

Reflection Revisited: The Class Collage

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ABSTRACT: Through the regular use of what Donald Schön has termed reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, students can learn to improve their “reflection-in-presentation,” in Kathleen Blake Yancey’s term. Students are often asked to do this type of reflection-in-presentation as a capstone to first-year or basic writing courses. However, a number of critics have articulated reservations about reflective writing assignments that ask students to assess their progress in writing and, in essence, their cognitive development as they complete a composition or BW course. Laurel Bower (JBW 22.2, 2003), in particular, notes that such end-of-term written work is frequently superficial. This essay focuses on an alternative approach to reflective writing, one that asks students to examine their own beliefs about writing as well as those of their classmates rather than examining their cognitive development. This shift to reflecting on the epistemological grounding of their experiences as writers, coupled with a semester-long practice in reflection, seems to produce rich, fully developed reflection-in-presentation that offers some anecdotal evidence of knowledge transfer by the students as well as providing an informal outcomes assessment of course objectives for the professor.

KEYWORDS: reflection; epistemology; beliefs; outcomes assessment; knowledge transfer

“Formulating an organized assignment is difficult enough; reflecting on the process and describing the changes is the ultimate challenge. But I will lasso my metacognitive thoughts and attempt to put them on paper.”

—Kyle, a first-year composition student

Reservations about Reflective Writing

Metaphorical lassos in hand, students have been asked to reflect on their writing and on their learning in first-year and basic writing courses for some time now. But skeptics have been expressing reservations about the role of reflection in composition courses for more than twenty years at the same time that advocates, especially portfolio supporters, have been

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urging its centrality to the purposes of writing instruction (see Sommers, “Bringing”) and learning itself (see Moon). Why? Donald A. Schön defines “reflecting-in-action” as thinking about something while immersed in the act of doing it, offering examples of how baseball pitchers explain “finding the groove” and how jazz musicians “manifest a ‘feel for’ their material” (“Reflective” 54-55). Schön is also careful to point out that at times people “reflect on action, thinking back on what ... [they] have done” after the action is completed (*Educating* 26). But the “ultimate challenge” in many writing courses, as Kyle, quoted in the epigraph above, has described it, may be neither reflecting-in-action nor reflecting-on-action. Instead, students are asked to perform what Kathleen Blake Yancey terms “reflection-in-presentation: the process of articulating the relationships between and among the multiple variables of writing and the writer in a specific context for a specific audience...” (*Reflection* 14). Yancey adds that reflection-in-presentation is a public act: “the image of the writer that is projected by the composer to an other” (*Reflection* 14).

Reflection-in-presentation in the form of end-of-term capstone pieces is challenging for student writers, I believe, because they are often asked to reflect in this manner as a one-time-only task. It is not difficult to imagine how daunting it might be for students to visualize themselves “going public” before “an other” who is their very own instructor, or possibly an unknown professor (a portfolio reader), particularly if they have not been asked to do so throughout the writing course. But as Carol Rodgers points out in her analysis of John Dewey’s work on reflection, “[B]ecause reflection is a particular, defined way of thinking, it can be practiced, assessed, and perfected” (864). It is the notion of “practicing” reflection that I wish to stress in this essay, of engaging in a series of both reflections-in-action and reflections-on-action that can make reflection-in-presentation less daunting for students.

However, incorporating more practice by itself does not fully address the critiques of reflection-in-presentation. Barbara Tomlinson cites research in cognitive science that casts doubt on the ability of individuals to describe their own cognitive processes retrospectively. So, she argues, student accounts of “how they composed” should be viewed skeptically (431). Tomlinson’s skepticism is focused on learning about student composing processes through self-report, but others have noted additional reservations about self-reflection through retrospection. Jane Bowman Smith, Laurel L. Bower, and Glenda Conway all stress the influence on student reflection of the writers’ desire to please their teachers. Smith observes that “The fact that

the teacher reads these self-assessments affects what students will write” (128). She acknowledges that this effect can be for the good in underscoring to students the significance of the activity, but she continues, “The negative is that the fact of our reading may change what the student writes in ways that are not beneficial to the student” (128). Bower agrees. “For the most part ... students seem more concerned with pleasing the teacher and appealing to his/her set of values than analyzing their priorities and thinking” (60), she concludes in her recent study of portfolio cover letters, echoing a concern voiced a decade earlier by Conway, who explored the degree to which students make a deliberate effort to say what they anticipate the teacher wishes to hear (85).

Additionally, because students may not be thoroughly prepared to produce effective reflection-in-presentation, they tend to generalize or write in vague terms when they reflect. In her study, Bower observes more than a half-dozen occasions when the eighty-eight portfolio cover letters she analyzed simply lacked enough specific details to explain convincingly students’ assertions about their writing experiences. Peggy O’Neill echoes that criticism, pointing out that in her case study, the student’s self-assessment has not been specific in referring to her own written text (65). Both Bower and Conway speculate that student writers may not have taken the task seriously enough, given that their cover letters are often merely one page in length (Bower 63) and may have been viewed by students as “not much more than a formality, in the sense that it may not have seemed very important. . .” (Conway 88).

Bower concludes that “To demonstrate true metacognition, however, the student needs not only to indicate places where change has happened but also to specify how his/her perspectives have changed” (62). In casting a critical eye on the role of student reflection in her analysis of portfolio cover letters, Bower links her analysis to basic writers. Reflective writing is difficult for many student writers, but Bower notes that basic writers in particular may struggle with the challenges of writing reflectively: basic writers “... often have developed detrimental behavioral patterns in school writing or ... may become blocked, feeling that they don’t know what is expected” (50). Yet she seems to advocate reflective writing for basic writers when she argues that “A monitoring of self through reflection helps a learner determine the value system of a particular community and integrate his/her own abilities into the existing system” (51). She cites Yancey’s claim that “self-knowledge through assessment can affect what one believes it takes to be a college writer” (“Dialogue” 99).

Belief, Epistemology, and an Alternate View of Reflection

But Bower also points the way, perhaps, to a more effective inclusion of reflection-in-presentation in our curricula when she comments that “Some basic writers need to develop new positive writing identities in order to reconstruct or reconcile their present learning with previous *beliefs* about themselves as writers or about a writing class” (51) (emphasis added). In referring to “beliefs” about writing, Bower hints at a strategy to include effective reflection in the writing classroom, a strategy that I plan to flesh out in the balance of this essay by sharing a specific end-of-term assignment and the multiple steps taken to integrate the assignment into the fabric of the entire writing course along with an analysis of the assignment’s value.

