

# **What To Say: Empathy for Students Who Struggle to Find a Voice**

By Jason Bucek

## **Introduction**

Writing is hard. Writing is challenging. Sometimes I feel that I'd rather go to the dentist than sit down at my computer and try to figure out some combination of words to plop down on a page that accurately reflects what I'm thinking. If I were to admit that I hated writing for nearly all of my experience as a student, I would feel like I was committing an indecency. After all, shouldn't an English teacher love to write? I'm starting to love it, but not quite there. In fact, I can feel myself resisting even as I sit here.

Now I don't feel that I'm mentally impaired in any way, but for me, thoughts are things that I really have to fight for. Whether it's determining my heart's reaction to a certain work of literature or even the day's events, thoughtful reflection is a struggle and almost never comes easily. It makes me sad that writing has never been fun for me. It exhausts my mind and spirit and, truth be told, I'm afraid I would lose my students' respect if they ever found out. I know that I'm not the only person to struggle with writing, but it feels good to finally admit it to others. I have certainly had my share of late nights struggling over a paper, trying desperately to figure out how to fill the blank computer screen. Then the next day in class, I would never let on to anyone that I found the task of producing the paper to be exceedingly difficult. I was afraid my classmates would think I was dumb. In fact, I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that I came to college not knowing how to write. I wrote several "C" papers before I was able to consistently earn "B's" and even a few "A's." When it comes time for me to teach, I

think it will be good that I am able to recall my own struggles and use them to understand those of my students.

I know I have an authentic voice within me somewhere, one that is my own and has something to say. I am just now beginning to consistently find it and use it. Since grade school, it has seemed to me that writing was the one subject my teachers refused to spend significant time on. There always seemed to be a gulf that lay between reading and writing. In English classes we would memorize facts about authors and plot details for the tests, but I cannot recall ever being asked to freely respond in writing to any of the class material. If we ever wrote anything, it always had to be in the five-paragraph form. Come to think of it, the teachers never seemed to want those essays to go anywhere. They were always circular, that is, you had to end up saying the same darn thing you started with. Students like me were never taught that it was legitimate and good to explore ideas and see where they might go. Instead, we had to write for the teacher exactly what he or she wanted to see. Otherwise you would get a poor grade. It seemed as though the teachers prized adherence to format over quality of thought. Writing was just something we did to appease the teachers. I know I never used writing as a tool for thinking and was never really encouraged to do so. And I certainly never used it for my own purposes. Trying to produce it for school was bad enough! Students deserve a space where they can write for themselves. And I plan to give it to them by making room for student journals in my course curriculum.

### **Professional and Teaching Purposes**

Here is what I plan to do. I will lay the groundwork for student writing through the medium of the journal. I will require my students to keep two types of journal:

academic and personal. The possible purposes for journaling are many and serve not only students' personal purposes, but also a number of pedagogical aims.

- to make connections between personal experience and the class material at hand
- to recapitulate the course material through identifying what has been learned, what is confusing, and what needs further study
- to assess learning
- to collect observations, responses, and data
- to practice writing
- to experiment with voice
- to examine the self
- to clarify virtues
- to have an ungraded forum for writing
- to provide information about a student's feelings and understanding
- to be a repository for writing ideas and materials
- to have a chronological record of student thought and opinion during a term
- to have prompts for classroom discussion (Milner 326-7)

First, I'll begin to explain the personal journal. When I use the word "journal," I refer to a student's collected writings over time, not necessarily a day-by-day account. Students need a space of their own where they may explore their thoughts, ideas, feelings and reactions, free from the scrutiny of the teacher. I will not assign a grading rubric for the personal journal, only request that the entries be at least one-half of a hand-written page. Hand-writing seems so much more intimate and less formal than typing. I would like my students to feel as though they were confessing their thoughts to a friend. My

rationale is also that writing to purge the soul is a healthy activity. Sometimes our thoughts make more sense when we can see them on paper. My hope is that through this activity my students will come to understand themselves better. I believe they will also become more comfortable with the task of generating writing and that this task will become less and less intimidating. I will have a minimum number of entries they must achieve, but my intention is for them to write and respond to life as they are moved to do so. If absolutely necessary, sometimes I might provide them with a one-sentence writing prompt to help them get started. Perhaps I might invite them to finish thoughts such as “Today I feel \_\_\_\_\_” or “It really makes me mad when \_\_\_\_\_” or “The most important lesson I learned this week is \_\_\_\_\_.”

