

A Writing Assignment/ A Way of Life

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Whe attendance has been taken, the homework assignment for tomorrow has been noted, the daily vocabulary word has been defined and discussed. “Now,” I ask, “does anyone have an occasional paper to read?” Becky has one. I ask “What’s your title?” She says, “It really doesn’t have a title. It’s about winking.” She begins reading: “Yesterday, when I was at Signulls, which is the youth group at my church, we played a game called ‘Wink ’em.’ At first it was boring because no one would wink at my partner, but someone finally did, and I got to wink someone over. Then the tables turned and I was the one being winked at, and my

partner was the winker.” She says she didn’t like being the “wink-ee” because she was afraid she might misread the wink and jump up when the wink wasn’t meant for her. Then she starts to comment on winking in general. “And anyway, how many times a day, or even a year, do you wink at people? Not that many. I think that last night was the first time in about ten years that I had winked at someone, or that somebody had winked at me.” She speculates on winking in the past—was there more of it? Why is it so rare now? How do you tell winking from a “nervous eye twitch”? Her final reflection is that winking is a strange behavior that seems to be much more common in children’s books and stories than it is in real life.

After she finishes reading, everyone applauds. “Who has something to say?” One person says that he also felt uncomfortable when he played this game. We start talking about thinking someone is waving at you and finding (after you’ve waved back) that the wave was intended for a person behind you. What makes this so embarrassing? Several people have ideas. After several comments, I say to Becky, “Thanks, that was a good paper.” Everyone applauds again. “Anyone else have a paper?” Sean says he’ll have one tomorrow. He’s got an idea, but

he just has to get it written. Then we go on to “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.”

This brief written reflection on winking is an “occasional paper.” Students write at least one each six weeks. Some write more; a few write five or six. They are read aloud and discussed, a grade is recorded indicating successful completion, and that is it. The paper is not handed in. No comments are made on how to improve it; there is no discussion of word choice or development. But the occasional paper is, I am convinced, one of the most successful and powerful ways of improving student writing.

It is important that these papers be easy to write. They are intended to reflect responses to life as it happens; the idea is to take advantage of an occasion for thought, to explore the occurrences of a moment that would usually be dismissed as unimportant. Since students do not hand them in, they can be written quickly without concern for presentation. They must, however, be completely written out and must be read aloud. Having students read the papers aloud is safeguard enough against carelessness. Not that some papers aren’t flawed, but if they are, it is not from lack of care but lack of control. Students always care about what they read

aloud to their classmates, and to attempt more than they have control of is often a good thing.

An OP is written on an occasion rather than for a deadline. Ideally the student writes about something immediately after it happens—within the day. This means the student is truly responsible for the paper in a way that a deadline can erase. The student has less excuse for saying, “Well, I had to write *something*.” Students do, of course, say this, and they do get down to the end of the six weeks and face a deadline, but the force of this deadline is different. For most students the sense of writing something that is worth reading is much stronger under these circumstances than it would be if there was a “paper due on Tuesday.”

Students look forward to hearing OPs. They are proud when they have one to read. A student will see me during lunch and yell across the cafeteria, “I have an OP today,” knowing I will be pleased. I give him or her a thumbs up. I *am* pleased.

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I also write OPs. During the first week of school I write and read at least three. Mine are usually longer than the customary page-and-a-half length. Sometimes I read papers I have written in previous years, but I also always write a few new ones. I want to show students that I think this is valuable; I want to model for students what an OP sounds like. And I must admit I like the feeling I get when I read an OP that I know is good. There is nothing that develops a bond between me and my students more quickly and more strongly than reading an OP that tells the truth. And I try very hard to tell the truth.

OPs also have a powerful effect on class interaction. Students learn to listen to each other and respect each other’s differences. Bob was passionate about this aspect of OPs:

This is almost the first time I have been in a situation where in a room full of teenagers one shares his/her opinion or tells what is in their heart, and he/she is not laughed at. When an OP is read, instead of hearing snickers or objections, there is silence. Instead of people staring into space, you see thoughtful faces, taking in every word that is being spoken. At the end, instead of silence, other

people’s opinions and thoughts are heard. At that moment, every student in the room is extremely mature and thoughtful of others.

OPs are not just a writing activity. Or at least they do not develop only writing skills. They are also a way of life, a way of looking at life, a way of experiencing life. OPs develop the ability to reflect on the grandeur of the ordinary.

Students tell me that once they begin writing OPs they continually think to themselves as events happen or thoughts occur that “I should write an OP about this.” Students who have graduated two or three years ago come back and tell me that they still write OPs. One student reported having a dream and within the dream saw a message flashing, “Write an OP about this.”

I do this myself. OP-thinking has changed my life. I have learned to see the small problems and puzzles of life as opportunities for thought. When I see and hear the excitement that is caused by Tiger Woods when he takes a dominant lead in a tournament, it occurs to me that the excitement does not result from a love of drama as much as a love of fantasy. There was no excitement caused by drama because the tournament is not dramatic. I start to think about the distinction between the excitement of fantasy and the excitement of drama and the fulfillment each one causes. The point is that, without the OP in mind as a format and a forum, I am unlikely to pursue the idea, even in conversation with someone watching the tournament with me. The OP format gives me the opportunity to think about something I would not otherwise pursue. The OP format encourages a development of ideas that even the most intellectual conversation rarely approaches. And beyond this, OPs make me notice things more, make me value things more.

