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A Glimpse into Bard College's Writing & Thinking Workshop

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"What's a 'text explosion?" a wide-eyed new ninth-grader asks me, holding her notebook against herself like a shield. "What's 'loop writing'?" I give her an extra-wide smile, knowing that these strange-sounding exercises will eventually ease her writing anxiety, freeing her to write in an exploratory way. "Welcome to Bard's Writing &Thinking Workshop!" I say.

At Bard High School Early College of New York City, every new school year begins with a weeklong writing workshop whose curriculum originated in a workshop designed at Bard College in 1981 by writing scholar Peter Elbow. The Institute for Writing & Thinking (IWT), founded a year later, grew out of the college's president Leon Botstein's continuing concern that student writing lacked complexity. The methods taught in the workshop help students become deeper thinkers and writers within the support of a community. Over the last three decades, these methods have proven to be widely successful in a variety of teaching settings, from the elementary to graduate level. Over 50,000 teachers have traveled from across the country for training at the IWT at Bard College[1].

Workshops tend to be small, around fifteen students. All students in the school receive the same booklet of readings for homework, which creates sense of school community (at lunch, you can count on everyone at the table having read the same texts). All teachers at the school, from the English teacher to the math teacher to the physical education teacher, participate. Workshops last all day long for the first week of the school year (or the first two weeks for incoming students at Bard College). The wonderful thing about this workshop is that students fill whole notebooks, gaining confidence in their ability to produce copiously. Nearly five hours of writing per day might seem overwhelming for younger students at first—but by the middle of the week, most adapt beautifully to the rigorous practice and find writing easier than ever before. Workshop teachers tend to incorporate at least one kinesthetic activity per day (tossing a ball while brainstorming about a poem; taking a meditative walk with a notebook; or acting out a skit). This makes a day of writing seem more manageable for energetic, restless students.

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[1]Bard College, Institute for Writing & Thinking: **http://www.bard.edu/iwt/workshops**

Presented below are some classic Bard Writing & Thinking (W&T) methods and exercises, drawing on my own experiences as a workshop leader and participant, and the *Writing & Thinking Faculty Guidebook* by Dr. Joan Del Plato, professor of Art History at Bard College at Simon's Rock, who helped coin many of the key terms described here.

Free-Writing

Many schools use free-writing as a warm-up, but in W&T Workshop, free-writing is a recurring activity. Free-writing happens at the beginning, middle, and end of every day, and spontaneously. Sometimes, in the middle of an active discussion the teacher will interrupt and say, "Free-write about this question, everyone"—channeling the energy from talking into writing.

In other schools and colleges, I have seen teachers invite students to do free-writing to "clear their mind," and get "all the junk out of your mind so you can focus" before the real writing exercise beings. The free-write is then thrown away rather than used as a building block for more writing. This approach suggests—incorrectly!—that random or spontaneous thoughts are not important enough to be given real class-time, and then developed through revision.

When Mohamed asks what is expected of him in a free-write, I say, "You are playing on paper—writing whatever pops into your head."

"Oh," he says, eyes brightening. "So I don't have to make sense?

"No! Just free-write."

The workshop leader usually lets students know if this will be a free-write to share or not; another standard practice is that the leader does not comment on what is read. The leader only looks the student in the eye and says, "Thank you," before listening to the next student. Everyone receives an identical response to their writing; everyone's voice is heard.

I think of "free write," as the equivalent of a Downward Dog in yoga, a foundation position or "home-base" of the whole practice. It is the simplest, most basic gesture, but at the same time, the most profound. In workshop, students do free-writes so many times a day that it becomes second-nature, and yet, they are constantly discovering and re-discovering it every time they go back into free-write. Free-writing can be taken lightly or intensely: to help students ramp up for a challenging exercise ahead, or to cool down and reflect on a rigorous exercise they have just completed.

After an open-ended free-write, we move onto "focused free-writes" in which students respond to a question or a short reading. For example, they might write in response to "Against Still Life" by Margaret Atwood. This is the opening:

Orange in the middle of a table
It isn't enough
to walk around it
at a distance, saying
it's an orange
nothing to do
with us, nothing
else: leave it alone

After writing a "focused free write," about the poem, a leader might put an orange on a desk in the center of the room. As Del Plato suggests in the "Faculty Guidebook," the workshop leader can ask students to write a focused free-write about this orange for fifteen minutes. Then the leader can ask students to underline their favorite parts of the free-write—or mine the free-write for gems. The next day, students will return to these gems and write a new piece based on the dazzling sentence or paragraph they "mined."

