English.

When we began, many students equated literacy with reading comprehension. We discussed literacy as multiple and ideological, and most were amenable to the idea that they and their students had a variety of literacies, such as technological, artistic, and cultural. This awareness led to understanding each discipline as having a particular and unique discourse, which therefore required specific literacy practices. We analyzed structures and features of course texts and practiced scaffolding student learning of vocabulary and concepts. Pre-service teachers then saw how teaching students to "read" the discourses of their discipline was part of their responsibility as educators.

When it came to writing across the disciplines, however, students were more resistant. The "I'm not an English teacher" refrain was spoken more than once. It was only when we discussed writing for specific, identifiable purposes and real-world audiences that opposition lessened. Creating a math book for younger students became a way to review important algebraic concepts; writing letters from soldiers to their spouses during the Battle of Gettysburg became a way to personalize the horrors of war; and writing a science grant for further experimentation on AIDS research became a way to understand the political as well as scientific issues surrounding funding for medical endeavors.

We discovered that if we expected our middle and high school students to immerse themselves in a particular theme, concept, situation, time period, or person's life, it was our responsibility to create writing invitations that explicitly asked them to do just that. In addition, it became evident that writing assignments could be differentiated to accommodate the various skill and sophistication levels of students. Rhetorical writing, which requires students to write for a particular purpose, audience, and context, is one such application we practiced that borrows liberally from the concept of RAFTS (Role, Audience, Format, Topic, Strong verbs) writing (Allen, 2004; Culham, 2005; Strong, 2006). Depending on their field, once students are out of school, they will be writing in multiple contexts (letters, briefs, memos, fieldnotes, articles, persuasive pieces, etc.) for multiple purposes (to explain, convince, argue, communicate, etc.) and for multiple audiences (bosses, clients, family members, etc.). Learning to write rhetorically is a way for students to take on different perspectives, imagine how their writing might be perceived by specific audiences, and learn the conventions of different genres.

Although I used rhetorical writing as a means for pre-service teachers to create meaningful and worthwhile writing assignments for middle and high school students, the concept is also applicable to most college courses. My colleagues helped me develop a more sophisticated format for college students: instead of using the acronym RAFTS, I ask students to attend to Topic, Perspective, Audience, Purpose and Genre. There are multiple ways to design a writing assignment using this format. Instructors can determine some or all of the elements, give students choices, or allow them to develop their own ideas in groups or as individuals. In [Appendix A](#), you will find a sample writing assignment created by faculty members from Rhode Island College.

As teacher candidates developed rhetorical writing assignments, wrote models for their hypothetical students, and did the assignments developed by their classmates, they discovered that rhetorical writing is challenging and engaging. The element of choice supports student agency and often engenders a sense of playfulness (student designed RAFTs area [available online](#)). One future science teacher asked her students to demonstrate their knowledge of Newton's Laws. She wrote a sample diary entry in which she took the perspective of a birthday cake riding in the front seat of a car that crashed. Her model demonstrated her understanding of the laws of acceleration and inertia by applying this knowledge to a real world context. By asking her students to do the same, she was showing them that what they were learning affected their lives outside of school. Rhetorical writing assignments help students at all levels answer the question, "Why is this important to know?"

In my English education courses, I plan to use this form of rhetorical writing as a way to look at the identities teachers and students take up as they seek agency and belonging in specific school contexts. Through writing and performing dialogues, teacher candidates will better understand why students react in certain ways when teachers take up specific roles in the classroom (i.e. as authoritarian, parent figure, buddy, and so on). My hope is that they will begin to think like the teachers they are about to become by practicing the discourses of the community that awaits them.

Writing for Critical Inquiry

I (Lesley) have always been a writer. When I was seven years old, I started my first personal journal. In it, I recorded the ins and outs of the second grade alongside intermittent reports of "Happy Days" episodes that I watched with my sisters in the evening after we took our baths. I kept a journal for much of my life and took creative writing classes in summer school when I was a teenager. I read ferociously. I entered essay contests and sent my horrifically bad poetry to teen magazines throughout high school. I used writing to connect with the world, with friends, and with myself.

