

TEACHING THE THINKING PROCESS IN ESSAY WRITING

City College has a three-semester Basic Writing sequence designed to assist college students whose placement tests indicate a deficiency in writing. I've taught them all: English 1 is concerned with the development of the sentence and paragraph; English 2, with the expository essay; English 3, with the long paper. They are not popular courses. As motivated and as intellectually able as they may be, students placed in Basic Writing courses are generally non-liberal arts majors who consider the process of writing as mysterious as a foreign language, and less relevant to their academic or professional goals. These students cannot write, quite simply, because they have not been taught to write, as they have not been taught many other skills one expects them to have after twelve years of elementary and secondary schooling. Unfortunately, Basic Writing students tend to blame themselves for their deficiencies. Many are deeply ashamed to be in a remedial class and have little hope that another English course of any kind will help them.

It took me many years to understand the complex needs of students who are placed in Basic Writing and to begin to develop effective ways to meet those needs. Of all the techniques I have tried, there are three that have been productive on all levels of the Basic Writing sequence:

1. Constant writing on topics that require emotional involvement. I encourage emotional involvement, not out of soft-hearted sentimentality, but for the practical pedagogical reason that feeling assists cognition. If students allow their feeling about an experience to flow to their intellect, the feeling will heighten awareness of that experience, stimulate thought and, it is hoped, motivate communication of that thought.

2. One-to-one conferences to give students feedback on their progress and to assist them with special problems, such as grammar. To help me in this task, I have always used tutoring facilities available at City College. Most recently, I have asked the assistance of students in a

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graduate pedagogy program whom I train to tutor and grade papers and to team-teach with me in the classroom.

3. A variety of in-class exercises that require active student participation. Because of the negative experience they have had in past English classes, most Basic Writing students attempt to sit back passively and take in what they can with a minimum of self-exposure. Of the various exercises I use to break through this passivity, the most effective is peer-group discussions.

In addition to these basic techniques, I have found each Basic Writing course requires an overall dynamic, as integrated and developmental as the sequence itself, to advance its students from the achievement of the goals of one level to those of the next. I believe the most crucial course is English 2, which teaches the essay, for if students do not master the analytical thinking process that is essential to the essay form, they will never be able to write the long papers necessary for college-level work.

In the years I taught English 1, I was always disappointed at the end of the semester when I assigned an essay to prepare my students for English 2, to discover that many who had improved the most in narrative and descriptive writing had great difficulty with the essay form. Organization was poor, flow constricted, arguments weak. When I tried to analyze the cause, the primary problem almost always seemed to derive from a weak thesis. Slowly I realized that the students had never been taught that there was an analytical process they had to go through before they could develop a strong thesis. I tried to describe this process as simply and as clearly as I could, as a weaving together of many sources of information on a given subject into a general idea—a thesis—which could be expanded and defended by the very particulars from which the thesis derived. I explained further that I would call the process “thinking analytically.” But my English 1 students found it difficult to comprehend what I was saying, even when I used examples. So, when I was assigned my first English 2 course, I decided to demonstrate the process by organizing all classroom activities—rough draft or journal writing, analysis of reading, class discussions—in a way which would replicate the process of analytical thinking, or the ideal work students should do before writing an essay.

As a further guide, I insisted every essay be built on the following four-paragraph model outline, which requires that students gather more than obvious information on the essay topic, come to a conclusion in thesis form, and defend that thesis with at least two logical arguments.

INTRODUCTION

Names subject. Gives some background information.

THESIS

Names writer's opinion on subject in a way that requires defense.

TRANSITION

Clarifies relationship of material about to be presented with that which precedes it.

REASON #1

Defends the thesis by arguments appropriate to the subject such as specific example, description, personal observation, reference to facts, statistics, opinions of others.

TRANSITION

REASON #2

TRANSITION

CONCLUSION

Links thesis with some additional insight.

In spite of the discipline imposed by the model, my students respond to it positively. In addition to giving them a clear guide for the construction of an essay, it provides constancy at the center of a course in which themes and activities not only change from week to week, but become increasingly difficult.

In each 15-week semester I assign an average of fifteen essays and teach at least five essay forms: personal, proposal, critical, contrast/comparison, evaluation. Of these, I spend the most time, four to five weeks, on the personal essay which is, for my students, the most difficult. To help them, I begin slowly so they can experience mastery of each step before moving on. And I use myself as a model.

