

## *Asking for It: Imagining the Role of Student Writing*

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Having been asked to discuss writing assignments, I hope not to have been cast as the department comp dog, whose job is to bark at the heels of other faculty members so they will do their dreary compositional duty. For though in some places an assignment is still an interesting event—the *ad signum* still a signaling toward a certain one, a special allotting or appointing or singling out, a little drama of destiny (“Your mission, Jim, should you choose to accept it . . .”)—in higher education assignment suggests standardization and drudgery (“Attention, class; here is your assignment for tomorrow”). Even my visiting mother-in-law, asking what topic I’d address, made a face at the answer. Hearing that my audience would be department chairs, she gave a comprehending “ah,” which I paraphrase as follows: “Writing assignments and department chairs are necessary evils of the same bureaucratic kind. The assignment is a way of riding herd on students, of checking up on them and quantifying their performance. The department chair rides herd on faculty members, checking up on them and quantifying their performance. Your topic is therefore apt for your audience.”

Although this assessment is unfair to both topic and audience, I will focus here on the former and consider some aspects of writing assignments that are more than bureaucratic—that indeed have directly to do with the imagination—and that are perhaps apt for a panel on curriculum reform. I say “perhaps” because I speak as an outsider to English departments. I teach

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in a freestanding writing program, where I help train writing teachers and sometimes confer with professors in various departments about writing assignments. As a live-in tutor in one of Harvard’s dormitories, I also confer with graduate teaching assistants and (usually much later at night) with students attempting to respond to writing assignments given by these teaching assistants and by professors. Rather than play the comp dog, then, I want simply to give the gist of these conferring experiences, by following out a line of four basic questions that teachers in various departments, thinking about their writing assignments, have found useful—and that perhaps might be asked of whole departments.

An obvious opener is this: *What role do writing assignments play in your course?* It’s a fairly abstract question, but the main reason college teachers find it hard to answer (in my experience) is that they haven’t thought about it. This may account for the odd fact that in many courses, while the canon of teachable topics and types of texts has changed excitingly in recent decades (at least in the humanities), the basic assignments have remained the same. Even though teaching new kinds of texts from new kinds of viewpoints, college teachers seem to assign the kinds of papers—compare and contrast, summarize and respond, and so on—that they were assigned by their own teachers, who in turn assigned what their teachers did. But clearly one reason to avoid asking oneself about the role of assignments is the banality of the answer—namely that assignments are for riding herd. They’re for making sure students are doing the reading and paying attention to lectures and for distinguishing students from one another by ranking them. Which is of course why so many college teachers speak of “correcting” or “grading” student papers rather than of “reading” them.

But since both these tasks could be accomplished by, say, a few pop quizzes, a second question arises: *Why not simply abolish writing assignments?* Most students hate doing them, do them only at the last minute, and care more about the grade than about our painstaking responses, which sometimes take longer to write than the papers themselves. And teachers hate grading them. Judged by any honest measure, most student essays to which we give Bs are vacuous, bored, and (read in quantity) soul-killing. Even as we jot our pert, fair-minded notations in the margin—“could be clearer here; develop”—we are really thinking, “What are you *talking* about? Why are you *doing* this to me?” When we come across a hint of a suggestion of an idea, we fall over ourselves to congratulate “a fine insight,” which insight we hungrily fill out and clarify even as we congratulate the student for having it. And student essays on literature are even more soul-killing than those on, say, psychology or political science, since the aesthetic distance between the language that students are writing about and sometimes quoting—the

language that is the teacher's joy and scholarly passion—and the language that students use to describe it is hugely great. And what else should we expect? To feel the truth and fineness of great literature requires more life experience than most students have. A good class discussion can boost one's adrenaline and ego: hitting one's stride as an academic Oprah, one actually starts to like the way those three guys always sit together in the back with their caps on backward and their arms folded in front. But reading their papers afterward is always depressing. It's only too easy to imagine how the authors we are teaching—say, Dickinson or Baldwin or Lawrence—would judge the whole hypocritical, mutually resentful interaction. Our Catullus surely *didn't* walk this way.

