

Introduction

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For the kinds of changes necessary to transform American education, the work force of teachers must do three tough things more or less at once: change how they view learning itself, develop new habits of mind to go with their new cognitive understanding, and simultaneously develop new habits of work—habits that are collegial and public in nature, not solo and private, as has been the custom in teaching.

—Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas*

READERS MIGHT UNDERSTANDABLY come to this book with the expectation of finding new strategies for teaching writing and for teaching through writing. Since the 1970s, exchanging ideas and strategies for teaching writing has been part of numerous seminars, institutes, and workshops on writing instruction. Such strategies are well represented in books on the writing process and writing across the curriculum, to which writing teachers, as researchers and practitioners, have made important contributions. Teachers just beginning their careers, and experienced teachers looking for ways to bring more writing into their classrooms, still need practical handbooks on invention strategies, on writing to read, exploring a topic, and revision.

The assumption guiding this book, however, is that we also need mentors who show and tell, colleagues who can talk about how they learned to do something new, how classroom culture, intellectual context, and personalities affected the outcome, and what they have learned about their classrooms and their students. And we need teaching communities in which these conversations can take place. The euphoria following participation in a workshop may evaporate when a new strategy or lesson falls flat, tempting a teacher to resist

any change. Mentors can encourage thoughtful reflection about what did or did not happen; colleagues can challenge us to try the practice again with a different subject or text.

The contributors to *Writing-Based Teaching* are faculty associates of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College; they write out of their experiences as teachers of composition, mathematics, anthropology, literature, and education at diverse home institutions. As leaders of the Institute's writing and thinking workshops, they are accustomed to talking with secondary and college teachers of all academic disciplines in urban and suburban public schools, independent schools, and two- and four-year colleges and universities. They have also heard teachers' questions about writing and teaching: Where is there time to fit more writing into my teaching? How do I pay attention to students' language when I teach history or literature or science? How can I maintain academic standards for critical thinking if I make writing more central to my curriculum? In the chapters that follow, the writers respond to questions like these from their individual perspectives, but all emphasize the need for teachers to develop a *practice* for writing-based teaching, not simply a collection of strategies.

What do we mean by practice? Aristotle's idea of virtue, which says that we become virtuous by practicing virtue, become better at the cello by playing it, better at carpentry by doing it, is relevant for making changes in teaching.¹ Repetition—over time, under different circumstances, and with increasing depth of understanding—transforms a one-time action into a practice. We deepen our understanding of writing-based teaching over time by making writing central to how we, and our students, engage ideas, talk to one another, and read diverse texts. More than that, taking time to notice how reading and writing strategies work for us and for our students makes us more reflective practitioners. The daily practice that refines the skills of the craftsman, musician, performer, artist, or teacher also fosters certain habits of mind that change how we think and who we are as teachers and writers. It is what we mean by having a practice.²

The idea for this book came up at a meeting of the Advisory Board of the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College. We were talking about how best to mark the Institute's twenty-fifth anniversary (in 2007), and since all Institute meetings begin with writing, we began by writing about our concerns "about the Institute's work with teachers." On everyone's mind was the worry that although teachers were engaged and inspired by participation in Institute workshops, back in their classrooms they often lacked a community of colleagues who were able to "believe and doubt" new teaching ideas. Teachers barely have time to see each other in the schools and colleges in which they teach. In numerous e-mail conversations with each other and with other Institute faculty associates, we worked our way toward a series of conversations with teachers in which we would believe and doubt writing-based teaching—

essays that would be about more than strategies. We imagined an audience of teachers—secondary school and college teachers of English, history, literature, and science—who might appreciate candid talk about teaching and writing in terms that are at once personal, practical, and philosophical.

As we worked, we rehearsed through writing our individual histories with the Institute, called on the collective memory of people who had been important to the evolution of its programs, and talked with teachers who, as participants in workshops at Bard and at schools and colleges elsewhere, are part of the Institute's story. As writers, we were pulled between wanting to tell our own Institute stories and describing the particular writing practices as they evolved, first in our own classrooms and academic disciplines, and then in the workshops we led for other teachers. We have worked toward integrating the two kinds of stories.

Today, few would question the value of writing in the secondary curriculum or writing-intensive courses at the college level. The *idea* of writing to learn, or teaching through writing, has caught on in liberal arts colleges, universities, public and private high schools, and even medical schools. College faculty in history, mathematics, and science are investigating whether writing reveals students' thinking and illuminates the assumptions of different academic disciplines. Elite colleges and universities, where faculty once balked at the need for what they perceived as remedial efforts, are now developing state-of-the-art writing programs that provide help in writing to students of all abilities, and often to faculty as well. At urban public schools, a new generation of teachers coming out of graduate writing programs and master of arts in teaching programs know about the work of Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Janet Emig, and Ann Berthoff, and are familiar with the theories behind writing to learn, the composing process, and collaborative learning. In theory, the process model for teaching writing and the value of writing across the curriculum have gained wide acceptance since the Institute for Writing and Thinking was established at Bard College in 1982.