Writing came easily to me because I was given so many opportunities to practice being a writer. By the time I entered college, I was already well on my way to developing my creative and analytical writing voices because I had help along the way — both of my parents were teachers, and I went to a high school with

"high expectations" and lots of academic support. I gained confidence and skill early on, and thus my experience with writing was mostly positive. This was my privilege.

Most of my students, however, come from a very different place as writers. Often underprepared and unpracticed, these students lack some of the basic rules and codes for success with literacy (Casey, 2005; Delpit, 1994). In my five years teaching in this predominantly white, working class state school, I have learned that students need opportunities to develop their confidence and skills in the area of writing (Linton, 1999). Writing can serve as a crucial mode of connection and communication in the college classroom per the examples my colleagues have described above; and students also need access to writing as a mode of critical inquiry. With consistent, low-risk writing opportunities that include high expectations, students can become better critical readers and writers in the college classroom.

The primary undergraduate course that I teach is called *Schooling in a Democratic Society*. It is a prerequisite course for all students entering the School of Education, so many of the students who end up in classes with my colleagues (Jenn, Janet and Susan, in particular) first spend a semester in this course. I tend to teach from a model of depth over breadth — each week students read one scholarly text that I have collected from academic journals or other scholarly resources in the field of education. The class is organized around the broad theme of teaching-for-social-justice and we cover topics that range from race, class, ability, sexuality, gender, and age to other issues of power as they relate to schooling in the U.S.

While I have incorporated several strategies to use writing to connect — which is so important given the very heated and politicized nature of our content — I have found much of my attention drawn to teaching writing as a strategy for critical inquiry. I try to offer specific, focused assignments that allow students to build their strategies as critical readers and writers without getting derailed by anxiety and fear. Drawing from Peter Elbow's work, I begin the semester with two "low-stakes" writing assignments called Think Pieces. In two double-spaced pages, I ask students to simply think on paper: What is the article about? What do you make of this? This offers an opportunity for them to practice articulating ideas, impressions, confusions and thoughts before class. I begin here because it gives students a very low risk space to initiate their engagement with content and process. Without the stress of analysis, writing conventions and skill, students are able to engage the work of making meaning around new theoretical frameworks, vocabulary and concepts.

I move from these Think Piece assignments to a series of Position Papers in which students learn to read for meaning and write for clarity. For this task, students have to read an academic article and work to articulate the author's argument: "In this text, John Dewey argues that..." The goal here is not to *summarize* the whole article, nor is it to practice critique. Rather, position papers are an exercise in synthesizing ideas and articulating positions. We practice working out argument statements together in class before the paper is due to model this kind of literacy. With the basic tools in hand, students then work on their own at home, writing a 3-4 page paper in which they focus on the argument and three examples of the kind of evidence the author uses to support that argument. I assign three position papers but grades are only counted for two of the three. Of the two graded papers, one can be rewritten for a new grade at the end of the semester. I set up these opportunities to allow students to experiment with this kind of writing without penalty.

Both the Think Pieces and the Position Papers are designed to promote critical thinking and writing skills. I follow these with a third assignment that I have called Talking Points. Here students get to practice the skills they have learned in the first two assignments, but the Talking Points are tighter and more focused. Rather than continuing to practice the conventions of academic writing, I downshift into a thinking activity where students use bulleted lists to articulate the same argument and evidence they rehearsed in their position papers. Writing Talking Points helps teach students how to prepare for class and come ready to participate confidently in our discussions. (See Appendix B for Talking Points assignment).

I have found that all three of these assignments — Think Pieces, Position Papers and Talking Points — greatly improve the quality of thinking *and* dialogue in the classroom each week because students are prepared to discuss the texts at hand. Their confidence is much higher because of these writing assignments. I watch student use their own work when they are in small groups, and even read from their papers when we are having large group discussions. Students' reading skills also improve as they gain the skills to move from basic summary — 'first the author says this, then she says that...' — to a more focused discussion of an author's theoretical position and rhetorical strategies. Finally, the students' writing shows much more sophistication by the end of the semester. Their writing strategies and skills increase as they learn to think through their words. My next step — inspired by this collaborative work with my colleagues here — is to imagine ways to explicitly teach more about writing conventions, grammar, pace, rhythm, etc. to help students further develop the sophisticated ideas they are now able to articulate. I am ready to do this now in a way I wasn't before because I feel more confident as a teacher-of-writing given the experience of working across the disciplines with supportive co-authors and friends.