Since reading the books is the primary civilizing experience, after all, and since reading with understanding is challenge enough for most students, why not leave the assigning of these depressing exercises to composition teachers? The value of entertaining this question is that it clears the air: it allows teachers to speak feelings about student writing that are usually suppressed by institutional pieties and heavy workloads. And such feelings, if universities have half as much to do with the human spirit as they pretend to, aren't just to be sucked up. We pay an emotional price for giving and grading writing assignments, especially at a time when classes are getting larger and we need to ask what makes the price worth paying.

One consequence of imagining a world without writing assignments is that it forces us to consider alternative activities seriously. Every teacher I've spoken to, for example, who has set up an online dialogue group or bulletin board for his or her class—in which students challenge and refine one another's views on provided topics in an intimate, nonthreatening, yet thoughtful forum—reports an increase in engagement and collaborative communication, in the amount of writing willingly done, and in the sense of a real audience for that writing. The teacher who regularly participates in or monitors these online discussions has a truer record of a student's engagement with the course than most essay assignments provide. And that teacher's comments, interjected along the way as part of the conversation, probably do far more good than the comments stamped on a paper as a final seal of approval or disapproval (Better luck next time!). If that teacher does assign a paper at the end of term, moreover, students can draw from the semester's online discussion. Instead of starting painfully from scratch, they can select from all they've written the ideas and examples that seemed interesting to discussants and that therefore might make an interesting paper. So, far from being the enemy of the humanities, computer culture—if made universally available—may make it easier for all of us to follow the

motto of the Renaissance humanist Juan Luis Vives: "Read much, talk much, write much—publish little."

And yet most teachers, even those who use writing assignments to ride herd, will demur when invited to imagine a world without them. As anybody who has made it through graduate school knows in the cells, one learns to think about a subject not by reading, however massively, but by reading and then writing painstakingly about it—at first writing badly, gradually a little better. And in the humanities, at least, many of the qualities that distinguish good thinking—the detailed working out of a response to a work of art or philosophy, the alert prose persona, acute and lively phrasing—are necessarily products of solitary effort, however much others help inspire them. This may be why those teachers who establish dialogue groups or bulletin boards report that some of the best moments in online discussions are the mini-essays, the crystallizations of thought that are encouraged by collaborative dialogue but that students work out alone. So while it's true, as many are now saying, that college courses should include more collaboration—a way of working that's obviously much healthier and more useful in the workplace than the lonely pondering and polishing of humanities scholars—it also seems clear that literature invites and requires a certain amount of solitary contemplation. And surely in any discipline, as in life in general, coming to emotional maturity requires that horizontal interaction be balanced by vertical solitude—the sort of disciplined loneliness an essay assignment imposes.

But what should come of this solitude? Or, to pose a third basic question, *What do you want your students to be able to do in their writing?* This too turns out to be a difficult question, since most college teachers imagine their objectives for students in terms of knowing rather than doing. Thus one classics professor, after wrestling with the "do" question for a while, showed up with a manuscript of one of his own papers and said, "This is what I'd like them to be able to do." And if not imaginative, this response was honest. What we want is for students to be able to think and write like us. For all our talk about self-realization and finding one's own voice, we basically want to reproduce ourselves—if not our ideas, certainly our interests, our habits of noticing, our argumentative moves. This is the responsibility, and the vanity, one accepts in becoming a teacher. Students may rave about the great ideas that emerge in an intense discussion or a knockout lecture, but they forget most ideas in a few hours. The intense discussion one has with a student, which could be absolutely crucial for the subject the student is writing about, somehow never makes it into the paper a few days later. And at the semester's end heaps of brightly colored binders containing knockout ideas from lectures fill the trash bins outside my dormitory apartment.

What stays with a student is the way good teachers approach texts and problems, ask and answer questions, negotiate a mass of materials—the pre-siding presence that drives the student to write and rewrite that one hellish paper that changes and deepens him or her.

Teachers who would use writing assignments for something more than riding herd—for teaching rather than for finding out who has been listening to their teaching—therefore need most of all to know themselves as thinkers. They need to articulate and distinguish the intellectual moves and qualities of mind that they themselves have internalized—not only so they can be critical of their habits but also so they can teach those habits. So my third basic question inevitably needs sharpening to *What intellectual skills or operations do you want students to learn?* This sharpening, however, doesn't make the question easier to answer. Most scholars, as one professor of history protested, don't learn to write scholarship by articulating and rehearsing the different skills required by that discipline; they learn by being thrown into the deep end—and learning to swim or going under. Professors know what they do; it's just that (unless they've taught writing or been involved in team teaching) they often can't say what they do—not having developed a vocabulary to name their skills, to articulate what it is about themselves that they want their students to reproduce.