In fact, teachers are still struggling with how to make use of writing, even as the pedagogical pendulum moves away from learning through writing—which, it is said, takes too much time in and outside of the classroom—toward an emphasis on assessment and templates for fostering critical thinking. The movement toward standardization of the curriculum at the secondary level, and the focus on product in college writing programs, also make it easy to dismiss teaching methods that take more time as touchy-feely, unconcerned about academic writing and critical thinking, and irresponsibly romantic about school culture and students' abilities. In the Institute we have often talked about the perception among some teachers (and students) that writing to learn practices are not academically rigorous, but intellectually soft. The authors of the chapters in this book respond to the criticisms of writing-based teaching by showing how familiar writing strategies can become valuable tools for fostering critical reading, inquiry, and reasoning.

In the English or language arts classroom can be found an impatience with “free” writing, with reading writing out loud in class, and with peer response groups. There isn’t time for these activities, we’re told, or for teaching the academic paper. In chapter one, Sharon Marshall defends private freewriting and explores its potential to make students better thinkers. Skillful use of freewriting may in fact save time in the classroom. In other academic fields, the “writing to learn” movement has often foundered on the issues of time, demands of teaching content, and the language of particular academic disciplines. Yet thoughtful application of writing to initiate discussion of an idea, event, or text can greatly enrich classroom discussions, as Nicole Wallock suggests in chapter two.

An incomplete understanding of what teaching through writing does, and what it is, hampers a writing-based approach to teaching, especially when teachers face new challenges: schools preoccupied with test scores, new technologies in the secondary and college writing classroom, and a higher percentage of second-language speakers and readers. In addition, the physical makeup of many public schools; the jealously guarded privacy of secondary, and especially, college classrooms; and fear of judgment from colleagues make many teachers fearful of change, cynical about its outcomes, and unimaginative about the possibilities of adapting lesson plans that include writing to the circumstances of their classrooms. Nevertheless, a tool such as the dialectical notebook helps students become close readers, critical thinkers, and partners in what Ken Bruffee calls the “conversation of mankind,” that is, the reactions and opinions of other readers, past and present, to key texts in a discourse community.³ But as Margaret Ranny Bledsoe describes in her chapter on dialectical notebooks, teachers need to experiment over time with many forms and uses of this notebook, in order to discover the form most appropriate for their students, their discipline, and the text to be read.

The writers included in this volume develop and refine Peter Elbow’s idea that although students need to learn how to write academic papers and good essays, they first need to discover who they are as writers, what they think, and what they make of what they read. Students need opportunities for thinking through writing, for experiencing what Elbow has described as an economy of plenty, rather than one of scarcity.⁴ The practices of writing to explore an idea, respond to a text, reflect on learning, or engage others’ opinions—or even to rethink and revise a piece of writing—are as critical for college faculty seeking to engage students in a first-year seminar as they are for a teacher of tenth grade in an inner-city school looking for a way to help students through a first reading of *Much Ado About Nothing*. More language and more thinking, rather than less, and more ideas, not fewer, can make the process of revision creative and imaginative, as Carley Moore suggests in chapter six, on radical revision. Revision revolves around a sequence of writing exercises that support the process of re-seeing first drafts. In revision, as with double-entry notebooks,

focused freewriting, collaborative learning, and even freewriting, noticing what has moved our thinking makes us better writers. As Alfred E. Guy Jr. suggests in chapter three, skillful use of process writing is one way to encourage students to re-see their own and others' writing, and to revisit their own thinking about a text or problem.

The contributors herein acknowledge that making changes in our personal or professional lives is a difficult process and needs support from friends, colleagues, and mentors. Collaboration and a belief in the social character of learning are critical components of writing-based teaching, as all of this volume's chapters suggest. The authors collected here frequently report in their chapters what they have learned from each other; from other Institute faculty associates, both past and present; and from programs at their home institutions. They confront their doubting selves and the difficulties, internal contradictions, and challenges they have encountered as teachers of writing, literature, mathematics, and anthropology. As Alice Lesnick writes in chapter four, on collaborative learning, "Teaching through writing invites students to collaborate; learning how to teach through writing invites teachers to collaborate." Writing as a teaching tool in fields such as history, anthropology, or science has been well investigated by proponents of writing across the curriculum. But writing also creates a culture of learning in which students learn to listen and respond to opposing attitudes, as Robert Whittemore describes in chapter seven, on learning culture. And Ray Peterson reminds us that schools can be built on a culture of collaborative inquiry, and that practices described in this volume are vital in shaping that community.

The question implied in these chapters is, "Why write?" What difference does writing make in teaching, learning, and in the community of school? Questions about how to teach and what is worth learning are not new, but the weight that teachers and administrators give to the importance of writing for learning suggests not only that literacy has become a more pressing problem, but also that writing is valued for the ways in which it enriches and enlivens thinking. Writing-based teaching, described in different ways in these chapters, slows us down and makes us better listeners and readers of others' texts and of our own, and more reflective teachers. We hope this book will be a companion guide to those teachers, who, alone and with colleagues, want to know what it is like to teach through writing.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.
2. The term is Paul Connolly's. In memos to the Language and Thinking Workshop faculty, Paul identified the goal of weekly portfolios as that of developing habits of mind necessary for learning, habits that could be fostered through sequences of writing prompts designed to help the writer explore diverse ways of approaching a subject or text.

3. Kenneth Bruffee, "Sharing Our Toys," *Change*, and "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind," *College English*, 635–52.
4. Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries*, 38–53.

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