

The Role of Writing in the Classroom

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Providing students with the opportunity to engage in a variety of writing experiences can enhance their ability to learn the subject matter of a course and to communicate their knowledge to others. Written language serves many purposes for writers and readers and for individuals and communities. In my seminar series this June, I propose to investigate the uses of writing for the individual student writer.

Students can and do use writing for a variety of purposes; we will examine classroom strategies and techniques for enabling students to use writing in the following four ways: 1) *to communicate* information to a particular audience, 2) *to learn* about certain subjects, 3) *to express* themselves and order experience, and 4) *to assess values* in relation to the material they are studying. While these four functions of written language are not mutually exclusive, or even exhaustive, I have found it useful to segregate them so that the unique value of each can be studied and practiced. We will look at these functions of writing from two points of view: first as an English teacher might employ them in both the composition and literature classroom, and second as they might be employed in any classroom through a "writing across the curriculum" program. Seminar participants will explore these functions of writing by writing and talking about their writing in small groups.

I have been designing assignments based on these functions of writing in my own classes for the past several years. In order to encourage students to become confident, fluid, and effective in writing for a variety of purposes and audiences, I have assigned research papers, interpretive essays, journal entries, speculative pieces, poems, stories, graffiti. After each of these assignments, I ask my students to reflect in writing on the experience of doing the assignment. Let me share with you a suggestive student response to each of these functions from the perspective my seminar will take: **The value of writing to the writer.**

1. When the primary function of writing is *to communicate* then the writer has the dual obligation of arriving at a coherent understanding of the material and of presenting it in an attractive, efficient way. This particular aspect of writing is familiar to us all, and we spend a great deal of our professional lives assisting students to become proficient in it. After completing an analytic paper for a course, one student put it this way:

By writing a formal paper, you want to get an idea across clearly, neatly, and concisely. You want your reader to be able to go through it and understand immediately what you are saying without having them stop and ask questions – about your purpose or grammar and spelling mistakes. You write a formal paper to make sure you don't make mistakes, to make sure you're organized, and to make sure you don't

leave anything out, but by using an outline, a rough draft, and proofreading.

(John)

2. When the primary function of writing is *to learn* — to reach a secure understanding of new information, either for no immediate pragmatic end or as a step to mastering information in preparation for a formal paper or a test — then the writer is free to discover ideas and to play with language without the constraint of pleasing a demanding reader. Here is an example of a student writing his way to an understanding of Emily Dickenson's poem "I started early, took my dog —":

This particular poem is very perplexing. Even after quite some time of study I don't understand the meaning. I've even had problems with the overt meaning and the words.

The poem seems to be about the sea – about how she (Emily) stands in a wave and then runs from it – back to dry land. But what do the dog, mermaids, frigate, mouse, and the town represent – why are they added? The dog and the mouse especially don't seem to have any meaning to the poem if it is just about the sea. Therefore the sea must be a metaphor or symbol or something.

The mermaids in the basement speak of mermaids from the depths as the frigate in the upper floor speaks of a ship on the sea. When the ship extends its hempen hands, it seems to be beckoning to her to come out there – But she just seems to stand there until the waves wash on her and try to pull her in. Then she realizes that she can't be a part of the sea so she moves toward the land with the water close behind. As she gets closer, the sea "realizes" it can't go with her so it retreats.

Overall the poem speaks of two worlds, both different and distinct from the other. E.D. is part of one and observes the other. This could be the recurring theme that nature is separate from humanity.

(Ralph)

3. When the primary function of writing is *to express* the self's perception of reality and to order experience, then the writer's primary goal is to personalize knowledge — that is, make it his or her own. New information must be made to fit the individual's perception of reality. All of us need to symbolize reality in order to handle it, and written language can be a valuable tool in this process. Here is a student reflecting on the experience of reading Emily Dickenson's letters:

They had a moral code. Now I understand, mind you, that some people rebelled against it, but at least there was something to rebel against. They know where they were, and so the courageous ones could strike out on their own, from someplace to someplace. They had a culture. We either don't have one or have one too embarrassing to admit to. I can never decide which. I think maybe I'm just writing this on a bad day, because even though I'm no Puritan, I think I would rather be there than here. The only thing this has to do with Emily D. is that I started feeling this way reading her letters.

(Joyce)

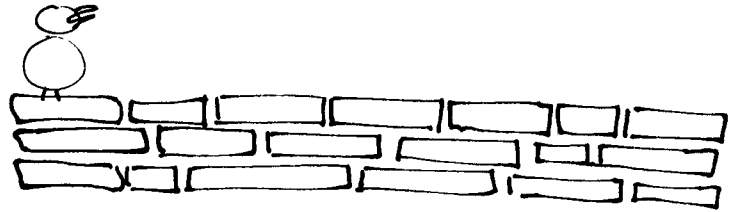
4. When the primary purpose of writing is *to assess values*, writers are engaged in discovering what they believe and how they feel about a particular experience or piece of information. Although such engagement can be encouraged in many ways, I have found creative writing assignments related to understanding the subject matter of the class to be a particularly effective way of sharing and shaping values. Here is the response of a student who had just completed an assignment to write another final chapter to Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano*:

I think that I actually do enjoy creative writing and just the opportunity to be able to have anything you want happen to the characters. It is true that I usually tend to depict them pretty much as before but I still get the chance to see what it is like to be an author. That provides me with more motivation to do the other assignments. Looking back just now, I

realize that when I have some character do something it is mostly likely to be in the manner in which I see that group in which the person can be classified. That is, I have women doing what I see as the role of women. Doctors doing what I see as the role for doctors, etc. I suppose that that is, actually, an indication as to what I am like, believe and see as important.

(Steve)

The teaching of writing and the teaching of literature are alike as humanistic callings. While we are proud to teach the survival skills of writing, reading, interpretation, and critical thinking, we are privileged to teach whole persons — persons with thoughts, feelings, beliefs, personalities. I believe that by systematically allowing writing to serve various functions, teachers encourage people to grow as their talents do. See you in June.



As my grandfather used to say:

Any fool can make ~~almost~~
any old sentence at all;
Something
You've gotta ~~kinda~~ ^{don and} work and sweat
~~plan~~
to make an honest wall."

Reflection in writing
on the experience of doing
the assignment