Work on the first essay, NAMING YOUR NAME, begins in the first class. After the necessary formalities, I talk about my name and my feelings about it in a conversational, unorganized way. Then I ask the students to write informally about their names. This “journal” writing, which is always the first step in preparation for an essay, gives the students the freedom to record their immediate thoughts and feelings.

In class #2, I distribute the geometric drawing of the model outline, explain its principle, and distribute an essay I have written on my name following the outline. The students have heard my “rough draft” material. I explain that by using the outline as a guide, I was able to edit out the unimportant details, focus on material that supported the thesis and expand that material to 500 words by using a combination of personal experiences, anecdotes, and concrete facts. I then return the journals the students wrote in class # 1 and ask them to write an outline for their essay based on the model. If they have difficulty now or at anytime during group work throughout the semester, I encourage them to call on me or the student teachers for assistance.

In class #3, I divide the students into two “primary” groups, each directed by a student teacher. From this point on, the class meets and

conducts most of its business in these primary groups. After the groups have been formed, the students read their NAMING THEIR NAMES essays out loud. Then the student teachers, who have also read their essays aloud, ask each student to give the names of the other group members. The students discover that the stronger the essay, the more likely the students are to remember the name. This exercise is the first real moment of total involvement. For most it is one of shared agony and provides excellent material for the second essay assignment, NAME YOUR FEELING ABOUT READING OUT LOUD IN CLASS. To the surprise of many who expect to arrive at a negative thesis, they discover there were good as well as unpleasant points to the exercise, if only that nine or ten people learned their names.

In Class #4, I distribute familiar forms of communication such as print ads, storyboards for TV commercials, and cartoons. I explain that as simple as these forms are, each has, at its center, a concept. I ask students to find the concept or thesis and write it down. Then I divide the primary groups into sub-groups of three or four students which, under the direction of an appointed leader, attempt to come to an agreement on the theses. Later the class meets in a large circle which I call a super-group. Each of the group leaders report on the group theses and there is an open discussion. I have found that the competitive pride that develops in anticipation of the super-group sessions helps stimulate more involvement in the sub- and primary-group discussions. This involvement can generate exciting class discussions, particularly as students begin to explore ideas that are related to, but larger than, original themes.

In subsequent classes, I distribute reading materials that become more challenging, more literary, and I make the further demand that students find and write down not only the author's thesis but his reasons and their own response to the work. I integrate reading into the class work in the same way: sub- or primary-group discussion; reports to the super group that lead to larger discussions. This analysis of literary models help strengthen the process of critical thinking, but there is a further benefit that may be more important: each student can be engaged in the class on some level at all times. The more skilled or verbal can assume leader roles and assist the weaker. The students find the groups, especially the smaller, unthreatening. Each student can speak without being judged or humiliated because he or she doesn't understand, or because of a difference in point of view. In fact, the greater the differences expressed, the more interesting the subject becomes. Working this way increases confidence in self-expression,

which is in turn reflected in the writing. Theses, in particular, begin to get stronger.

If the class needs an example, I write a model of the third essay, **NAMING YOUR PLACE**. I also begin to type up the best or most interesting of the weekly essays each week so the class can see the diversity of point of view that is possible. The student models serve as well to reinforce some aspect of the model outline, such as how to strengthen introductions, transitions, or arguments. Students react to this “publication” of their essays with a pride that stimulates better work. By the fourth week, I find that students who claimed in the beginning they had nothing to say are not only writing at length but demonstrating sufficient mastery of the process of analytical thinking to begin to tackle more complex subjects, more demanding forms.

By the fourth week, most students have mastered the model outline and are using the classroom activities more or less naturally to help prepare for the final drafts of their essays. Those who have not mastered the outline, because they can’t or won’t do the work, drop—an average of four out of a class of twenty-two. Those who stay are ready to work intensively on a single theme for a sustained period of time as well as to try types of essays other than the personal. I chose “higher education” for the theme of this section because it is broad enough to be dealt with from both a personal and an objective point of view, thus providing a good transition from the personal to the proposal and critical essays. It is also a dramatic way to show students that a topic they consider boring (what student ever wanted to write about education?) can be brought to life.

