

Writing is Hard Work:

The Importance of Story Sharing in a Writing Classroom

Involving Collaborative Colleagues as Guest Speakers

by

L. Karen Soiferman

University of Winnipeg

Winnipeg, MB: Canada

2019

Abstract

This report explores the benefits of having guest speakers, who also teach academic writing to undergraduate students, discuss the writing journey they take when they write. The purpose of the exercise was to continue to explore ways to enrich students' experiences in the writing classroom. When students were asked for their thoughts on whether they found it helpful to listen to someone else, besides their instructor, talk about writing, they all said that it was very beneficial and they enjoyed hearing a different perspective on writing. The students found it beneficial to hear that many of the struggles they were having adapting to university writing were the same ones their instructors faced when they began writing university papers. This was one of the features discussed by the guest speakers that resonated with the students and they said it made them feel more confident about their own writing abilities going forward.

Introduction

It all started with an idea as so many good innovations do. I should tell you, in the interests of being transparent, that I spend a lot of time thinking about writing and how to teach writing. You see I teach writing for a living at a university. I like my job. There is nothing I get more satisfaction from than seeing students begin my class who say that they hate writing, or tell me that they are not good writers, and by the end of the term they leave my class believing they can write. This is what makes me continue to teach writing to undergraduate students because teaching, despite all its triumphs, can also be very frustrating and lonely. I don't often get a chance to talk to my colleagues about what they do in their classrooms or discuss with them their own writing process. It is the nature of the job due to the fact that we are all so busy and we typically only have time to talk, over the copy machine, as we are getting ready to run to class. It is hard to have a good deep discussion about anything over the hum of the machine and the constant distraction caused by the need to glance continuously at the time to ensure we are not late for class.

So, when I get an idea I spend a great deal of time, by myself, thinking about how I could go about implementing the idea in my classroom. It is this attention to detail that makes me question if an idea is as good as I think it is. But, as with so many of my ideas, I still wanted to try it out even if I was not sure it would work. What did I have to lose? If it worked, great. If not, then I wouldn't do it again. This is the wonderful thing about ideas. If they don't work they can be abandoned. But, if they work, it is magical. In order to implement my idea I needed someone to assist me. I had been thinking for a long time about having another instructor come to my class and discuss how they write. I wasn't sure how that would look but I wanted to try it. Enter one of my colleagues. I was heartened by how enthusiastic he was when I brought the idea

up over lunch one day. He thought it was a great idea and I don't think it was simply because he was away from the office for a couple of hours. Just to make sure there were no outside influences operating during lunch I spoke to him again a few days later, in his office, and he was still on board. He whole heartedly agreed to come to my class and he said that he was already thinking about what he would say when he came to speak to my students.

When he and I first discussed the idea we were not sure exactly what we would say or the topics we would cover. I am afraid I was not very articulate in terms of what I was expecting. We both teach first-year students how to write an academic essay but how we go about doing that is different. The end result may be the same but the process is different because we are different. My purpose for having a guest speaker come to my class was that I wanted my students to understand that even though they all write the same type of essay, how they write it is unique to each one of them. I believed that this could be accomplished by having the students listen to someone else, besides me, talk about how they write.

The Day of the Talk

The day arrived and my colleague walked in and started talking. He covered topics such as his undergraduate writing experiences, his master's thesis, his PhD dissertation, and the book he recently completed based on the research he did for his PhD. He talked and the students listened. They asked questions. I was observing their body language as he spoke and they smiled and nodded at some of the strategies he used as they obviously could relate. Some frowned when he said something that they perhaps had not thought about before. What my students told me at the end of his presentation was that they were surprised by how careful he was in his writing process. They did not realize that the process of writing could be so deliberate. And, they identified with his talk on how hard he worked to find the right words to

convey his message. This is something my students also have difficulty with so this was a point that they paid attention to when he was speaking. I do a lesson on word choice but I think the students did not really understand how important choosing the right words to convey their message was until my colleague confessed his own struggles with that aspect. This emphasized the importance of story sharing in the writing classroom as the students learned the lesson I was trying to teach them, on word choice, through the shared experience of an experienced writer detailing how he dealt with word choice in his own writing. This story showed them the reality of the problem in a way that I could not have explained to them because it was more personal and not some abstract concept learned in class. This is something they took away from the talk and will think about as they write future papers. He really impressed them with how he goes about writing and how long it takes him to write. At the end, I had them fill in a short informal survey to obtain their feedback on the benefits of having a guest speaker in the classroom (appended).