In this way, the workshop shows students that free-writing is not simply a way to "clear" the mind but a way to create raw gems of prose they will later polish.

Loop writing

Looping is a process that invites students to write three five-minute loops (similar to a "focused free-write" but in three parts). A loop explores a subject—whether a question raised in discussion, or a text. For example, a loop about Atwood's poem might

Irilla feui tisl ipit augueros aliquatue con hendiam autpat. Ut acipit, vulla ad digna feu faccum ing eumsandre ming exerostie del utat. Putpat il utatin euis nonum vel in exero commod eum zzril utem vel iriustrud auguer. Olorper il ut vercin velismo lortismod minit ute velit,

invite students to write about their "first impressions" of the poem. The second loop might ask them to create a "dialogue" or "give voice to the thoughts of a silent character in a poem" (Del Plato 10). If the orange could talk, what would it say? It is usually in the second loop that students are encouraged to write something more unconventional. The third loop, the "voyage home" takes us back to the subject at hand, asking us to articulate what they feel is the heart of the Atwood poem, and how it might be relevant to their own lives. The three loops mimic some of the larger, recurring patterns in writing. Whatever genre we might pursue as writers, most of us have experienced that sensation of gliding out into the dark—or in an unknown direction with our writing. We take the knowledge we gained out in the dark, and steer our boat "home," or back to the subject at hand, with new insights. We may repeat this process dozens of times as we compose a poem or story. The loop exercise reminds students that writing is not a straight-shot process, but an experience of circling. As Elbow elaborates:

"For the first half, the voyage out…you allow yourself to curve out into space—allow yourself, that is, to ignore or forget exactly what your topic is. For the second half, the voyage home, you bend your efforts back into the gravitational field of your original topic as you select, organize and revise parts of what you produced on the voyage out." (*Writing with Power*, 60).

After students have done three loops on a subject, a natural next step would be to invite them to write "process notes" reflecting on the loops. What did they learn from the experience of considering the same topic from three different angles? Which loop felt the most authentic or natural—the most like "their" voice? Process notes allow the writer to reflect on what happened, and move onto revision (but more on process notes later).

So far, the exercises I have discussed are more solitary. Although students are writing side-by-side, reading aloud and hearing each other, they are not commenting on each others' work. I love this aspect of the workshop; I think of it as giving fledgling writers the breathing room they need to find their footing. It is like a dance class where students all do the movements together without correction or critique; they gain fluency simply through experiencing the movements. As the workshop progresses, the exercises become more interactive, with more comments from peers, although very few (if any) comments from the leader. I like the gradual progression from solitary to community in this workshop.

The Thought Chain

The "thought chain" teaches students how to listen to each other, and how to talk about each other's work in a way that can be heard. One student will begin by reading a response to a prompt—a paragraph-long response would be sufficient. Then the next student must say, "I hear you [John, *insert name here*] saying that…" and then they can add the conjunction "but" or "and" to connect to their own writing. For example, "I hear you, Mohamed, saying that an orange in the middle of the room was a hopeful image, but I wrote about the sinister side of a piece of abandoned, uneaten fruit…"After providing this response to a classmate, and introduction to a new work, the student reads from his or her own writing.

Throughout the entire thought-chain, no one raises their hand and no one is called on. It fulfills Elbow's goal of the truly "teacherless" class (for more about this, read *Writing Without Teachers,* 1973). Students are alert because they must listen carefully to what is being read, decide whether or not it is an appropriate time for them to jump in, like children

Irilla feui tisl ipit augueros aliquatue con hendiam autpat. Ut acipit, vulla ad digna feu faccum ing eumsandre ming exerostie del utat.
Putpat il utatin euis nonum vel in exero commod eum zzril utem vel iriustrud auguer. Olorper il ut vercin velismo lortismod minit ute velit,

playing Double Dutch in jump-rope. This provides students with the experience of learning to join class discussion, and threading their thoughts into the larger tapestry of ideas. The phrase "I hear you saying…" gives a student a structure in which they can respond in a non-judgmental way to respond to writing that is still new and fragile. It also slowly prepares students to critique each others' work.

Positive Pointing

In the more formal critique process, a student will read a piece aloud two times and listeners will respond through the direct compliment "I liked . . ." or the neutral "I noticed . . ." Later on, perhaps in another round of discussion, there will be gentle constructive criticism, "Have you considered . . . ?" (for example: Have you considered giving the poem a new opening?" Or ". . . telling us more about the grandmother's past?") A danger in the creative writing workshop is that students offering critiques often try to re-write their classmates' work in the way they would choose to put something. A one-sentence "have you considered . . . ?" invites the writer to consider a possibility in a non-judgmental way.