Conclusion

The tales from the field that we describe in this piece leave us with several issues to ponder. As teachers, as writers and as friends, we are left thinking about both the practice of teaching writing and about the promise of collaboration in higher education. In the introduction, we discuss our shared commitment to writing pedagogy and to the process of becoming better teachers of writing across the disciplines. We have learned from each other and from other WAC colleagues that "good writing" comes in many forms, and that teaching students (to write) is less about producing outcomes than it is about rehearsing rhetorical flexibility.

We acknowledge, in our teaching methods and in our own writing process here, new ways of composing and new texts to help us — teachers and students alike — see ourselves as writers/composers in other areas of our lives (Yancey, 2006). This collaboration encouraged us all to flex our own rhetorical awareness in a variety of ways. Just as some of us, prior to this collaboration, did not necessarily see ourselves as teachers of writing, some of us came to this project reluctant about technology, resistant to purging the pencils from our classrooms and plugging everyone in. The integration of technology into this project, and ultimately into our classrooms, came in large part, because one of us (Susan) is the only tenure-track Instructional Technology faculty member on our campus. Initially, Susan invited us into the 21st century by developing a website to codify our work together; but little by little, with gentle urging and technical support, we all came on board. Beyond the website we created together, we began to compose this article, in its tender early stages, on a wiki, which then morphed into a Google Doc. In these ways, Susan facilitated our experience, practice and comfort with bringing these technologies into our classrooms, so to better guide our students to see technology as a constructivist tool that can assist in composing, collaborating and communicating. This, too, is about becoming better writers in imaginative and flexible ways.

This article is about using writing with students in higher education classrooms and about how we help our students become better thinkers. But this article is also about coming together as writers ourselves and how we have discovered other things we have in common, sturdy things that hold us up as teachers, as colleagues, as women when we are tempted to be lazy or feign indifference. We came together in spaces both real and virtual to become stronger. As junior faculty at a state teaching college, we have benefited (and continue to benefit) from this collaborative professional development experience. Our confidence, our classroom pedagogy, our identities as teachers and researchers, our connections across campus, have all been enhanced through our meetings, discussions, presentations, and writing together. This collaboration has been self-directed professional development, tailored by the six of us to meet our needs as new faculty and as scholars (and here, hidden deep within the article, we divulge our group's moniker: the Scholarinas). As a group, we have had the courage, energy, and drive to present faculty workshops on writing and ultimately, to write this article. All of these professional experiences, especially on a small campus, necessitate

suspension of ego — we had to risk doing it badly. And, we all *could* risk doing it badly, with the support of one another.

What lessons can we impart from the stories we share here? How can we talk to you, our audience, without suggesting that the supportive collaboration we found is merely a matter of chance, coincidence or serendipity that therefore could never be replicated? It is true: we found each other in the junior faculty blur of new course preparation, time-intensive service commitments, and post-doctoral adjustment to professional life in the academy. At this writing, we — as mothers, partners, daughters, friends — have survived 3 divorces, 2 twelve-step programs, 1 major move, 2 rounds with antidepressants, 4 cases of intense newcomers syndrome, 1 psychotic girlfriend, and a whole lotta of red wine. But to suggest that our collegial success came merely of this would be false and naive.

As we consider our fortunate friendships, we know that it is both our individual connections *and* the efforts of our institution that fostered the professional and pedagogical success we speak of here. We believe that an institution of higher education has an obligation to invite and to sustain the energy of junior faculty around writing and professional development. While our institution was not perfect at this, we can draw some lessons from our experience that could help sustain others in this process.