Shifting the students’ focus from an exploration of their cognitive development, about which Tomlinson had expressed severe reservations, to an examination of their beliefs about writing and writing courses and the impact of those beliefs on a semester’s writing experiences, can, I argue, permit writing students at all levels to engage in meaningful reflection about themselves as writers. Bower elaborates throughout her essay that students “*must reexamine previously held beliefs* and decide if those beliefs are beneficial or inhibiting or something in-between” (49) (emphasis added). As she expands on this idea, she calls for students to assess their “previous beliefs” and “determine the value system” of the classroom community (51), the goal being to persuade the teacher that they have experienced “epistemological growth in the areas of writing and learning” (52).

David Charney, John H. Newman, and Mike Palmquist similarly argue that student behavior in a writing course may be driven by “students’ attitudes and beliefs about themselves, about the nature of such skills as reading and writing, and about knowledge itself” (299). These beliefs, they continue, can affect the degree to which students are willing to expend effort, persist on task, attempt new approaches, and pay attention to teaching and response. Their essay focuses on how students’ beliefs can affect their performance, and their most significant conclusion is that “students’ attitudes toward writing are not completely unrelated to their epistemologies. How students think about writing and about the nature of knowledge deserves further attention” (327). That conclusion is echoed several years later by John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, who argue that “Teachers must draw out and work with the preexisting understandings that their students bring with them” (19). Even Susanmarie Harrington’s analysis of an extraordinarily successful piece of student reflective writing, which

concludes, “I have learned that my original views of reflection were too limited, geared only toward understanding why and how a student revised from draft 1 to draft 3 or 4” (50), suggests that a broader view of reflection may be called for in examining students’ self-reports.

The Class Collage Assignment

At this point, I want to describe an assignment in reflective writing that is explicitly designed to focus students’ attention on their own epistemologies by requiring them to explore their belief systems. The assignment is a final reflective letter at the end of the writing course that involves the use of a class collage of writing beliefs, or credo statements. (See the Appendix for a copy of the assignment for the final reflective letter.)

At my former institution, where students were advised to take basic writing but not required to do so, my first-year composition courses were heterogeneous, including students who had been identified as basic writers but who chose to take FYC instead. The activities described in this essay were developed for use in this heterogeneous class and have been used, therefore, with basic writers. I believe the class credo collage is appropriate in basic writing courses because it provides the type of scaffolded approach that basic writers may need in order to engage in effective metacognition. I continue to use a version of this assignment in my first-year composition courses at my current institution, and excerpts from student writing that appear later are from these FYC students. My primary motivation for writing this essay for the *Journal of Basic Writing* has been to continue the conversation about reflective writing begun by Laurel Bower in this journal and to suggest ways that basic writers as well as first-year comp students can learn to reflect effectively on their own writing and their beliefs about writing.

Because my experience has been that final reflective assignments only work if the students have been engaged in reflection throughout the semester, my final assignment actually begins on the very first day of the term with a reflection-on-action activity: I distribute index cards to the students and write the word “credo” on the blackboard, explaining that it means “belief” in English but that in the original Latin its meaning is “I believe.” I then ask them to write out their beliefs about several topics related to our course: “Please make a complete sentence out of each of the following three sentence-starters. Because I’d like you to express your honest opinions, do not put your names on the cards so that I won’t know who has written any of them. I’ll be collecting these cards, and we’ll be using them again later

in the semester.” I write the first sentence-starter on the board, giving the class 60-90 seconds to finish the credo statement, and then I repeat the process with the second and third statements. The three sentence-starters are

“I believe writing...”

“I believe revising...”

“I believe writing courses...”

At our next class meeting, I have the students participate in a four-corners activity, placing a post-it note in each corner of the classroom; the notes represent a traditional Likert scale: Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree. I then show the class a series of credo statements culled from past students and ask the class members to gravitate to the corner that best represents their opinion about that credo. My purpose is to generate an open discussion about their opinions and experiences with writing, revising, and writing courses. They can freely accept or reject the credos, knowing that no one in the class will take offense because the statements were not written by any of the class members. Although I deliberately choose thought-provoking credo statements, even the credo statements about writing courses are relatively “safe” to talk about because the discussion looks into the students’ *past* experiences, thus any critical stance taken is not directed at me (yet!) but at previous teachers. This activity asks students to engage in reflection-on-action as they think back to their previous writing experiences in order to discuss their current perspectives. Here is a sampling:

I believe writing is complicated and takes talent.

I believe writing is like every skill: the more you practice, the better you become.

I believe revising is a small part of the writing process. What you wrote the first time is what you meant.

I believe revising is difficult to do on your own, and it is helpful to have an outsider point of view.

I believe writing courses are helpful at times, but I believe you are either good at writing or not.

I believe writing courses are important for any student, no matter what major, to take in order to get a general background of writing.

The session concludes with all the students, again anonymously, jotting down one idea they heard during the discussion that they want to remember and one idea that they want *me*, as the teacher, to remember as the course moves forward, comments that I collect and read.

These opening activities serve several purposes. The students are introduced to reflection-on-action in the very first week of class. They are exposed to the range of opinions held by other students, not only their classmates' ideas as expressed in class discussion but also by their anonymous predecessors who have authored the credos to which they are responding. They read, think, move, discuss, and write about their beliefs during this class session, one that they tend to remember because of all the varied activities involved. They engage in a low-stakes reflection-in-presentation as they explain to each other and me their reasons for their beliefs without being evaluated for doing so. At this point, our class moves on with the semester's work, work that includes repeated practice in reflection-in-action through the use of the writer's memo¹ (Sommers, "Writer's Memo"; Yancey, *Reflection* 26). I devote an entire class session to explaining the writer's memo activity. During that class meeting, I not only share some writer's memos from former students but also writer's memos that I have written myself to colleagues who have graciously volunteered to read my drafts in progress, and I share actual letters from authors with whom I correspond in my own work as an editor. The purpose of the examples is to illustrate that writer's memos are not tiresome busy work but a valuable tool often used by writers and editors in multiple forms to communicate about intentions and revisions.