One of the goals of the workshop is to write a "polished piece of prose," that grows from one of the exercises, and to present it in a celebratory reading and sometimes also in a class or whole-school anthology. After a student "mines the gems" of a free-write, writes loops around the idea and develops loops into a finished piece, a peer review process can help with revision. Then the student presents what is called a "polished piece of prose" accompanied by a process note in which the student reflects on the process of writing the piece.

As a student at Bard College at Simon's Rock, I found great solace in the process note. I found it especially difficult to hand in a piece of writing and declare it "finished." The process note gave me a space to record some of my unfinished business and anxiety: ("Do I have too much alliteration? . . . Is the uncle character's motivation clear? Do the plot twists work, or do they feel artificial?) As a workshop leader, I find it fascinating to read students' process notes because I get a window into their lives as writers. Some process notes include details such as the number of drafts, the time of day the student wrote the piece, and readers who helped with the process along the way. Process notes help me see the *writer*—not just the writing. I almost always treat student writers with more generosity and tenderness after I have read a process note, and usually my critique of that student's work is more effective as a result. In fact, I cannot imagine working with student writers without process notes.

I was deeply moved to read a particular memoir piece written in a Bard H.S. Early College workshop. The piece is candid, moving, with an interesting use of language—already an achievement for a one-week workshop. In some ways, though, I was even more impressed by the process note that followed because it demonstrated the writer's ability to look beyond the piece itself, and consider even more emotionally moving and sophisticated possibilities for expanding it. Below, an excerpt:

> **"Genesis"** (name withheld)
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> *Summer is a synonym.* A word found in a grade school thesaurus under mirth and jocularity. My summer consisted of days spent in ice-cold waiting rooms, listening to the methodical clock droning on, ticking as if to tease me of my hours spent away from summer […] The rooms smell antiseptic, like latex gloves and rubbing alcohol. It sounds of sphygmomanometers, cries, anguish and fear. All of the nurses wear scrubs with creepy little clowns riding uni-

> cycles, or furry puppies wearing stethoscopes. I have dreams at night. I have dreams where someone knows why I'm broken, and someone knows how to fix me. When I wake up, I'm crying, I'm crying even before I open my eyes, because even in my dreams I know it isn't real. In dreams I meet doctors, empathetic doctors that care about me hurting inside. But when I wake up the doctors are mean. They tell me that I'm only pretending. I like to pretend, but not this way. Pretending is wrapping yourself in furs and sequins. . . . I don't pretend now, this is something far away from my control, some universal prophecy that my body was meant to fulfill, ticking away for fourteen years inside my blood. . . .

Process Notes

The most logical idea for my first free write was my summer, which in essence this story is about... This story/memoir was also a release for me, almost like a diary entry. If I added or continued to revise, I would write the effect my disease and these trying times have had on my family, mostly my parents who hurt just as much as I do, if not more, because I know they feel they have failed as protectors. I know if they could swallow my pills and endure the dangerous side effects, they would. I know they would wear my knee braces and steal my twitching and pain, my fevers and dyspenea, they would wear the monitors and IVs, only if they could.

The piece itself is deeply sad and beautiful, and the process note takes us into even deeper emotional territory, revealing the child's precocious understanding of the parents' suffering. It also includes more visual descriptions of physical symptoms (i.e."knee braces," and "twitching."). Perhaps the student was not quite ready to include those details in the piece itself—which was read aloud in workshop. However, the student has included these details in the process note so they can be included in a future revision. Indeed, sometimes the best part of a piece is contained in the process note. This may be because the student's writing is more fluid by the end; in reaching the end of a long writing process, the student has discovered the heart of the piece.

Writing with Your Students

To my mind, the most valuable part of Writing & Thinking Workshop is the tradition of teachers writing alongside their students. Throughout the workshop, leaders read aloud from their own writing and share in class "thought chains." Admittedly, I am sometimes too preoccupied thinking about the students to engage fully in my own writing. However, at least once during the course of a workshop, I will find my pen moving so furiously that I forget to look around the room, or down at my watch. Surfacing from the depths of a poem, I will suddenly feel startled to see fifteen pairs of eyes watching me, waiting for the next writing prompt. Perhaps this is the best, and only, way I can ever teach writing—to show students what a delicious experience immersion can be.

For more on Bard pedagogy: *Educating Outside the Lines: Bard College at Simon's Rock on a 'New Pedagogy' for the Twenty-first Century,* edited by Nancy Yanoshak (Peter Lang, forthcoming, 2011).

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