Students who are unfamiliar with this sort of thinking sometimes begin to associate any reflective talk with OPs; they think that when we start being reflective about things, we are entering OP mode. Chris tells how he and his friends even took OP mode into their lunch hour: “The OPs in class have sparked what we like to call ‘OP lunches.’ My friends and I all go to lunch after school, and every once in a while we have an ‘OP lunch.’ It’s almost like what we have in class, just discussions about things of interest, curiosity, and confusion.”

Even though the effects of OP writing don’t *necessarily* differ from the effects of other types of writing done frequently such as journals or essays

(certainly the best thinkers and authors write journals in which they explore ideas and distinctions, perplexities, and revelations), the important difference is that journal writing and essay writing only *allow* such exploration; they do not necessarily *encourage* it. They do not motivate it. I would not write at length in my own journal about Woods's performance when he leads a tournament. I care about the distinction between the excitement of drama and the excitement of fantasy, but only in an intellectual way, not in a personal way. But I would write the OP because I would look forward to reading it to a class and would welcome the conversation that followed. The idea becomes personal when I think of it as an idea of mine introduced in my writing and read by me. The occasional paper, in other words, gives the intellectual and the abstract a personal context and a personal motivation. Since adolescents experience nearly everything as personal, the occasional paper offers them an entry into thinking that is abstract and intellectual.

OPs are, of course, also a place for personal reflection on personal concerns. Lana said, "I only read a few OPs but I wrote many. Some I didn't feel comfortable sharing with the class, which is something I should still work on, but writing them was a step toward acknowledging and expressing those feelings."

In some classes I have tried to have students read to each other in small groups to increase the amount of feedback. This works, but it works in a different, and, to me, less successful way. It usually takes a teacher/moderator to legitimize the time for discussion. It is exactly the problem that OPs seem to solve, which drags down work in small groups: students read but no one pursues the idea; students give responses, but they are much more likely to be congratulatory statements or anecdotes about parallel experiences than questions that pursue the theme of the paper.

By forcing students to read papers aloud, I ensure caring. I don't ensure quality, but rather caring about quality. When a paper is good, a student knows it. One student said that after reading an OP he knew was good he felt like "a Greek god and like [his] paper should be enshrined forever in some ancient ice cave." It wasn't any external praise that made him feel this way; he could tell as he read his paper that it was good.

And if a paper is bad, I don't penalize. By not penalizing for lack of effort, I make it shameful not

to put some effort into it. By not counting off for laziness, I make laziness a lazy choice. Carelessness is prevented by caring more. Once students have something worth saying, they will struggle willingly to say it right. Eventually, students will start to see what it is that makes a paper have impact. The student who tries to get a grade without any effort does not come across as a clever trickster who "got something for nothing"; instead the student is seen as someone who gets something and gives back nothing. The motivation to do good work is like the motivation operating on the playing field or on the dance floor. It is motivation from inside and from pride in doing good work. Ironically, by not assessing content I put more pressure on students to come up with something substantial.

I don't critique the style. Tempting as it is to point out stylistic successes in these papers, I avoid the temptation. I always comment on the content. I treat the paper as communication rather than demonstration. If the focus is communication, style will improve; if not, it is mere decoration. By commenting on style a teacher makes students self-conscious in a way that prevents good style from emerging naturally.

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At first students want to write "school compositions," which have a predetermined structure and completely safe content. This is fine as a start, but in the discussion I ask questions that push the topic beyond what is predictable. The paper on winking could lead to a consideration of risk-taking in social situations and to issues of vulnerability and generosity. I push the discussion in directions such as this. I'm not content to listen to a student's account of how wonderful grandma is without following the reading of the paper with some questions about what makes grandma different from other

grandmothers. What does the student really know about grandma? I want to push it in the direction that authentic interest would take it, which is the essence of development.

The questions I ask in discussion are those I might offer in a writing conference to encourage development of a first draft. But in relation to the OP they are not school questions that a student slots under teacher advice; they are instead real questions asked out of real interest. I want to get students to think about their writing in terms of real audience—what people are really interested in—and in doing that, I want to get them to search for what is really interesting in their lives. What people are really interested in is hearing the truth. They are not interested (for long) in displays of competent or even powerful writing that do not hold truth.

So the talk that follows should be interested talk. Students do not usually know how to be interested. They do not know how to use questions to pursue interest. Ask students to do an interview with someone to prove this to yourself. They do not understand follow-up questioning. (What was the most exciting thing you did when you were in college? I was attacked by a bear. What was the most interesting course you took?) This is why they have trouble with development in their writing.