But articulating these skills has obvious advantages, as a prompt to the instructional imagination. For one thing, it allows teachers to ask for assignments in a way that helps students write them. It's teachers who haven't clearly imagined the skills that their assignments involve, in my experience, who simply list their assignments on the syllabus in a sentence or two each or jot a few phrases on the blackboard. But most students I know are grateful for full instructions, which they read and reread while sitting at the computer in the small hours before the paper is due, as if the words held the key to the universe. Such instructions define the main tasks of the assignment by clarifying vague terms like *discuss*, *close reading*, and *argument*; indicate the basic criteria for success; and explicitly warn of moves that are too easy or of possible pitfalls. (I was once sharing a table with a group of students and the distinguished professor they had invited to dinner when the professor got confidential enough to remark, with a bemused shake of his head, that every year half his class makes the same blunder on the final paper. After this the conversation flagged, though I later overheard one of the students discussing it, using a word that rhymes with *gas toll*.)

Relatedly, defining required skills helps teachers imagine what doing this or that assignment entails and thus to see when an assignment might be causing bad student writing. One might see, for example, that writing a book review requires skills and knowledge most undergraduates can't post-

sibly have—the ability to place a book in the context of other books or of discussions that treat the same topic or use the same approach. (Part of the work of defining what operations one wants to see in student papers is distinguishing those operations that students can, at their stage of knowledge, perform from those that they can't.) One might also see that to read and describe a group of articles or positions on a topic and respond to or critique them, a student must stand outside the articles and bring to them some different, relevant experience and examples. When the student can't do so, as most nineteen-year-olds can't, the assignment forces the student to tack on a paragraph at the end that begins "In my personal opinion . . ."—or quietly to plagiarize one of the sources. And one might see that an intelligent compare-and-contrast paper requires the writer to find or have a good reason for making the comparison—usually to identify some key regard in which a focal text is illuminated by an adjunct text—not merely to draw comparisons between two equal objects, an exercise where the student's only thesis can be that the texts are alike in some ways yet different in others.

Simple realizations like these—products of the instructional imagination—bear on the current ideal of a "decentered" classroom that gives more authority to students. In my experience, most students don't want to gain authority at the expense of the teacher's; they don't want to determine the direction of a course or to establish policies, don't want the teacher to become vulnerable and confessional. What they do want is to be able to be smart—to write papers in which they feel some control over the material and in which they arrive at some perceptions of their own. And the way to help students achieve this, the best kind of authority, is to design writing assignments that invite and allow them to be smart, that deliberately encourage originality and intellectual movement. The best way to take away student authority is to give thoughtless, herd-riding assignments.

But even the teacher who articulates what he or she wants to see happening in a paper and who has designed assignments that allow it to happen needs to answer a final question, by imagining backward from the desired result: *How can you help students get there?* The assumptions behind this question cut against the apparently widespread belief that students can learn to write a good paper for any class by intellectual osmosis—by simply listening to the teacher lecture or discuss—provided that the students' composition course has taught them basic style and structure. I'm reminded that this assumption isn't valid when, for example, Professor X calls the writing program wondering how a certain student in his class who has just submitted a paper devoid of style and structure could possibly have received a B+ in her writing course. What has usually happened is that the student, drowning in voluminous and unfamiliar course material, has been unable to infer from

X's lectures, discussions, or assignments the analytic bearings she needs to compose an argument, and her style and structure simply parake of her general flailing. Let me suggest, at the risk of ending on a comp-dogish note, that X's assignments and lectures might have helped the student considerably more had they been better integrated—had X thought more about helping her and other students get to the kind of writing he wants.

The problem with X's assignments isn't only that his instructions are minimal and vague; it's that he hasn't thought through the role of writing in his course. He has planned to survey a body of important texts, through which he will march one by one, and to require either a big paper at the end (so how could he know that the student was lost?) or two or three shorter, similar papers at the administratively appropriate intervals. He hasn't considered arranging his march through the texts in units that highlight large questions or controversies that the student could have used to give her paper some bearings. And he hasn't planned with the student learning curve in mind; he hasn't assigned papers that move progressively toward a more complex understanding or built a revision into the schedule or figured out what key operations students need to perform in their papers—say, doing rhetorical analysis or inferring cultural assumptions or giving a quick sketch of opposing secondary articles—and let students practice those operations in shorter assignments or in a reading journal or as part of a prewriting exercise.