Like my students, I, also, enjoyed listening to my colleague talk about his writing process. As mentioned earlier, we don't often get to hear our colleagues talk about how they write so I really found it interesting to hear what he had to say. His process seemed, at first, to be so unlike my own but the more I listened the more I realized that he may go about writing differently but the steps in the process are similar. We may do them at different times as we write but they still get completed. For example, things like editing and revising. I edit and revise as I work, this is the recursive part of writing where I continually circle back and check my writing as I compose. My colleague tends to write, leave it for a few days, and then come back to it to edit and revise. The process of editing and revising is the same but the time when we do it changes. This does not mean that one process is better than another; it simply means

that we do things differently. And, perhaps this is what my students were alluding to when they said that what they took away from the guest speaker was that there was not only one way to write.

Then it was my turn to go into his writing class. As luck would have it, we taught back to back classes, in the same hallway, so that made scheduling easier as we were able to do our presentations on the same day. I had made a list of topics I wanted to cover, before my presentation, because that is my writing process. I make lists of everything I do. Then I started talking. I talked about my struggles in first-year English and shared how my English teacher had identified my introduction, for my first essay, as one of the five worst introductions in the class. She didn't put my name down but the embarrassment of that day still resonates with me. I told them I got a C on my first essay after having gotten A's in all my papers throughout my schooling. I spoke about my shock at getting that low grade and thinking that it was somehow the teacher's fault. But, what I told them is that I did not let that one instance define me as a writer. I knew I was a good writer; I just had to make some adjustments. It was those adjustments that kept me going. I talked about the English teachers I had, in my other courses, as I pursued my English degree. I told them that what helped me improve was that I was willing to listen to my professors and take what they told me and adjust. I didn't let one bad mark define me for the rest of my university career. I told them I had my PhD now and therefore it was possible for them to go onto higher learning and success even if they were not the best first-year writers.

It was gratifying to see so many smiles and nods as I spoke to my colleague's students. The message that everyone writes differently appeared to be something that they could relate to. The students were engaged and asked all types of questions about my writing process. I have

written three books and I brought them along to show the students and to talk about my process when I was writing each book. One of the books I co-wrote, with a colleague, and the process of writing was different than when I write on my own. One of the major differences was having to adapt and adjust my writing style to match my colleague's writing style. I, also, had to take into account his point of view about teaching writing. When I write by myself I do not have those constraints. I am free to write what I want in the way that I want. This leads to its own issues as I no longer have someone to monitor my thinking and question what I am saying. But, I learned a great deal from my collaboration and when I write I still can hear my colleague asking me questions in my head. The students seemed intrigued by that fact and some did say that when they write they try to take into account what their instructor has said about writing.

I told them how long it takes for me to write a book and I contrasted the three books that I had written and the time it took to complete each one of them. The book I co-authored took the longest because my colleague and I both had jobs and families that took time away from the project. We did not have time to just write for long periods of time. I, also, like to write at the end of the day and suffice to say my colleague valued his sleep time so my optimal time of writing had to be adjusted. When I write by myself, I write late at night when the house is quiet and there are no noises to disturb me. One of the students pointed out that she also likes to write at night and this led to a discussion of when students like to write and when they feel the most productive. They were surprised that everyone has a different time of day when they are the most creative. I think this was one of the take-aways that students appreciated hearing. At the end of my presentation, I, also, asked them to fill in the same survey I had given my students.