Over the next several weeks and months, the course proceeds, and students write drafts, revisions, writer's memos, reading response journals, peer review comments on one another's drafts, and, in many cases, other writing assignments for their other courses. As we near the end of the term, I produce a class collage by publishing all of the credo statements the students wrote at the beginning of the semester in a single document. Of course, these are anonymous credo statements, but I assign each anonymous author a letter of the alphabet, making it easy to refer to the statements and to connect the three disparate statements as the credos of a single author. After I post the class collage online in our course management system, I assign the final homework journal of the term, asking the students to read their class collage and to select one belief with which they agree and one with which they disagree, explaining their reasoning for each in a substantial paragraph. This reflection-on-action continues in class as we generate two quick lists on the blackboard of which statements the students have chosen to agree

with and disagree with, using the letters to identify them. A class discussion follows in which the students exchange their opinions, continuing to practice reflection-on-action as they are pressed to explain the choices they have made (and once again engaging in a low-stakes effort at reflection-in-presentation as they share their thoughts through interaction with each other). This discussion, however, differs from the earlier four-corners activity in two important ways: the credos now under analysis have been produced by the class members themselves, and the course is now near its conclusion rather than its beginning, so their reflections grow out of their experience during the term. The discussions are usually spirited—partly because it is not unusual for the same credo statement to spur both agreement and disagreement. Also of interest is that quite a few students will confess that they cannot recall which credos they have written themselves, but I find that understandable because they have written these credos several months earlier and spent a very brief time writing them. They are also usually struck by how similar—and generic—many of the credos are. Some students do recognize their own statements and will preface their explanations by saying, “I wrote this one, and I still agree with it” or “I wrote that one, but I don’t exactly believe it any more.” And, perhaps most important, the students learn from each other’s beliefs. Rodgers argues that “collaborative reflection” has “benefits” and identifies three hallmarks of this type of reflection: “affirmation of the value of one’s experience: In isolation what matters can be too easily dismissed as unimportant ... [;] seeing things ‘newly’: Others offer alternative meanings, broadening the field of understanding ... [; and] support to engage in the process of inquiry” (857). My objective at this point in the term is to prompt students to think about their beliefs in the context of a full semester’s work, comparing what they now believe to what they may have believed at the start of the term, but also comparing their beliefs to those articulated by the other members of their writing community in the class. The written credo statements offer this opportunity as does the class discussion that follows.

This journal assignment and class activity serve as scaffolding for the final reflective writing assignment, a reflection-in-presentation capstone writing assignment in the form of a letter to me about the class collage. But I engage the class in one final activity as a group before the term is over. Bringing to the final class meeting several one-page excerpts from previously written letters (all A and B+ papers), I divide the class into small groups, each of which receives one of these samples. I ask them to analyze the sample by addressing two issues:

- What point is the author trying to make about the chosen credo statement?
- In your group's sample paper, how does the author show rather than tell? What examples or illustrations does the author provide to support the arguments of the paper? What is the source of the examples? What form does the writer use to provide evidence? For instance, does s/he use direct quotations or some other method of providing examples?

Each group then makes a brief presentation to the class, contextualizing the letter excerpt and answering the questions. I project the sample onto the screen in front of the class and point to any passages as instructed by the group. The object of this activity, I explain to the students, is to enable them to leave class with a broader conception of the array of sources from which they can draw evidence to explain their beliefs and opinions in the assigned reflective letter, and with a deeper understanding of the varied strategies available to present that evidence. At this point in the term, I leave it to the students to teach one another. When a group isn't clear enough, other class members will ask questions for clarification because they are motivated to learn what they can from these successful excerpts.

The idea of the activity is not to critique but to allow the students to expand their own writing repertoires. The samples illustrate different sources of information that could be used in the reflective letters, for example: discussing papers written in other classes, and sometimes quoting those papers; comparing experiences in writing two of the assigned papers in the course through a narrative about choices made; quoting a passage written in a draft and then quoting a revision of the same passage, followed by an explanation of the changes; quoting extensively from the student's own writer's memos as a means of exploring her evolving experiences as a writer in the course; citing one of the course readings and applying a quoted passage to an experience in revision; excerpting the writer's own journal response to an assigned reading and then explaining how that response influenced a revision; focusing on the responses the student writer received from others in the class such as quoting from teacher comments on a draft or describing and quoting peer comments on the draft.

Why the Assignment Works: Distance and Heuristics

According to Kathleen Blake Yancey and Jane Bowman Smith, "the request for self-assessment ... relies on a student distancing himself from

the processes he is using, from the learning he is gaining, from the text he is writing, from himself as one with the text. Thus a shared identity of text and writer is disrupted" (172). Bower also points out the need for students to "detach themselves from their writing selves ... [to] become spectators of ... [their] writing experience" (50). The assignment I have described incorporates such distancing in two ways: First, in *time*: the project begins in the first days of the course and concludes in the final days, providing months of distance between the initial thinking and the final reflecting. As the students remember back to the early days of the semester, they cannot help but filter their views through the lens of memory. Second, in *authorship*: the class collage provides students with material and ideas to discuss that were written by others, building into the assignment a kind of detachment of perspective on the beliefs. Students can critique the ideas of anonymous authors, should they wish to do so, providing a platform for their own newly thought-out beliefs that does not require them to critique themselves.

If distance between the students and their experiences is vital to effective reflection, so is contiguity, at least in the sense of "intersection" with their own experiences as writers/readers. Yancey discusses "intersections" as crucial to reflection (*Reflection* 18) if students are to work through their experiences in meaningful ways, and the class collage assignment encourages such intersections by asking students to plumb their varied experiences and beliefs as writers throughout the term. They "intersect" with their own experiences as writers/readers in multiple ways: with their reading journals as they comment upon the course readings; with writing in their other courses; with the instructor (through his response to their drafts and class lessons); with classmates through peer review discussions; with texts written by classmates both in peer group review sessions and by reading the class collage; with multiple drafts of their own writings; with reflection-on-action classroom activities such as those related to the credo statements; with their own previous reflection-in-action work in the class, including writer's memos; and with previous instruction they have received prior to the current college writing course.

