

Emotional Landscapes of the First-Year Student or What do they write about when they can write about anything?

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What do first-year students write about when they can write about anything? The answers to this question can reacquaint us with the first-year experience and the themes which dominate that experience — loss, overwhelming change, redefinition of self, new perspectives on significant relationships, and more global social issues. We can learn much about our students' culture from the stories they tell (Newkirk 106). Knowing our students **and** their concerns can also inform our practice, helping us to relate our material to the emotional landscape they inhabit.

In JoAnn Marchant's composition class, students are allowed to choose the topic of their five-page weekly papers. At the end of the semester, as they were preparing their final portfolios, we asked students in both of her sections to look back over their writing and to tell us what they had written about and why. Even though they were told that their responses would not affect their grades in the course and that they could respond anonymously, they seemed to take the task very seriously. They wrote thoughtful and detailed responses and many chose to include their names.

In looking at their responses, we chose to consider only their individual weekly papers. We omitted the research and collabora-

tive papers because their choice of topic on those assignments was somewhat restricted. We assigned their responses to broad categories that emerged through our careful reading of their answers. We found that their writing mostly focused on self-defining experiences, change, perspectives on relationships, social concerns, and loss.

These categories are by no means discrete; there is considerable overlap. Anything which is loss is also change; many times perspectives on relationships involved loss, and self-defining experiences often centered on significant relationships. We tried to use the students' explanations as a guide to the main focus of each piece.

As might be expected, many of the first-year students' pieces centered on themselves. They wrote about experiences which they felt defined them as individuals. College seems to afford them a vantage point from which to look back on significant events in their lives. In this new environment, they are free to re-define themselves, sifting through past events and deciding what really matters to them. They identify key events in their lives. As one student reflected in her explanation, "it was a very important event in my life and I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for that [theatrical] audition." Sometimes a piece about a particular experience can crystallize a series of incremental changes and come to represent greater change. As one student commented on her paper about attending her first Phish concert, "it almost resembles me growing up and finding something new about myself."

Of course, change itself was a major theme. In coming to college, many students have left behind all that is familiar to them—family, friends, community, or even culture. This change is so overwhelming that, as one student put it, "the first week of school, the only thing on my mind was the change in lifestyle that hit me so quickly, [that] I decided to write about it."

It is hard to overestimate this change. They are unfamiliar

with the culture, with the language, with the customs of the college environment. They lack past experiences of coping with this sort of change, and may not even know anyone who has. It is as if an atomic bomb has gone off in their lives and often they write simply to get back on their feet and re-orient themselves. "I wrote this piece as a means of settling into my life here," one student wrote. Another wrote, "I had a lot going through my head about college. I felt if I wrote it down, I could organize my thoughts better." Sometimes they wrote to reassure themselves that they would survive this change. One noted, "I wrote it to convince myself I could accomplish my goals, even in a new environment."

Often students used their writing to reevaluate significant relationships in light of this change in their lives. They looked back at the relationships which affected them and made them the people they are. As one student explained it, "I wrote about [Jerry] because he had such an impact on my life and how I viewed people."

They often looked back on relationships with the quality of nostalgia that comes out of feelings of loss. Loss itself was a surprisingly frequent theme in students' writing. The majority of these pieces centered around the death of a friend or family member. Perhaps the loss of so much in their own lives brings other losses to mind for them. Themes of loss also permeated their pieces about relationships and significant life events. Writing is a way of working through these feelings: "There is no way to get me to talk about things like [my grandfather's death] so I wrote about it," said one student. Writing also provided them with a means of memorializing those who have been lost to them. Several pieces were written as celebrations occasioned by loss or "a tribute to the person who died."

Newkirk notes that some critics believe that too much openness in topic choice and the concomitant focus on the self leads to an "individualism" which is "isolated, solipsistic, focused on purely personal gratification and success, oblivious to the communal

responsibility” (92). While initially almost all of JoAnn’s students found personal concerns completely absorbing, as the semester progressed many were able to move beyond themselves and express their concerns about the wider world. They wrote about domestic violence, sex education, crime, the elderly, homelessness, incivility, prejudice, cruelty and media depictions of women and fashion. For several students, these concerns grew out of personal experiences. They were able to connect their experience to its more global implications.

One student traces this process for us: “It’s a story about an old farm that had been abandoned. It captures loneliness until something/someone changes to see the beauty inside. I’ve seen a lot of beautiful things destroyed because no one cared enough. It’s not just a house or farms. I am also talking about people.” One student moves from her experience working in a nursing home to “the elderly and all the respect I gained for them as precious individuals.” Sometimes the concerns were more local, but no less global in their implication: “After the elections for senate and class officers I began thinking about how many people associate power with a position. So, I decided to write my thoughts on the subject.” Some students assert a sense of social obligation, “I know a few people who have been caught stealing, so it has been my job to tell them it’s not worth it.”

Reading JoAnn’s students’ responses has reminded us of how our lives are a continuous process. Revisiting the themes that resonate with first-year students has helped us to realize that when we write about the things that most concern us, we often return to themes of change, loss, identity — that these are essential parts of shaping words on the page and shaping our life experiences with those words. Maybe our first-year students are just closer to this truth.

We were also struck by the incredible amount of energy that students invested in writing about these issues. Knowing what first-

year students care about could become a powerful tool in bridging the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar material that we introduce to them. Subjects not inherently interesting or compelling to first-year students might be framed in terms of loss, change and identity. Whatever our discipline, understanding first-year students' perspectives on their world can only help us to help them learn.

Work Cited

Newkirk, Thomas. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*.
Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann/Boynton-Cook, 1997.