



Writing What You Really Mean

Three Activities to Help Student Writers Develop Authentic Voices

LUCAS DUCLOS

ASK MY STUDENTS TO SET THE BAR HIGH when it comes to the authenticity of their writing, and I don't mean whether or not they actually write what they hand in—whether it's plagiarized—but whether the writing captures their own thinking. So not, “Did you write this?” but “Do you actually *think* this?” After my first five years of teaching, I began to realize that many of the papers I got from my students, though often sound and logical compositions, contained ideas that these student authors didn't necessarily agree with. Whatever the genre of writing my students are doing, I expect them to put themselves into it somehow. But to write coherently and critically, demonstrate comprehension of a topic, follow conventions, and be completely honest with oneself all at the same time is a challenging balance to achieve, especially when for most students the most honest sentiments are ones of doubt and confusion. In trying to help them develop an authentic voice in their work, I have learned that

it's hard to produce authentic writing if they're not given the opportunity to engage in authentic *thinking*, and that it is my job to provide that opportunity to students.

The two activities that follow help students to explore the authenticity of their own writing. Both reinforce active self-assessment and the autonomous learning I suspect is at the heart of authenticity, in all its vagueness.

Recording and Observing the Writing Process

For about a year I had a very long commute to work. To be more efficient about giving feedback on students' work, I had them record their papers so I could listen to them in the car. Eventually, I learned that students also benefit from hearing themselves read their work. I began to ask them to listen to themselves reading their papers, then to edit and reflect on their work.

The process works like this: I ask students to record themselves reading something they've written using whatever media allows immediate playback. After they've finished, they listen to it (or watch it, if it's a video recording), stopping where they like to jot down reflections, questions, new ideas, or concerns they have about their writing. Sometimes I give them

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specific things to assess (mechanics, style, cohesiveness, etc.), but I also ask them to make observations.

After viewing themselves reading their papers on video, students often discover issues that proofreading on their own doesn't always reveal: subtle incoherencies and problems not just of syntax, which a computer can detect, but of semantics, and, as one student put it, "phoniness," which might as well be the opposite of authenticity. "Yeah, I wrote it, but it's not exactly what I really think." This is an observation that students can follow up on in this next activity.

Using Recordings of Class Discussions to Illuminate the Writing Process

How often do we have a great discussion in class which we simply trust facilitated some kind of learning? If you can get your hands on a video recorder, try to capture some of your students' discussions about their work and about the topic at hand. Some of my students' most authentic and insightful "paragraphs" happen in class discussions, and I've found that being able to replay these discussions often allows them to better incorporate these insights into their writing. Each week, we set aside time for students to record themselves reflecting on their theses, topics, or concepts. This produces a wealth of material we can later watch. Even five to ten minutes of recording, twice a week or so, provides students with a history of their thought process. And because they know they are the ones who will be looking at the process, they often seem to compose themselves more intentionally during the reflections and discussions.

We often find ourselves entrenched in language and literature, reaching for seamlessness between the thinking process and the finished composition.

Asking students to pay attention to the process on a more granular level by listening to and watching themselves read and discuss their work encourages them to engage in a more independent critical analysis of their language, their ideas

and the topics they write about. While the finished writing product looks linear, the process of getting there is not, and that's something the video recordings can help them understand and work with.

Composing Yourself: Mindful Writing

My other foray into authentic writing is less cumbersome, but has forced me to question some deeply ingrained beliefs about the writing process.

There are many days when students—even though they may not express it—want nothing more than to stop everything, even thinking. But when I asked students to do just that, to do nothing, not even "think," in complete silence with their eyes closed, they looked at each other in disbelief. Eventually, though, they started asking to do it every day, and not because it was about doing nothing. Quite the contrary! The results were so good that I agreed to let them. But encouraging students to sit in silence, free of others' expectations, attendant to the maze of wandering thoughts, was a decision I did not originally make with the intention of producing any writing at all. It just always seemed to help create a smooth transition into my lessons.

It started with guided visualizations. Noticing how overwhelmed many students seemed to be and how little they seemed to know what they thought even after I prompted them, I started doing five to ten minutes of guided visualization in which I would use imagery and even improvised sections of a story we were reading. The results were shocking. After I'd stopped, students would often wait quietly with their eyes closed, contemplating, after which they would write without even asking "How much should I write?" They just wrote, non-stop. And this happened

a lot.

I noticed that they needed the period of silence between the guided visualization and the writing so much that I eventually used only that as the prompt. I began implementing what I would call “mindfulness writing,” wherein I would ask them to *not* think at all for a few minutes, and then write. The students just needed to get in the habit of using their own thinking as the prompt—a sort of agency I wanted to reinforce in all aspects of learning. So after about five minutes’ time with their eyes closed in as much silence as I can create, I often ask students to make and document an observation. Someone once raised her hand and said, “How do we make an observation if we were quiet with our eyes closed?” I said, “Exactly.”

The few minutes’ time this takes up is often compensated for by a much more meaningful writing experience for students, and a more productive lesson. Students’ ideas often seem less derivative after this. I have also found that their writing becomes more articulate, almost as if when we’re silent we can tap into an authentic mind, after which when we write we are more articulate too. I’ve gotten word from students years later about how it’s helping them to prepare for exams, or to think about what they’re really trying to say in a thesis statement.

And students who often couldn’t sit still or redirect from conversation with others during writing exercises found that they could write with much more focus. Something else in them just needed to be turned on, or maybe turned off, so they could think differently. “There’s so much going on in there I’m not even paying attention to,” they would tell me, and, “I feel like there’s all this noise in my head.”

The uninhibited writing I’ve seen students engage in after this period of mindfulness is intimately related to the rigorous thinking that is required of

them. I had already suspected something about our thinking changes when we write without command and regularly. But why did some of the most authentic and productive writing follow total and utter silence?

I believe it is because in silence we truly become more sensitive to all that’s going on in our heads—much of which, for many of us, is just noise if we don’t make time to reflect on it. Maybe only this inarticulate noise was making it onto the page before because we hadn’t created a buffer of quiet time to restore the students’ thinking to a state wherein they felt, as one student put it, “This is my mind and these are my thoughts.”

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I wouldn’t ask students to strive for authenticity in their work if I didn’t see them thrive on it in their free time, and if I didn’t suspect that something about our own voice drives our learning. I agree that it’s important to question our biases, to think critically, but the purpose and reasons for doing so are not always explained to students, who often lose track of themselves in the writing process. This accounts for

a host of problems, from plagiarizing and cheating (both very misunderstood phenomena) to problems with attention and a loss of direction in the world of ideas, whether it means choosing a thesis statement, a major, or a profession.

In reflection, dealing with this issue of authenticity meant I had to become more comfortable trying new things—something we ask students to do every day—and more comfortable with a kind of thinking and learning that seemed to just take more time and start with the students themselves. ☺