Unlike many portfolio cover letter assignments, which focus the students' attention on the work selected for final assessment in the portfolio, the class collage letter provides a broader palette of options from which students can paint the picture of their experiences and beliefs. In other words, the assignment turns back to the students the decision of *which emphases they wish to choose* in reflecting back upon the course instead of insisting that they discuss their selection process for a final portfolio. The value, I believe,

is that the assignment asks students to take the initiative for their own metacognition, requiring them to take agency for their writing. (See Sommers, “Self-Designed Points” for a discussion of the role of student initiative in a first-year writing course.) Additionally, on a practical level, I can use the letter assignment even in courses where I have not used a portfolio approach with its end-of-term choices.

Another significant difference between the class collage assignment and more traditional end-of-semester reflective capstone writing assignments lies in the heuristics that are part of the design for the assignment. In Harrington’s analysis of her student’s exceptional reflective letter, she comments at one point that the student has produced the letter “without much explicit prompting from me...” (49), implying that this is a virtue of the letter. And it may well be, but that student’s letter is not typical. If we hope to move students away from resorting to “description and explanation, techniques they are more comfortable with and more experienced at, rather than analysis, which is a more abstract and complex process” (Bower 53), then we must build preparation into the process. I find Conway persuasive when she asserts “... I most emphatically do not believe that it is either fair or appropriate for an end-of-semester cover letter to be given the burden of conveying the only reflection on a whole semester’s work. Required reflection is ethical only if it exists as an ongoing component of a course and if the teacher of that course openly discusses his or her reactions to the reflections with students” (92).

The writer’s memos required of my students create an ongoing, semester-long conversation about their reflections on specific drafts, a conversation that forms a backdrop to the course experience for the students. The opening week activities I have described along with the final journal entry and the in-class analysis of sample letters serve as heuristics for the students as they plan, draft, and revise their letters for submission at the end of the course. To cite Rodgers again, I would also point out that some of the reflective activities are communal, allowing students to generate ideas about their own experiences in concert with their classmates. It is such integration of the assignment into the entire course that sets the groundwork for successful reflection.

The Class Collage Letter as Social Activity

Because this reflective writing assignment assumes that students are part of a writing community—the writing class that has collaboratively created the class collage—the student writers do not have to fall back entirely

on their own ideas, and that seems to provide a starting place for many of their letters.² A common strategy that the students use is to write about their classmates' beliefs. One student begins her letter by making an explicit connection to her classmates: "Looking back at them [the credo statements] after these three months have passed, I don't even remember which ones I wrote ... , but I noticed more interesting ones that my peers wrote." And another opens her letter by noting "It is a pleasure for me to express my deepest feelings about two of our class credos, created by the students, distinctly showing our thoughts about writing and writing classes." This second student's use of first-person plural shows a strong sense of a class community. These two excerpts exemplify what Bower calls the "appeal to nomos" because they "center on commonly held sets of values, established ... by the students, the teacher, and the classroom culture. An appeal is classified as nomotic when it primarily focuses on the value system of that particular classroom" (54).

Yancey and Smith insist that "self-assessment is dialogic; its very nature demands that the self call on others to help in its development" (172). And so some students, by engaging in a dialogue with their classmates, find a heuristic value in contrasting their own ideas with those of other students. Bryan begins his letter by writing that "There really is no downside to revising besides that it may not be the most entertaining thing in the world, but like many things that aren't the most fun or appetizing, they must be done for improvement (much like kids eating their vegetables.)" Later in his letter, he returns to his analogy: "Here is a credo statement from one of those kids who didn't like their vegetables. The statement that I found and I disagree with is: 'I believe writing courses do not let you be who you are. They make you who the teacher wants you to be.' I can't find anything about that statement that I agree with." From there Bryan goes on to explain why he has taken issue with his classmate. For me, what really matters here is not so much the specific grounds of Bryan's disagreement but the fact that he has thought deeply enough about the issues to form his own position—and found a colorful way to "show me" where he now stands. I think that the move he makes is facilitated in part by having his classmates' ideas as a potential counterpoint, a strategy that seems to provide substance in a number of the letters because it moves reflection away from being a solitary act.

There is another heuristic value to the class collage—it provides ample ideas for students to discuss. Yancey observes that the typical shortcoming of such reflection-in-presentation is that it focuses on "text that parrots the context of the class or the teacher without demonstrating the influence of

either”(82). Some of the reflective letters, of course, are relatively empty of content and offer generalizations without substantiation; however, this assignment as designed explicitly invites students to provide evidence that shows what they have learned about their own beliefs. And many letters do just that. (Unlike the single-page efforts critiqued by Bower, last semester’s reflective letters averaged four typewritten pages.) One way that students avoid writing Yancey’s “text that parrots” is by demonstrating *how* their classmates have influenced their beliefs. Thus, a number of students choose to offer the structured interaction with their classmates that had occurred through peer review as a means of explaining the influence of the course on their beliefs.

For example, Erik agrees with the credo statement “I believe revising other people’s papers is a good way to improve your writing skills.” He describes two occasions, both peer review sessions, where he came to this belief. About the first workshop, he describes his own writer’s block and how reading the varied approaches taken by his group members helped him decide on an appropriate genre for his paper. His letter explains how one of his peers had decided that rather than writing an explanatory essay, she would compose a letter to her former high school principal about a run-in with a faculty member. Her choice prompted Erik to move away from the essay format also, instead composing a retirement speech to honor his favorite high school teacher. In a second example, he explains that when he noticed in a classmate’s draft that he could not follow the student’s narration of important memories because the events had not been explained fully enough, he applied that lesson to his own draft and expanded on his ideas. Both examples are intended to illustrate why he believes in the value of reading and responding to the papers of classmates.

Self-Reflexivity and “Going Meta” in the Class Collage Activity

Because reflection has been ongoing throughout the course, students have begun to develop the practice of reflecting on their writing. That manifests itself in letters in which students comment on the letter not only as a product but also as part of a process. Some students recognize that their claims about their writing ought to apply to the reflective letter, and they “go meta.” In effect, they make the reflection-in-presentation double as reflection-in-action, commenting upon the document they are composing. Clara chooses to write about this credo statement: “I believe writing courses are mandatory at WCU and only a few really help.” She explains that

she gradually learned to abandon the five-paragraph-theme template she had been taught in her earlier writing classes, and so she found the course helpful. She concludes her discussion by noting that in her reflective letter, some nine paragraphs in length, she has devoted three paragraphs alone to a discussion of revision. “That is something I would have never done while I was under the reign of the five-paragraph format,” she concludes, offering the reflective letter itself as evidence of her new beliefs in action.