- **Building Cultures of Collegiality & Collaboration:** From the date of hire, new faculty members across disciplines and departments should be brought together to meet and share experiences, to collaborate and be mentored by veteran faculty, and to foster connections as teachers and as researchers. This should happen at the department as well as college level, allowing for mentoring at multiple levels. Building this type of culture in the competitive world of higher education is no small feat. The efforts by our College to bring us together were admirable but sporadic. We continued to build on what the college cultivated by meeting together, on campus and off, and by engaging ourselves, as a group, in a scholarly project that would propel us forward, together.
- **Sustaining Cultures of Collegiality and Collaboration:** These efforts will be most effective when they are sustained by an institution that visibly values them. Material and symbolic gestures on the part of the institution can encourage faculty to work together as teachers, scholars and colleagues: course release time for interdisciplinary work, adequate compensation for co-teaching, faculty development grants, and the acknowledgment of collaborative authorship in the tenure review process all contribute to this. We worked without many of these institutional supports, but our future work beyond this article demands more of us and our college. What can this look like for us, and for others?
- **Buy-In and Participation:** While building and sustaining cultures of collaboration is an institutional responsibility, it is meaningless without the commitment of individual faculty members, untenured and tenured alike. To borrow from Gandhi, we have to choose to be the change we wish to see in our workplaces.

In their feedback to us about a draft of this piece, the reviewers cited that one of the most impressive aspects of our work is that we've done it in spite of the fact that historically, higher education does not produce or sustain this type of work. In other words, in the culture of the academy, this sustained collaborative work, especially for un-tenured folks, is not easy. We agree! This has been a long and difficult process — the process of our becoming, as new professors; the process of coming together, regularly, to nurture the stuff of an article; the process of writing collaboratively, of making decisions together without splintering the group. But, it has also been an enriching experience for each of us, adding friendship, girlpower, support, and intellectual sparring to our lives just as we all happened to need it. This collaborative professional experience has pushed us to challenge ourselves to do more and to do better as teachers, as learners, and as scholars. Our hope is to continue to explore possibilities for writing across the disciplines and, in the

process, to provide opportunities for other faculty at our college to come together to explore links between their content and writing-to-learn methods.

Appendix A: Rhetorical Writing Sample

<i>Key Elements</i>	<i>Faculty Example</i>
Topic: Instructors often choose the topic, or you may want to offer students choices, depending on the subject and your objectives.	The trial of Daniel Biechele, manager for the rock band Great White. Biechele was responsible for setting off fireworks in a local tavern which caused a fire that killed 100 people and injured numerous others.
Perspective: What role will the writer take? This will determine her point of view, voice, and knowledge base. This can be a person, animal, or inanimate object.	Families of those who died, Biechele, his family, the owners of the nightclub, the survivors, the fire, other nightclubs.
Audience: Who will be reading or hearing this piece? The audience will determine the content and style. The key here is that the instructor is NOT the ultimate audience—the student is writing for the hypothetical reader or listener of this piece.	People who go to see bands play, the judge, the public, members of Great White, those who were there that night, the family members.
Purpose: What is the purpose of this person/animal/object for writing?	To mourn, justify, punish, forgive, explain, deflect blame, assure, prevent.
Genre: What is the most appropriate genre given the perspective, audience, and purpose?	A play, letter, apology, obituary, poem, song, blog, psychiatrists' notes, legislation, legal brief, press release.

Appendix B: Talking Points Assignments

YOUR NAME

NAME OF AUTHOR

PREMISE:

In the most general sense, what is the article about? This can be a bulleted list of topics, concepts, and themes.

AUTHOR'S ARGUMENT:

1-2 sentences — what is the author's position on the topic? Be specific. "Oakes argues that..."

NOTES:

Use the rest of the card to respond to the issues raised in the article. This can be a bulleted list or full sentences. Include any quotes that you found particularly interesting or confusing. What do YOU think about the issues raised in this text? How does this text connect to other texts or issues we have raised?

POINTS WE RAISE IN CLASS:

In order to best prepare to participate in class discussions, you should include at least one question or comment that you intend to share in class.

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