Participants

The course, we both teach, is a first-year writing course so the majority of the thirty students, in my section, were first-year students with an average age of 18. There was only one second year student in my section. The other section, the one my colleague taught, was also a first-year course but it was made up of a cohort of eighteen older students who did not enter university straight out of high school. Those students had an average age of 30.

Data Analysis

The short, informal, survey that students were invited to complete was made up of five questions asking them to give their opinion about what they learned from listening to the guest speaker. The last item asked them to rank, from one to ten, the benefit of having a guest speaker come to their class to speak to them.

The first question, on the survey, asked students if they thought having a guest speaker discuss his/her writing was beneficial. All 48 students agreed that having a guest speaker was beneficial. They were asked to indicate why they thought it was beneficial and 41 of them said it was nice to hear about writing from a different perspective than their regular instructor. Five of the students said it gave them confidence about their own writing process when listening to the speaker since they could relate to what the guest speaker went through in learning how to write at the university level.

The next question asked them what they learned about writing from listening to the guest speaker. Of the 48 students, 41 indicated that it was good to hear that everyone has a different writing technique and that it is alright to each write in the way that works for them. Both my colleague and I admitted, in our presentations, that we struggled with writing when we first went to university and students liked hearing about that because it gave them hope that they could still

improve. Additionally, the students pointed out that they learned the importance of listening to their instructor's advice and following the guidelines provided on their assignments. They also learned the importance of editing and revising. One of the things they mentioned that really connected for them was that writing does not come easy. It's hard and it takes time. They had assumed that people who had gotten as far as we did in our studies never had problems learning how to write. They were pleasantly surprised that we had the same issues in our first-year of university that they were experiencing in their first-year.

The third question asked if they were surprised by any of the information the guest speaker discussed regarding writing. Twenty-three students said they were surprised by how long it takes for us to write. They wrongly assumed that when writers reach the place where we are that writing would come easily and that we would be able to turn out articles in no time. They were also amazed that we talked about how difficult writing still is for us and that it takes a long time to get our ideas down the way we want them. They mentioned that they were surprised at the similarities between their own writing process and that of the guest speakers. They had always believed that they were somehow doing things wrong which led to their less than expected grades but then they realized, after listening to the guest speaker, that this was something most of us struggled with in university especially when it came to understanding the expectations of different instructors. Something else they were surprised to learn was that essays do not have to be written linearly from start to finish. One of the things I tell my students is that once they have an outline for their essay they are free to start writing anywhere in the essay. This was a surprise to the students because they thought that they always had to start with the introduction and write until they came to the conclusion.

The fourth question asked them what information, they heard from the guest speaker, made them think about their own writing process. The answers were varied but one of the ones that came up more frequently was the importance of an outline as many students did not write to an outline and then wondered why they had a difficult time staying on task. When I talked about how I make an outline for everything that I do, including coming to speak to their class, they were surprised because outlines were not something they typically used as they did not understand the purpose of an outline. They stated that they thought outlines restricted what they could say and did not realize that outlines would help them stay on track. Some of the other responses included: they said they had never thought about the benefits of reading before writing, of thinking before writing, of how to overcome writer's block, and how the type of learner they are often determines how they write.

The students said they had never thought about the importance of doing a lot of reading before writing. My colleague stressed that it was the reading he did before writing that gave him ideas and he said that students could benefit from reading, before writing, as that would give them ideas about their own topics and how to approach them. This led to a discussion of how to research and the importance of reading a wide variety of articles about the topic before beginning to write. Many students said they just began writing and did not spend a great deal of time thinking about what they wanted to say. When I told the students that I probably spend more time thinking than writing they were intrigued by that idea. I told them that I always start with the thinking process, then I create an outline, and then I write. Since I have already thought a great deal about the topic before I begin writing, I usually can write my first draft in a few days. Then, I spend time going back and editing and revising. This takes a long time as I revise my word choices and my sentence structures. I add in new information that I may have missed the

first time through in an effort to make the meaning clearer for my readers. My colleague, on the other hand, spends his first days reading, then thinking, and then writing. He takes time to think of the words he will use as he writes his first draft while I do not pay much attention to the words the first time through. I just want to get all my thoughts down at the beginning.