Perhaps the most notable recent example of a student’s reflection-in-action is in Joyce’s conclusion to her letter:

This entire letter is really just a memo in a letter’s disguise, or a masked-meta-memo-cognitive piece of writing, if you will (cause I always will!). I am reflecting in writing about my thinking about my writing, all sandwiched between a salutation and closing. Only instead of one assignment this addresses the whole semester. I find that I have learned a great deal and had a great deal of fun doing it. Perhaps the last statement from the class collage that supports how I feel is about writing in general. “I believe writing can be fun.” It was fun and it was work, but in the end I enjoyed the whole process of being challenged, gathering ideas, organizing information, telling stories, finding what works and trashing what doesn’t and just working to get it right. It is a satisfying feeling, to get it right.

Joyce concludes by explicitly linking the letter to the more familiar task of writing a writer’s memo. And when she claims to be having fun, we can see that she has been doing so, both in her playful string of adjectives describing her letter and her parenthetical joke.

Additionally, these letters sometimes provide insight into the writer’s process of composing the letters themselves. Ashleigh, who has begun her letter by quoting the course objectives from the syllabus, a way of involving *my* beliefs in *her* discussion, observes, “I originally believed in the statement ‘I believe revising is not helpful because I never know how to fix my mistakes.’ Throughout this course, however, my perception of revision was radically changed.” She attributes her changed perception to writing the required writer’s memos throughout the term:

The biggest reason for this adjustment would have to be the memos you assigned us to do.... At first I assumed these memos were just more busy work attached to an already lengthy paper. Yet, once

I started answering the questions, I began to see the point. The questions allowed me to understand what I was writing about. If I couldn't figure it out, how was the reader supposed to? In addition, sometimes when I answered these questions, I figured out a whole new point I didn't even realize I had made. It was a type of revising I had never heard or seen before....

One student produced a remarkable letter in which she takes her reader through a semester-long reflective journey. Leslie, while not a basic writing student, was also not one of the “stars” of her first-year composition class, yet her letter stunned me with its sophisticated reconsideration of her experiences in the course. In her letter, she discusses no fewer than six different reflective activities in which she had engaged: her self-addressed letter about her goals for the course written on the first day; three credo statements; her writer's memos; her writing process timeline composed in class during the first week of class; her reading of an assigned essay on reflection; and her journal responses reflecting on reading assignments.

Leslie also understands that she needs to offer evidence to support her assertions about her experiences and beliefs, and she does so in a variety of ways. She cites her own writing six different times, both quoting herself and describing her decision-making in her self-addressed letter, two of her writer's memos, one of her revised papers, her writing process timeline, and one of her journal responses to the course reading. She also cites her classmates' writing twice by reference to specific credo statements and to peer review comments.

Most noteworthy in Leslie's letter, perhaps, is her successful ability to meld disparate materials into a focused reflection. Yancey identifies a number of “moves” that successful reflective pieces employ, including “multiple contexts, multiple narratives, answers to ‘what did I learn?’, answers to ‘how did this course help me learn it?’ (82) and “synthesis” (202). One of my course objectives also identifies the ability to synthesize as a goal for the students. In her letter Leslie weaves multiple narratives of her prior reflective experiences into an explanation of what she learned and how the course helped her. As she draws materials from multiple contexts—her reading, her writing, her interaction with her classmates and teacher—she ably synthesizes these strands into a single coherent reflection-in-presentation. Here is one excerpt from her letter in which Leslie makes a generalization, refers indirectly to a credo statement (“I believe revision means figuring out what the teacher is looking for and simply doing that to get a good grade.”), cites one of the

course readings, quotes her own journal response to the reading, and then begins an anecdote about one of her papers:

Through your assigned readings I have learned a lot about myself as a writer. In the beginning of the year I would have agreed with the idea that all a student needs to do is figure out what their teacher is looking for in their papers and simply do that to get a good grade. In the essay, “Un-teaching the Five-Paragraph Essay,” the author states, “the formula reinforces the writing-to-please-the-teacher syndrome that turns students against the system.” You have striven to instill in our class the importance of adapting to write different genres and to be aware of our discourse community. In my journal after reading the article, “Understanding Discourse Community,” I wrote, “Being that an ethnography contains many numbers and could potentially entail some very fancy word choice, if I myself were an expert, I must understand that my audience is a college class. Being a college class I must write my paper according to the class’s level of comprehension.” I did just that for assignment three, our ethnography....

Leslie is, in short, what Chris Anson describes as a writer “in control” (69), one who has produced just what I as an instructor was hoping to see in a class collage letter: a compelling explanation of why she holds her current beliefs about writing.

Of course, I do not expect all of the letters to rival Leslie’s in their depth and complexity, whether written by a first-year composition student or a basic writing student. However, the reality is that I generally look forward to reading these final letters—even when confronted with seventy-five of them in some teaching terms—because although they cannot always surprise me as Leslie’s work did, there are enough moments of genuine insight, sometimes from unlikely sources (such as Erik, quoted above about his peer review experiences, who concluded the course with a C), that I continue to read the letters with anticipation.

The Class Collage as a Vehicle for Dissent

Speaking of surprises, a less typical, but in some ways equally encouraging development with the letters has been that the opportunity to disagree with a classmate’s belief seems to provide some students with a strategy for

expressing dissent from the typical growth narrative of reflection-in-presentation that paints the rosy picture of a happy and demonstrable improvement in the course. The class collage letter gives students a viable means to express disagreement. One student chooses to take issue with a classmate's credo statement in order to write a letter about how the course had failed her. She focuses on a credo statement that reads "I believe writing can be easy if you enjoy the topic you are writing about" and points out that the credo may describe how she felt as the term began, but her opinions changed over time. In fact, thanks to the disillusionment caused by working hard on a first essay that earned a grade of D, followed by another essay that earned a C+, she now rejects the cited credo statement. Her writing strategy is to explore her dissenting opinion by setting it up in opposition to her past experience and to her classmates' beliefs. She never refers directly to me, even though I am obviously the one who issued the troubling grades, using her discussion of the credo statement as a distancing mechanism that enables her to reflect on her changed beliefs.