They don't know how to be interested in the context of a school assignment, and they don't imagine how much additional explanation a reader might need. This is what discussion following an OP can teach. I think it is important to maintain authentic conversation and not to point out teaching goals as the conversation progresses. But it can be helpful when presenting a writing assignment to tell students to imagine that they have read the paper aloud to the class and imagine what questions the class might have. Experience with authentically interested conversation, both observation of it and participation in it, can be powerful in imagining development. And students writing OPs begin to hear an audience listening in their heads as they write. Robert said, "I was eager to hear their response [to my OP]. I would always imagine so-and-so's response to a statement as I wrote."

It is important to model for students how questioning can bring out significance of an incident as well as filling out the details. Many times students' comments will be of the "I've had the same thing happen to me" variety. There is a chance here to look at difference within similar cases, making distinc-

tions. If students write about unfair treatment, it is worth exploring why some incidents of unfairness are more troubling than others, and it is also important to push for a definition of unfairness, and to do all of this without suggesting that the student was not treated unfairly.

Another benefit of including OPs in classroom activities is that it recognizes that what happens outside of school is legitimate content for discussion within school. Classroom discussion should always be in some way different from lunchroom discussion or bull session discussion, but it should be different in attitude and method rather than in topic. In fact, the best possible language curriculum would be one that takes "common" concerns and explores them reflectively. This is what happens in literature and what motivates philosophy. If school can develop this attitude in students toward their lives (what Freire calls critical consciousness), it will have succeeded in something of major significance.

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What about "traffic cops are unfair" and "school is worthless" papers? These are commonly favorite concerns. For me, these get old fast, but students seem never to tire of them. Rather than barring these topics, a teacher should push them to a significant and interesting level. They are boring simply because they confirm conventional beliefs of the student culture. They involve no questioning and no contemplation. I try to push these toward the level of ideas. Sometimes this works, and sometimes it doesn't. If it doesn't work, I can write an OP about it.

What about advice papers? Students love to take the opportunity to correct the behavior of the

rest of the world. "So the next time you are making a left turn, just take a look at the opposite lane of traffic and use your turn signal." "So the next time you need to answer your cell phone in the waiting room of a doctor's office, please have some courtesy for others and step outside." This is the tone of many bad letters to the editor. What makes a good letter to the editor is some exploration of principle that guides thinking on the issue. "Good driving is a matter of perception and prediction." "Rudeness is usually a matter of doing what you feel like doing even when it inconveniences or annoys other people." The discussion following an advice paper can push toward a controlling principle. Or I can write my own paper: "Trent's paper yesterday made me think about bad drivers and what makes a bad driver . . ."

What about process? Doesn't this teach students to think of writing as a single draft activity? No, it teaches them to use writing as a way of responding to life. The discussion following the papers gives students experience with a reading audience that they can imagine when they are called on to revise a paper not intended to be read aloud.

Beyond its effect on writing, a program of OPs has an effect on reading. The more experience students have with concepts, abstractions, and distinctions, the more easily they will understand such writing when they read it. It is hard to read what is unfamiliar. It is much easier to comprehend what is in some way similar to thoughts you have already had or heard about in conversation. OPs provide the rich conversation that teaches good reading.

Two brief examples will give an idea of the topics and reflection occasional papers bring into the classroom. Jordan's OP begins this way:

After reading the story "A Sick Collier" [by D. H. Lawrence] I began to think about what hard honest work really means. Is it a deep-rooted instinct in some men that satisfaction is only fulfilled through tough physical labor? To many people manual labor is the result of a lack of education. Why would anybody want to labor in the sun all day working, dripping in sweat and dirt? But still there is something that drives some men to want to sit back after a hard day's work in their old worn-out Dickies, old boots, and covered in oil, mud, and sweat. It gives a feeling of accomplish-

ment. This feeling is glamorized in Chevrolet truck commercials. Like a Rock!

Jordan goes on with his discussion of work and satisfaction and ends by comparing men at a restaurant, some in business suits and some coming from manual labor. He says the businessmen might look at you "in a different way. But you smile at them because you are proud of what you've done. Are they looking down on you or do they envy you because they see the satisfaction you get, and they too yearn to maybe someday live like you do?"

Marcia's description of a parent turning fifty leads into a reflection on the concept of age: "It is true my mom has reached this landmark age, but it still does not seem possible to me. I have always viewed fifty as extremely old. However, that does not seem to be true in her case. Is my mom older than I thought she was, or is fifty younger than I thought it was?"

Rilke writes in one of his letters to Franz Kappus that the young writer should write about that "which your own everyday life offers you." He tells Kappus to describe "your sorrows and desires, passing thoughts and the belief in some sort of beauty." He says if ordinary life seems without interest, the writer should not blame his life but should blame himself: "tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches" (19-20). Rilke does not suggest specifically writing about speeding tickets or twisted ankles, but I think papers on such topics, especially if they struggle toward reflectiveness, are in the spirit of Rilke's admonitions.

There is always plenty for students to write about, once they get the idea that everything about life, about being alive, is worth their interest and reflection. Once they get this idea, they write better papers, and they also, quite possibly, live better lives.

Work Cited

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Trans. M. D. Herter Norton. New York: Norton, 1993.

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