And X has missed similar opportunities in the classroom. He has thought a lot about his lectures but never about how they might work with the writing assignments. He has thought a lot about his work for the course, that is, but little about his students' work. The lectures are lucid, even knockout, accounts of the works being addressed, but they tend to be more impressive than helpful. To be helpful to the students in their work, X might sometimes pause in his lectures to explicitly model some operation that students will need to do in their writing. "Notice," he might say, "that this is how, for texts of the particular sort we are studying, one locates key passages or hot spots" or "sets up an overarching problem to grapple with" or "reads a passage through the lens of a theoretical idea" or "brings to bear a piece of historical information" or "works with a conflict in the commentary" or "constructs an argument that acknowledges complexity or gray areas." And X might consider a few other writing-oriented uses of class time that students say they find helpful. He might take time to talk about an upcoming paper or to read aloud sections of papers that illustrate a particular move. He might use writing to help prompt discussion—either by having students keep a reading journal and asking one or two students to read from their journals to begin a discussion or by using five- or ten-minute sessions

of in-class writing when an issue needs focusing or a discussion needs jumping-starting. And finally X might occasionally mention his own experience as a writer—which is after all a big part of his being a scholar and (witness his brilliant lectures) of being a teacher. For many students such comments are the most stimulating a professor can make. In short, although Professor X is seriously irate about the student's writing, he has signaled her in every possible way that writing isn't a serious part of his course.

But in fairness to X, let me allow him to reply: "What Harvey is advocating here," he might say, "despite his protest against a bureaucratic view of assignments, is in fact an oppressive bureaucratizing of the classroom. If the teacher's mind, as a model, is what sticks with students, we should try to preserve the subtlety, civility, and dignity of that mind, not turn it into a bland pedagogic facilitator. And if reading student papers is soul-killing, it's all the more important for our souls to remain focused on the beauty and complexity of our subject, not (however valuable the exercise of writing may be for the students) on the wasteland of those papers or on our pedagogic apparatus. The best approach to writing assignments is therefore a genteel minimalism. We should present students the rich, strange material of literature and theory; invite them to contemplate it and struggle with it on their own, in their papers; and see what they come up with. We shouldn't stage or confine their writing experience with a lot of exercises and pedagogic terms and instructions."

I have considerable respect for this view, having in college taken as my own model mind a professor whose only instruction, offered in a firm, slow voice, was "Say what needs to be said." I found this thrilling; it seemed to confer on me a grave and mysterious responsibility. And indeed, having been thus thrown in the deep end, I did somehow learn to swim by imitation. But many students in my mentor's classes didn't. His method worked well for a few good students, those whose educational background allowed them to take his way of talking in class as an intellectual model, but there were many other students for whom this method did not work. And nowadays there is perhaps even more diversity of educational background among students.

This fact is quite apparent to X's younger colleague Y, who has a more practical objection to what I've said that deserves the last word. "Fine," says Y, "but as an adjunct lecturer in my department, I teach four sections of twenty-five students each, and I'm way overextended as it is, without the extra work of writing detailed instructions and assigning more-frequent, shorter papers and drafts." Y's plight is a common one and a worrying reminder that many college courses—not only English courses charged with teaching writing and argument—aren't able to give individual students the

nd of attention that parents are ...  
olving this problem will require a major shift in ...  
ust be argued away. But in this context surely it can only help if teachers ...  
other courses clarify their writing goals and the relation of writing assign-  
ments to required reading (and train teaching assistants to do the same)—if  
they shoulder more of the college's work of teaching writing. And where it's  
impossible to give each student's writing enough attention, it's ultimately  
time-saving to integrate lectures and discussions with writing assignments  
and to talk about writing operations during class. And finally, at a time when  
departments are under pressure to show themselves indispensable to their  
college or university, those departments whose members can speak (to  
deans, politicians, parents) about their course sequences in a general, transferable  
kind of thinking, and about their course sequences in a general, transferable  
language like the language of analytic skills will have the advantage over  
departments that speak only the lingo of the books and articles they study.