In my explanation of the outline, I spoke about how an outline can help overcome writer's block. The students wanted to know how that was possible. I told them that an outline allows them to start anywhere in the essay. This went back to my point that writing is not linear. I explained that it is okay to begin in the middle of the essay and then work backwards or forwards. I told them this can help alleviate writer's block because students often get stuck on the introduction and an outline will assist them in getting their ideas down without worrying about following that linear structure that they may have learned in high school writing courses. I, also, told the students that because I am a visual learner that I find making outlines extremely helpful. Once I have a visual representation of my article, or essay, I am able to proceed and stay on topic. Without that visual presentation I would be just as lost as the students sometime find themselves when writing.

The fifth question asked students if they got any insights into how to write from the guest speaker. They reiterated many of the same things that they had discussed earlier such as writing takes time (23/48); that a writer has to take the time to plan, edit, and revise (6/48); the benefits of following an outline (5/48); they can start anywhere in the writing process (4/48); and the importance of reading before writing (4/48).

The last sentence on the survey asked them to rank, on a scale of ten, how beneficial the session was with the guest speaker. One student ranked it as a six; six students gave it a rank of seven; eleven scored it an eight; fourteen said it was a nine; and sixteen ranked it a ten. It was

extremely rewarding to see that the majority of the students 41/48 gave it a ranking of eight or higher. I honestly was not sure what they would think when I first came up with the idea so I was pleased that they thought the session was beneficial because they learned that writing is not always easy, that everyone struggles with writing, and that it's okay to not get good grades in first-year writing courses. They said they learned that the grades do not define the type of writer they are now or the type of writer they can become with the assistance of their instructors.

Discussion

My interest in how first-year students learn how to write did not happen overnight. My dissertation is based on student perceptions of their high school writing environment and how that compared to the writing environment in university. Many of the students, I interviewed, discussed how the writing expectations were so different in university from what they were used to in high school. They talked about how ill-prepared they felt they were to take on the writing they were expected to produce once they got to university (Soiferman, 2012). Similarly, McCarthy (1987) found that when students enter university they often find themselves “strangers in a strange land”. This was stated by one of her students who said that coming to university was like going to a different country, one that he had no reference for and he therefore found himself at a loss as to what he was supposed to do. This feeling of disorientation relates to everything they encounter at university from finding classes, to getting to know other students, or getting to know their instructors.

But, perhaps the greatest difficulty first-year students have is learning how to write an academic essay. The writing students are required to complete in high school is often very different from the writing that they are expected to complete in first-year university (Carroll, 2002). Even students who had been successful writers in high school sometimes struggle at

university. This was my problem when I first went to university and one that many students, who listened to me speak, said was their problem as well. I told them I didn't understand how I could go from getting all A's in June on my essays and then two short months later I was getting a C in my first-year English course. It didn't make sense to me. Many of the students, in the two sections, said the same thing happened to them. They were glad that they were not the only ones who felt betrayed by their English Language Arts teachers from high school. I explained to them it was not the fault of the teachers.

As Carroll (2002) discovered, students tend to find that the expectations at university are very different from what they were accustomed to in high school. In addition, first-year university students have to make a rapid adjustment to a learning environment which provides more autonomy, but requires more individual responsibility, than high school (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009). Students find that the expectations of written work can be particularly challenging for them because they often do not understand that they have to make adjustments. They think that they can continue to write the same way they wrote in high school. Students soon learn that understanding written assignments at the university level generally demand that they analyze topics rather than simply report on them (Carroll, 2002).

Another issue faced by novice writers is that even though they put in the effort, they do not often see the results, due to the fact that they do not always understand what their instructors expected in the assignment. This sentiment was reiterated by the students who took part in this survey. They expressed disappointment that no matter how many hours they put into writing their papers their effort was not matched by their grade. I explain to my students that, as instructors, we cannot grade effort as that is not quantifiable. I use the example of putting together an IKEA bookcase, which I am terrible at, and I tell them that it doesn't matter if I

spend ten hours working on it if it collapses as soon as I put books on the shelf. If students spend their time working on a paper without following the guidelines offered by their instructors than their essay will collapse just like my bookcase.