Another notable example demonstrates how a student can use a disagreement with a fellow student's credo not only to explore her own beliefs but also to offer a critique of the teacher, albeit in a muted way. This student chooses the credo statement "I believe revising can only make your work better, not worse." She is unpersuaded by this belief because, as she explains, revision often takes a writer far away from her original intent. She sets herself up in opposition to the credo and acknowledges that her commentary probably constitutes a minority opinion in her class. She has become a firm believer that the spontaneous nature of good writing can be—and often is—ruined by extensive revision. As an example, she relates an anecdote of a conflict between my specific revision recommendation on one of her papers and the comments offered by her peer group, deciding that she would not revise as I suggested because her intent was to appeal to her peers, who had evidently expressed satisfaction with that specific aspect of her paper. Unlike the other example of course critique, however, this student is willing to position herself oppositionally in regard to me, the instructor. She is careful to note that she is not criticizing either my teaching or my editorial skills so much as she wants to explain the fallacy of the credo she has chosen. Both of these examples suggest that this assignment allows students to take risks, in these cases by taking positions likely to be in conflict with the teacher's position.

The Class Collage and Transfer of Learning

Bransford, Brown, and Cocking argue that in general “Transfer can be improved by helping students become more aware of themselves as learners who actively monitor their learning strategies and resources and assess their readiness for particular tests and performances” (67). But Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick observe that writing students tended to push aside the notion that learning about writing in a composition course could have application in other disciplinary course writing assignments (124). With the continued concern in composition about transfer of learning, I want to pose the question “Does the class collage assignment encourage any transfer of knowledge?” Elizabeth Wardle has argued that, given the complexity of the issue and the multiple definitions of *transfer of learning*, “if we look for but do not find direct evidence that students use specific previously-learned skills in new situations, we cannot necessarily assume that students did not learn them, have not used them, or will not use them in the future” (69). She is highlighting the complexity of attributing the lack of a demonstrated skill in a later writing situation to the activities in a previous composition course. Dianne Fallon, Cindy J. Lahar, and David Susman make a similar point in observing that it seems “optimistic” to attribute a demonstrated skill directly to one learned or practiced in a composition course and, perhaps, more “realistic” to acknowledge that the student may have arrived in college already habituated to using the skill (43). Wardle is also concerned that her findings are entirely reliant upon student self-reports of what they have done in subsequent writing situations and that the students may in fact be reporting only what they think she, their former instructor as well as the primary investigator, wishes to hear (71). Unfortunately, Wardle discovers that her students did not make much use of their learning because they did not “perceive the need” to do so in less challenging writing assignments in later courses (76).

These studies, and previous ones that these investigators cite, are longitudinal, designed to measure *later* behavior demonstrated after the writing course has been completed. What happens, however, if the students choose to report on *simultaneous* behavior demonstrated in other writing situations while the writing course is still ongoing? Several significant differences surface:

- When students choose to describe in their letters how they have applied concepts from their writing course to other writing situations, it is because they have evidently “perceived a need” to do so.

- The difficulty of linking one behavior in a subsequent writing situation to a previous one in our writing course no longer requires an “optimistic” interpretation because in their letters the students themselves explicitly assert the specific connections that have occurred.
- When students report on such experiences in their letters, I would argue that it does not matter that they might be telling me what they think I want to hear because if they are smart enough to explain the transfer of learning in concrete, specific terms, then whether they have actually done as they say is not really of paramount importance. What matters, I would argue, is that they have learned what might transfer and how and when—and that explanation itself is, I believe, a meaningful transfer of learning expressed in a reflection-on-action.

So there appears to be some evidence in the class collage reflective letters that the assignment allows students to demonstrate how they have transferred learning—beliefs and behavior—from the writing course into other courses across the disciplines. One student chooses this credo statement: “I believe writing can be fun if it is about something that interests me.” She explains that at first she had continued to experience significant anxiety about her writing until she developed a “new skill”: finding a way to generate personal interest in the assigned writing. She recounts an anecdote about her “least favorite subject,” history, a course in which she was required to write one page per week. Her story continues, “In an assignment due about midway through the semester I had to write about a person from the Enlightenment.... Initially this seemed like some rare form of torture. And then suddenly I realized I knew something about one of those people and I began writing.” She discovered that she shared opinions with Voltaire, her chosen historical figure. She quotes one of Voltaire’s written opinions and asserts, “I became interested in this paper and even did a lot more research that was not required,” concluding, “This paper really made me see that finding even a small aspect of an assignment that is interesting is enough to make a paper fun and ultimately good.”

One of her classmates focused on the belief that “writing is determined by who you are writing for.” She explains that her major is athletic training, and she had never expected that “writing would actually help me in any of it.” She then narrates a story about having to write two observation reports for one of her major courses based on spending time with both a certified and a student athletic trainer. She writes, “As I went to sit down and finally write my paper, the first thing that came to my mind was who my audience

is... [S]omething I have learned from this writing class is that who you are writing for determines the way the paper will be set up and the language used. I also thought ‘do I use subheadings to help the readers?’ which I learned in writing class is a way of transitioning and helping the readers.” A third student relates a story about how he overcame his trepidation over writing an eight-page essay in his Italian culture class by employing pre-writing and invention strategies learned in his composition course, illustrating how his confidence in his ability to complete the paper grew as he generated more ideas. Such examples suggest that some students recognize that the underlying beliefs they hold can have a positive impact on their writing performance outside the composition classroom as well as that there is value in transferring specific strategies and methods from the writing course to their other disciplinary studies.

More striking is that in the most recent semester in which I made this reflective letter assignment, of the seventy-two students who completed the assignment, seventeen of them, 24%, refer in detail to writing situations outside of our class to help explain their current beliefs. Students cite papers written in women’s studies, Italian, educational psychology, literature, philosophy, political science, geography, and speech. Most memorable, however, is the young man who uses his letter to explain why he has chosen to write about the credo “I believe that writing can give a voice to the voiceless and change history.” He himself, he confesses, feels voiceless. He goes on to explain that he has had a very dissatisfying interaction with one of the administrative offices on campus and wishes to write an editorial for the school paper in order to put into effect what he has learned in the course in order finally to “give voice” to his anger.