Because of the financial crises at the City University this past semester, I spent an unusually long four weeks on the theme of higher education. The main work consisted of three essays: **NAMING YOUR WORK**—a personal essay about the students’ feelings about being at City College; **NAMING THE ALTERNATIVE YOU THINK WOULD BE BEST TO SOLVE THE FINANCIAL CRISES AT CUNY**—a proposal essay; **NAMING YOUR OPINION AS TO WHETHER OR NOT EVERYONE SHOULD GO TO COLLEGE**—a critical essay. Predictably, in their first journals, “Why I Came To City College,” most students wrote that they came to college to find a better, higher paying job after graduation. As is often the case, their refusal to think more deeply derived from a resistance to confronting negative feelings. From past experience, I know Basic Writing students are often angry at not having been given the preparation and encouragement they needed for college. They feel a sense of shame that they are

in a remedial class and suspect secretly they are not as good as the “regular” students.

We began to tap these negative feelings through the reading and discussion of the February 20, 1976, *New York Times* editorial by Kenneth Keniston, titled “For Him There Is No Exit from the Cellar.” Keniston’s thesis is that one quarter of American students are programmed to fail. He argues that these students receive inadequate health care and education; they have been psychologically damaged; they are victims of prejudice and an unfair economic system. When a number of my students corroborated Keniston’s thesis by relating personal experiences, there was an emotional release in the class that not only shattered the defensive shell of boredom but expanded the discussion to include the ways in which discrimination in education could be eliminated. The class concluded that the answer was through education itself, and with this realization the students began to take a genuine interest in the subject of “higher education.” They were particularly attentive to the story of City College as my team teachers and I traced the college’s evolution from its creation in 1847 as a free academy for the children of the poor, through its growth into a “proletarian Harvard,” to the advent of open admissions in 1970. As a consequence, the first set of essays, NAMING YOUR WORK, were considerably more spirited and thoughtful than the rough draft journals. Students began to write about college as a means of developing one’s fullest potential or, as one student put it, “a break in the long chain of failure that has been the tradition of my family.”

Once the class had an understanding of the prestigious history of City College, there was a new sense of urgency when we discussed proposals being made to resolve the issues raised by its financial crisis, such as charging tuition, raising admissions standards, cutting back on faculty and facilities. When they wrote their essays on the crisis, it was no mere academic exercise but a real effort to find alternatives to enable them to continue what was likely to be their only chance for a quality higher education. Not one student, as it turned out, would have been in that English 2 class if it were not for open admissions and free tuition.

Most of the students were highly conscious of their improvement throughout the section on higher education. In addition to the value of the reading, discussions, and writing, they had begun to grasp the step-by-step process that enlarged their initial concept of college as a place for job training into something much broader and more important to their total lives. The pleasure they experienced arose from more than the achievement of improvement; they realized they were

learning to apply the steps that caused that achievement, the process of analytical thinking, to different contents. As their sense of security in the practice of analytical thinking increased, they became more and more motivated to confront topics as challenging as “The Advantages and Disadvantages of Ethnic Identification,” “How to Maintain One’s Identity as a Man or Woman without Conforming to Conventional Sex Roles,” and “The Nature of Work.”

Each semester, one of the measures of the degree of the students’ motivation is that midway through the course the students are receptive to five or six lessons in grammar. I wait until mid-semester to take up grammar so that we have a clear diagnosis of the major common problems. By this time, students tend to participate not because they have to but because they want to learn how to strengthen their writing. They are even enthusiastic about correcting grammar tests in peer groups. In fact, the vitality of the class toward the end of the semester, as many observers have remarked, is barely manageable and would not be manageable at all if it were not for the students’ determination to continue the success they began to experience in those first group discussions, in which everyone had to participate, if only by being called by name for an opinion.

Success, no matter how small, does breed success. Of the eighteen or so students who stay in my English 2 class for the entire semester, there is rarely a failure. Many are able to skip English 3 and take the Proficiency Exam that completes the Basic Writing sequence. And when students collect their thick files of writing at the end of the semester, they do so with a sense of pride that contrasts dramatically with their passivity at the beginning. A few announce that they like writing so much they intend to change their majors to English. I don’t know how many do. But I am certain the process of writing is less of a mystery to them and that many feel much closer to being “regular” college students. For young men and women who have been tracked for most of their education to achieve modestly, this has a special value.