With each class, I teach, I have a discussion of how I write. I tell them my stories of failures and successes. I tell them that I would not be where I am today if I did not fail along the way. I, also, tell them that I learned more from my failures than from my successes because if I was always successful why would I try to improve? I wouldn't, because I would not see any point in changing what I do. When I share my first-year writing stories, with my students, I get the impression that they do not quite believe that I ever had difficulty writing at any point in my career. After all, I am a published author.

The one thing that students are often surprised to learn is that when I was a first-year student I did not do much editing and revising in my papers. Not because I didn't want to but because I used to have to type my assignments on a typewriter and not a word processor. The word processor has changed the way that I write because now I can cut and paste with the best of them. But, back in my undergraduate days, I had to use messy white-out if I wanted to change anything. And, if it was a substantial change, I didn't do it because that would have meant re-typing the entire page and since I was not the fastest at typing I tended to leave things the way they were. Added to that was my tendency to type my assignments the night before they were due. I never said I was a smart first-year student. I usually had them written out long hand but still the typing was limiting. The students were amazed that typing was still a thing when I went to university. I remind them that I am a 100 years old.

My Thoughts

I am a story-teller. I like to use my personal experiences to explain concepts to my students. I believe that sharing my experiences helps build a relationship with my students that suggests I am someone they can relate to and, by extension, someone who is more approachable. So often students do not see their instructors as ever having any difficulties with learning concepts and I see the value of my stories as helping lend legitimacy to their own struggles. When I share my stories the students are engaged with the material. The content becomes more meaningful for them. If instructors do not work to establish a personal relationship with their class then their students' learning will be compromised. Teaching is more than providing students with declarative knowledge through the course content, it is also showing them how to do something – the procedural knowledge. It is my contention that students acquire procedural knowledge, with greater understanding, if it is taught using story-telling. Story sharing makes the content personal and relatable just as it did for my students when my colleague discussed how much time he takes to find the right word.

It also opens the classroom to students' stories. If I share a story, then students can tell me their stories that relate to what we are discussing in class that day. This level of personal engagement shows me that the students have grasped the concept that I am teaching. I, also, find that students remember the stories I tell in class long after they have left my class and graduated thus showing that the information moved to their long-term memories. The ability to connect with students through story sharing indicates that students learn more when they can relate to the concepts directly.

For me, personally, the added benefit of having a guest speaker come to my classroom to share his stories is that I feel like I have now formed a closer working relationship with him in

terms of teaching writing. I, already, had had many discussions with him over the years but they were not usually about writing. The conversations typically went something like this. I would complain about my courses and my students and he would listen patiently until I was finished. He might have offered words of sympathy but there was definitely no discussion of teaching writing. Now, that we have each heard the other speak we can discuss other topics of interest that pertain to our classrooms. We just had an interesting conversation about teaching grammar of all things. I am not in favour of teaching grammar in isolation and he isn't either but it was still interesting to listen to his take on grammar instruction. I don't think we would have ever had this conversation if it wasn't for the fact that he came into my room to discuss writing.

The conversations we have now also make me think more about what I do in the classroom and how I do them. This is invaluable if I want to keep improving my own teaching. When you have been teaching as long as I have you sometimes lose sight of what the students know and what they don't know. I do try to keep these in mind when teaching but listening to my colleague talk, and listening to the students after his talk, I realized that I sometimes take for granted that they know more than they do about writing. Just as the students benefitted from listening to my colleague talk, I can say that I also benefitted.

Recommendations

The fact that the students, in the two sections, continue to struggle with the same difficulties that students thirty years ago identified leads me to the conclusion that things have not changed in either high schools or first-year university classrooms when it comes to teaching writing. Perhaps what needs to happen is more conversations about writing and how different people begin writing, how they continue writing, and how they end their writing. Students will find it much easier to write if they are instructed in the art of writing rather than just the mechanics of writing.