Of course, the need for longitudinal studies of transfer of learning remains a strong one for those of us who teach writing courses. The letters I have described, however, suggest that we can sometimes see, admittedly in an imprecise manner, whether students are transferring their learning *during* their writing courses. Of course, 76% of the letters do not describe such transfer, either because it has not occurred or has not occurred to the writer to describe it, or because the student has not been asked to write in other courses. Nonetheless, it seems worthwhile to design reflective capstone activities in our writing courses that encourage students to look for connections to their outside-of-class writing experiences if only to plant the seed that such connections are desirable.³

The Class Collage as a Form of Outcomes Assessment

As a teacher, I also “transfer” learning from these reflective letters because they serve me as an outcomes assessment in two ways: the students’ explicit statements about the class collage share their perspectives on the course; and my evaluation of the letters serves as an assessment of the degree to which course objectives have been met. For instance, two of the specific course objectives in my syllabus are that “students will become more skilled in *synthesis*, that is, effectively bringing together materials in their writing from a variety of sources” and “students will become more successful in *making claims* in their writing.” As I grade the letters, it is a relatively easy matter to note the degree to which the students have been successful in achieving these objectives. While Leslie’s letter is a triumph of synthesis, many other letters have similar moments in successfully blending sources. Similarly, the examples I have offered illustrate, to varying degrees, students’ success in making claims, rather than merely narrating or describing events. As a consequence of reading these letters over a period of time, I have modified my approach to preparing students for the class collage letter in response to what I have seen, primarily by sharing with them some of the successful letters that appear in this essay.

Here is one example of what I have learned about my own teaching that will influence change in my teaching:

These conclusions about my writing came to my realization not from my own reading over of my papers, but from the suggestions from others that read over and analyzed my pieces. That is why I agree with the statement “I believe revising works best when someone else first does it then the writer.” The revisions I received from other students during the peer workshops and from you, the teacher, have made my papers so much stronger and have brought things to my attention that I would have never noticed.... I received help with titles for my papers, examples I had provided, and wordy sentences. These were all things that greatly improved my papers and are all things that might not have necessarily been brought to my attention through my own revisions.

While I find it encouraging that Karli not only emphasizes how her classmates’ suggestions helped her revise, a realization of the social aspects of the revision process, there is also a lesson for me: this writer agrees with

references were to comments I had made on their drafts, but letters also identified comments on journal entries, a grading rubric I had used, a lesson plan on genre. One writer remembered that when she had asked me in class “Can we use ‘I’ in this paper?” I had answered, “You tell me. It’s your paper,” and then she explored the significance of that conversation to her beliefs about genre. Five students found our class discussions of the five-paragraph theme format’s limitations to be influential experiences. Four letters observed that my continued adjuration to peer response groups to “fry the biggest fish” in their commentaries instead of focusing on minor surface errors had influenced them. One of those writers told a story about her evolving belief in the credo “I believe revising is always necessary because there’s always room for improvement” and related how she had learned to “fry the biggest fish” when her roommate, not a member of our class, had asked her to look over a draft she was revising. Another student reported on an influential conversation with his roommate: he was astonished to learn that his friend routinely produced a half-dozen drafts before submitting a final paper to his professors, behavior that reinforced what my student had been hearing in our class and that prompted more introspection on his part about his own writing processes.

Additionally, close to 20% of the letters referred to the writer’s memos in some fashion, often using their own reflective comments about work in progress to illustrate their current beliefs about writing, revising, and writing courses. One student chose to write about a credo that stated “I believe writing courses will give me skills I will use forever.” She wrote about how the writer’s memos helped her to “evaluate herself,” and then related an anecdote about how she had come to see that at times she was articulating her ideas and arguments with more clarity and force in her memos, at which point she would substitute those reflections for fuzzier phrasing in her drafts.

A substantial number of students, 29%, referred to journal-writing assignments as having been instrumental in their course experience, often describing the journals as having served as invention activities for the full-length assigned papers. Three students referred favorably to the journals as effective “practice” for the graded writing, and one labeled the journal writing as “getting in shape” for the major projects.

My course clearly emphasized the importance of revision, even devoting one of the three assigned credo statements to revision. Noteworthy, however, is that 81% of the students chose to discuss at least one of the revision credos as they explored their current beliefs in the letters. During the semester, revision was optional except for one required revision of the very

first paper in the course. A majority of the letters, 54%, chose to offer that required revision as an example that explained why the author embraced the chosen revision credo.

But my point is not intended to be about any specific class activities; it is that reading the reflective letters about the class collage and examining the students' beliefs inevitably influence my own evolving beliefs about writing, revising, and writing courses, which, of course, affects the way I subsequently teach the course. The students' self-assessment thus becomes part of a dialogue with me, both explicitly in the form of their letters that continue the semester-long conversation we have been having and implicitly in what I learn from reading scores of these letters at the end of each term. Fallon, Lahar, and Susman conclude that "... the most significant finding from our research is that listening to what our students tell us when we ask them directly about their learning can yield useful information that has an impact on teaching and learning" (49). The letters I have been discussing can provide much worth listening to and can lead to further reflection on action by *me*, the instructor of the class, an entirely salutary outcome.

Conclusion

The class collage letter assignment is a direct response to Ann Berthoff's exhortation: "Students do not need to learn to interpret nor do they need to learn how to interpret their interpretations: they are born interpreters. But they must discover *that* this is so. We should offer them assisted invitations to discover *what* they are doing and thereby *how* to do it" (59). The assignment does indeed provide an invitation to reflection. That invitation brings students in direct contact with their own lived experiences in the course. Kathleen Yancey has outlined three curricula that students encounter in every class—the "lived curriculum" of their prior experiences, the "delivered curriculum" designed by the instructor, and the "experienced curriculum" of "what each individual student experiences in the class" (*Reflection* 18). The class collage letter not only encourages students to reflect upon their own experienced curriculum but upon their classmates' as well, to the degree that their peers' credo statements embody their experienced curricula.

