

The View from the Whiteboard Window

by Susan Roberts

Background

About five years ago, I decided to experiment and try another approach to the usual instructor-student mid-semester evaluations for my non-traditional female students (working adults, older students in college for the first time, single mothers, retirees). These students made up about sixty percent of the writing classes I instructed on the community college level. While these evaluations served a necessary purpose and gave me a chance to discuss each student's progress on an individual level, I realized that something was missing from the discussion process.

Although the non-traditional students were responsive and ready to converse about their work in the course, I could not help but notice that another angle kept emerging time and again in our one-to-one sessions. Somehow these non-traditionals were talking about issues other than the composition course, yet these matters were inextricably linked to their performance in the writing classroom. This hidden angle, or missing factor, had to be explored. In order for the mid-semester conferences to be successful, I needed to find the link between the individual as a student and the student as a writer.

Writing view journal activity

In our next class meeting, I began the class by asking the students to take out their journal notebooks. While the students were preparing to write, I drew a picture of a large window on the whiteboard, turned to the students, and said, "This is our classroom window in our writing course. What do you see at this very moment when you look through this window at yourself and your writing?" Here are the instructions that I wrote on the board and read to the students:

1. For the first two-three minutes of this activity, think about where you are as a student and as a writer in this class.

2. Now, when you look through that imaginary window on the board, write about the view that you see of yourself and your writing.
3. Use your experiences, do an analysis, or try persuasion to develop your ideas about you and your role in writing.

While I established few guidelines for this journal activity, I did announce to the class that they could use a variety of writing strategies to cover their ideas and feelings. With such minimal guidelines given, I was worried that some of the non-traditionals might miss the point of the assignment: to let me know where they stood in the writing-learning process.

At first, the students were a bit skeptical and thought I was joking. Somewhat reluctantly, they began to write. The fifteen-minute time frame that I had envisioned for this journal assignment soon became thirty minutes, and the students had become so engrossed in the journals that many did not want to stop writing. I had to walk around the room to collect the entries, and many students were hesitant about submitting their work, asking for more time to complete the entry.

Roxanne's journal entry

Roxanne is thirty-six years old, a single mother of three, and an employee at a hotel. She is enrolled in two courses this semester: English 101 and Math 102. Here is her journal:

An "imaginary window"? Someone ought to wash the real windows here! I should know—I'm a maid in a hotel near the airport. Is this my life? Will it be my life a year from now? I sure hope not. That's why I'm here. I'm tired, the kind of bone-crushing tired you see on those tv ads for vitamins. Between three kids and my job, I have to succeed. We read an essay in here that I couldn't

put down: “Campus Racism 101.” I needed a boost, and that essay was there for me: Go to class, meet your professors, do assignments on time, don’t defeat yourself. That’s what the essay said. I could be the poster girl for Nikki Giovanni’s words when she says, “College is a little like playing grown-up.” However, I’ve got a message for Miss Nikki: College is not for grown up wannabe’s—it’s the real thing. Someone ought to tell that to her because she’s dead wrong! College is an adult world, and my writing class is right in the middle of that big bad adult world. I don’t have to prove to myself or my family why I’m here in this classroom. My little finger can answer that one. I’m not going to wash windows forever, and if being at school and writing my butt off gets me anyplace then I’ll do my best. In the hotel we had a famous writer spend two nights as part of her lecture tour. I went to hear her at a local bookstore, and she looked at me two or three times, as if she recognized me as the person who cleaned her room. Did she know me? When she said to the audience, “Any questions?”, I raised my hand and asked her, “What has writing done for you besides make you rich and famous?” She said, “I could respond humorously or seriously, but I think you want a serious answer. Writing creates worlds for me.” She didn’t explain, and I nodded and left. I couldn’t get her words out of my mind for over a week. In this class we read, write, read, write, and then do some more. After thinking about her words, I had that moment we discussed—the epiphany moment—when everything she meant (or at least I think what she meant) finally came together. Maybe what she meant is what this whole journal entry is about: writing helps you create worlds with your words. It’s not some kind of really profound idea, but that’s what I want my writing to do. I want to share my world, the world of my here and now with my readers. I’m not writing books. I’m writing ME—my observations, thoughts, reactions to what we’re reading in class. For once, I feel like my voice counts. I’m not playing some adult in college—I AM that adult going to college to make something of my life. I

may be thirty-six years old, but I finally figured out where I am in that imaginary window: I’m here, I’m learning, I’m providing for my children, and I’m a learner who’s going to make it in writing, college, and life. That author was right—writing is helping me create worlds that I understand with my words, and for me, right now in my life, that’s a momentous thought.

Discussion

In this assignment, I did not have the students read their journal entries to their workshop groups; instead, I read their work and tried to find any information that would give me some insight into the non-traditional female students’ sense of location and performance in my writing class. I hoped that I could determine a connection between their perceptions of the learning process and any interaction writing had with their personal lives.

As I began to read their journal entries before I met the students for their conferences, I was not surprised to find that many non-traditionals wrote about observations and feelings that they never had explored in their essays, response papers, journals or classroom discussions. A wealth of information was coming from a simple view out of that whiteboard window, and the writing assignment gave me far more detailed background about my female non-traditional students than they were able to discuss in a fifteen-to-twenty minute mid-semester writing conference. This journal writing assignment was an epiphany for many of the students, for almost all of them found themselves torn between the known and comfortable world of the familiar and expected, and the unfamiliar and sometimes disturbing world of college life and adulthood. As learners and writers, they understood that the window view they were being asked to describe allowed them to recognize and reconcile the tumultuous feelings they were experiencing in their overlapping worlds of friends, family, work and academics. Kegan (2004) saw this step in the growth process when he claimed, “Indeed, school can be a most fertile context for this transformation of consciousness into adulthood” (p. 300). The mid-semester journal assignment achieved the goal I had

hoped for: It linked past and present, beliefs and attitudes, dreams and realities, and adolescence and adulthood all in an intense writing scenario.

Conclusion

The view from the window assignment expanded my horizons as a writing instructor and opened my non-traditional female students' eyes as learners. We all discovered invaluable information about directions in life, goals, past experiences, present perceptions, and the interplay of these factors with the writing-learning process. By using a simple visual—a drawing of a window—to stimulate creative and critical thinking, I found new meaning in the writing process. [Macrorie \(1970\)](#) noted in *Telling Writing*, “A journal is a place for confusion and certainty, for the half-formed and the completed” (p. 141). In many ways, his words describe my non-traditional female students' lives as individuals and writers. [Edward White \(2007\)](#) supported this idea of journal writing as a key unlocking the distinct identities of student and writer in “Helping Students Do Well On Writing Assignments” when he emphasized, “For many of our students, this use of writing to internalize and understand is novel and difficult; it also turns out to be profoundly instructive, sometimes even transformative” (p. 35).

A simple journal exercise on which I had planned to spend no more than fifteen minutes had expanded itself into a thirty-minute assignment that gave me mid-semester knowledge far beyond the typical “Well, you’ve done four essays, six response papers, and eight journals so far this semester, and let’s take a look at your drafts, workshop material, revisions and other assignments. What do you have to tell me about your work?” conference time dialogue that characterizes so many of these appointments. Now, I give this visual window journal assignment a week before I have mid-conferences with my writing students. Through this deceptively basic journal entry, I have recognized that the view from that whiteboard window illuminates not only the female non-traditional learners behind the writing but also the writers at work in a highly personal and ever changing world that characterizes the academic environment.

References

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