The importance of inviting guest speakers into a writing classroom to talk about their own writing process proved useful in the two classrooms we tried it in. Granted it was only two classrooms so there is definitely a need to try it with more classrooms and more instructors but the preliminary results indicate that students want to be able to learn how so called expert writers approach writing tasks. They want to learn how to become better writers and how to use their own strengths to help them overcome their weaknesses. The students were able to recognize some of the strategies they already use and some of the strategies that they could use moving forward. It showed them that the things they struggle with are the same things that everyone else struggles with as well. Things like how to get started, how to stay on topic, how to choose the word that gets their meaning across instead of finding the best word, how to know when to stop writing, and how to support what it is they are writing.

It is also important that students be able to talk about their own writing processes and often, as instructors, we do not afford them that opportunity. Every writing class should include time for students to think and talk about writing. To think about how they go about writing and how they could improve their writing. Having another instructor come in and talk to my class solidified the idea that I had over a year ago. It was beneficial. And, the students overwhelmingly supported the idea of the guest speaker and how helpful they found listening to the stories the guest speakers shared. It is definitely something I will use again as long as I can find the right colleague. I am not interested in having someone come in to my class and tell my students that the way they write is the only way anyone should write.

It is important that first-year students, especially, understand that almost everyone struggles with their first essays when they begin university because they have not yet identified the different expectations of their instructors. This is something they learn as they go along and

they shouldn't give up, or think they are failures, if they don't do well at the beginning. They need to hear from others who have been where they are and they need to know that things do get better.

Conclusion

As instructors, we often get so caught up in trying to get the content of our courses across to our students that we forget that in order for our students to learn they have to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with us. If an instructor thinks that the only way to teach is to walk into the classroom and provide declarative knowledge than that instructor has missed the opportunity to make a difference in their students' lives. Declarative knowledge is necessary but so is procedural knowledge. There needs to be a combination of both in order for students to actually learn what we are teaching them. It is important to remember that each class is different due to the students who are in the course. I teach many sections, of the same course, and it is always interesting for me to see how the classroom dynamics change due to the make-up of the students in the class. I have students who want to share everything they have ever done in the course of their life and other students who do not want to speak. It is good to have the students who participate because eventually it helps those students who are reluctant sharers begin to open up. When I share my personal stories with the class I can see that it opens the door to their shared stories. The art of story sharing impacts their learning because they become comfortable in my class knowing that I was once where they were and I lived to tell the tale. Stories are relatable and they help students remember what I am teaching.

Bringing in another instructor to tell his stories showed the students, in my class, that everyone writes differently and that's alright. He told me that the students in his class enjoyed my stories because they could relate to my first-year writing experiences and it gave them

renewed confidence that they could also succeed. This was a learning experience for all involved and I can say from my perspective, and my colleague's perspective, that we both enjoyed the process and would do it again.

References

- Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C., & Nordstrom, K. (2009). First year expectations and experiences: Student and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education*, 58 (2), 157-173.
- Carroll, L.A. (2002). *Rehearsing new roles: How college students develop as writers*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- McCarthy, L. (1987). A stranger in strange lands: A college student writing across the curriculum. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 21 (3), 233-265.
- Soiferman, L.K. (2012). "University and High School Are Just Very Different" Student perceptions of their respective writing environments in high school and first-year university. Unpublished Dissertation. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba. ERIC document: ED568878

Appendix

Student Survey

On The Value of Guest Speakers

1. Do you think having a guest speaker discuss his/her writing was beneficial? Why or why not?

2. What have you learned about writing from listening to the guest speaker?

3. Were you surprised by any information that the guest speaker discussed regarding writing? If so, what was it and why was it surprising?

4. What information made you think about your own writing process?

5. Did you get any insights into how to write from the guest speaker? Explain.

On a scale of 1 to 10 how beneficial was this session?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10