At this point in my original draft, I returned to quote Joyce, the student excerpted earlier in the paper, as my conclusion. But one *JBW* reviewer advised me as follows: "The quote from Joyce's letter is very effective. But I'd like to hear *your* voice here at the end as well. As you end the article, I would recommend that you shift the readers' focus from what is happening in one

... teacher's classroom to the larger issues that are reflected in this classroom. What can readers take away from this discussion even if they don't adopt the class collage and the other aspects of your practice in their entirety?" And so, upon reflection, I have decided to do both. What can be taken away from this discussion, other than a wholesale adoption of all of these activities? I would suggest that there are two main points, the first more familiar than the second:

- Reflection cannot be isolated as a solitary final act in a writing course with any great degree of hope for success. Rather, students need practice in the skills of reflection so that a culminating piece of writing can draw upon what they have learned about reflection and experienced throughout the course.
- Focusing on students' beliefs about the activities and work of the writing course seems to be a more comfortable—and productive—entry point for students to engage in reflection than a focus on cognitive development in terms of generating meaningful discussions of what they have experienced.

But the main thrust of this essay has been to argue that our students can—and do—have much of value to tell us about their experiences as writers when they are asked to ground their reflections on their beliefs. So I very deliberately want to give the final say to one of my students. Joyce, quoted earlier in this paper, also wrote to me about her experiences in my writing course approximately one year after the course had ended. Her letter concluded:

The final letter really just serves as a personal detailed account of my own learning journey.... I felt this was a powerful learning tool for the professor/teacher/ editor/person reading the writing in that it gave insight into thinking of the writers ... drawing attention to where they believed they needed help or where they were successful. Also, and more significant to me, its use as a learning tool for the writer is really unparalleled. The final letter ... serves as a personal "metacognition journal" to reference and reread at will. It reflects on my personal process of learning, drawing on examples from my own writing and not from some textbook. I make the point that I typically will write in the same voice, patterns, and styles and therefore be subject to making the same kinds of mistakes over and

over. The ... letter really just provided me with an account of my patterns. And once these patterns are spotted, they can be looked for and ultimately, changed.

Joyce proved to be a strong writer but one whose playfulness and sense of humor imbued every piece of writing, no matter how serious its purpose. Earlier in this essay when I quoted a typical comment of hers, it was smart, insightful, and self-consciously amused: “This letter is a ... masked-meta-memo-cognitive piece of writing, if you will (cause I always will!).” In looking back from the vantage point of more than a year, she asserts that she has seen the patterns in her work and learned to change them, as these final observations illustrate in the very different tone she has chosen. When she concludes that the letter was “not only a very personal account of what I was thinking and writing, but an account of what I learned and how,” I believe her. And the learning apparently extended beyond the end of the course, as exemplified in yet another reflection-in-presentation completed a year later when she wrote to me. Obviously, the class collage letter assignment did not have the same power for every student that it had for Joyce, but I am certainly encouraged to continue asking my classes to complete this final writing assignment. Writing the class letter provides all of my students with the opportunity to “lasso” their metacognitive thoughts as meaningfully as Joyce has done.

Notes

1. I routinely assign writer’s memos in all of my writing courses. Basic writers and first-year composition students alike have much to tell me—and to learn themselves—by methodically reflecting on their recently completed drafts.
2. The student examples quoted in the remainder of this essay have been drawn from my most recent first-year composition courses at West Chester University. While some of the student writers in those courses have progressed from our basic writing course into FYC, most have not. In the interests of transparency, I will also concede that I have not chosen “typical” responses but instead have selected outstanding ones in an effort to illustrate how this approach can work. Of course, not all students excel with this letter assignment any more than all students respond successfully to any assignment. All student names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

- Schön discusses what he terms “reflective transfer” (“Causality,” 97), which occurs when someone employs a strategy “in the next situation.” Joyce’s letter, quoted earlier, asserts that writing the writer’s memos all semester long, a reflection-in-action activity, has made it possible for her to write the final reflective letter, suggesting that, at least for her, the scaffolding of the memo-writing has “paid off” in the new situation of composing the class credo letter.

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Appendix: The Assignment Sheet: Final Reflective Letter

What is it?

Please write a letter to me in which you look back on your semester of writing in college. The point of writing this letter is to give you an opportunity to think about the writing you've done this term and reflect on its significance. In other words, this is intended to be a final piece of meta-cognitive writing.

What are you supposed to write about?

When we began the course, I asked everyone to finish these three sentences: "I believe writing ..." "I believe revising ..." "I believe writing courses" I've collected your comments and typed them up into a collage, which I've posted on the course website. It's now more than three months later; you've attended more than forty classes, written close to twenty journal entries, four papers, some revisions, multiple memos, etc. I'm very interested to know how the class collage looks to you now, based on these experiences. Please read over your class collage, and choose two or three of the credo statements to write about. Using your experiences in our course, write me a letter in which you explain why you've chosen those credo statements (perhaps your attitude has changed or maybe you still hold the same beliefs or perhaps you still reject them, etc.). You don't have to write about your own credo statements. I'd encourage you to write about what you're thinking currently that will be useful to you in the future as you look ahead to the rest of your college career.

What now?

Be sure that your letter talks about the work you did in this course. *Even if you select a belief statement that you have always held, your discussion of it should be in light of what happened this semester in this course (and/or in your other college courses).* How can you go about writing this letter? If you took time and wrote substantial writer's memos, you'll probably find them rather useful in beginning to think about this assignment. I'd recommend that you begin by looking over *all* of your written work: drafts, revisions, memos, journal entries. See what you can learn about your own experiences.

This is one of the most significant writing assignments of the term because by writing this letter you'll learn more about your experience in this course as well as teaching me something about your writing. This letter

is important; it receives a final grade that counts along with your other two graded papers to determine your final average in the writing component of the course. *Don't write a one-pager; it will hurt your final grade.* This is *not* a journal entry or a memo but is *intended to be a well-organized, well-written piece of writing.*

Show, Don't Tell/Organized and Planned

Remember that even in this letter, showing is more powerful than telling. *I expect to see specific references to your other writing: quotations from other papers, memos, journal entries; stories about specific choices you made; comparisons of specific aspects of your work, and so forth.* NOTE: I also expect to read a well-planned, intelligently organized letter with transitions connecting the different parts.

Final Note

The purpose of this letter is *not* to write a course or instructor evaluation. You've already had an opportunity to do that when you completed the official university student evaluation form last week. The idea here is to explore and explain some of your beliefs about writing as a student about to finish this composition course and move on, rather than as a student ready to begin the first writing course of your college career. It's also an opportunity for you to demonstrate what you know about developing and organizing a piece of writing.