Most importantly, “anything goes” in the personal journal. The students will receive credit for their personal journaling activity, but I will merely skim it and evaluate it only upon whether they have completed it. My students will have the option of indicating in writing which entries they would like me to respond to, but otherwise I will make no judgments about their entries. They may write whatever they wish, however I must advise them that I am required by law to report any writing that would indicate that the writer was contemplating harming himself or someone else. Since it is a class assignment, I’m afraid the students’ writing cannot be entirely private. I intend the personal journaling to be an assignment that will not only assist them in life, but will also help their course grade. If they write it, they get credit; it’s an easy “A.” I only want to reward my students for complying with my request. I believe that if I can coax them into the habit of writing journal entries, then it will become a skill that they can take with them once they leave my class.

The academic journal will be the space where students respond to the assigned literature readings. As opposed to the personal journal, the academic journal is not necessarily written “I,” but is “an I-it relationship between student and subject (Atwell 283). I will not assign an academic journal response for every reading to avoid burn-out, but I plan on requiring at least two journal entries for each literary unit. These entries will vary in scope. I may have the students write summaries, personal reactions, or respond to something that I point out in the reading. They will write things such as questions or concerns about a character’s actions, attempt to determine the theme, or state how a novel or poem made them feel and draw a comparison to their own personal experience. If it makes the students feel more comfortable, then they may begin each academic journal entry with the salutation “Dear Mr. Bucek.” In fact, I rather like the idea of putting it in the format of a letter. My students can communicate to me the sorts of things that fascinate them about the literature we read and in return, I can respond to them in a return letter and provide my own reaction and encouragement to what they are learning. Any way that I can reduce the formality of the student-teacher relationship and gain the trust of my students is a way I can help my students become comfortable with putting their reactions and thoughts into words.

By doing these periodic writing activities, the student will actively engage the text they read. My goal is for my students to become readers who can make judgments about the things they read, not readers who just passively accept everything at face value. This skill will serve them well later in life when they must make important decisions based upon texts and articles that they read, such as which candidate to vote for in an upcoming election.

The academic journals should be approximately one typed page and will be included in the student's writing portfolio for the class. The portfolio will be a collection of the student's written work for my class. All academic journal entries, drafts, and formal writing assignments (e.g. essays) will go into this portfolio. Such a portfolio will allow me to see how each student has progressed over the quarter (or semester) and help me determine what improvements they should focus upon in future writing endeavors. In addition, the portfolio is good for an authentic assessment; members of the school's administration may wish to view them too. Alas, in the school setting, journaling is private writing that really is not so private after all. Since my job description requires me to evaluate the progress of my students' learning, prying is unavoidable.

The biggest obstacle any teacher will face is the question, "*Why* should I write?" It is a difficult question to answer because different people have different reasons for writing. We may suggest to our students that there are significant events, memories, or experiences that have contributed to their present state of personhood. Such things are important to remember. They can transform their memories into words that appear on a page. We can explain that remembering helps us to understand ourselves better. A writer wants to remember and reflect upon the past so that he or she can better prepare for what is ahead. Perhaps journaling can help a person to prepare for both the pleasant and unpleasant surprises that life can dish out. You can respond to life and 'talk back' to the things that happen to you.

Since adolescence is an extremely tough transition, teachers should encourage their students to write about their struggles, fears, victories, losses, and other important events. Janet Allen, an educator whom I admire, has done something in her literature

classes that has really impressed me. (Though I can't imagine that I would ever have to resort to such measures!) She actually *went out and bought* journals for her classes, enough so that each student could have two. Her purpose was this: "...an academic journal for recording and responding to class work and a personal journal for communicating with me and getting their thoughts on paper" (Allen 21). I imagine, especially for students from poor families, that a gift like that from the teacher not only made the students feel special and cared for, but also drew their attention to the fact that their teacher takes writing *seriously*. In the personal journals, Allen said that her students "discussed not only their personal problems but their feelings and opinions about the class and school in general" (Allen 176). Students should not necessarily address their journal entries to me. I would prefer they would write to themselves, to parents, to friends, to God, or whomever else they wish to address. However, I would be willing to respond to a limited number of entries submitted by each student. I won't deny any student who feels that he or she really needs a response from me. After all, they are free to use the space however they wish. If they desire me to participate in *some* of their entries, then I gladly will.

### **Personal Purposes**

I intend to explain to my students that the personal journals will be a space where they are free to "babble" and "jabber." I share Peter Elbow's attitude: "the easiest thing is just to put down whatever is on your mind" (Elbow 3). I love the notion of the free write, where you transmit thought directly to paper and never stop until "time's up." Perhaps it should not be taken to the extreme of the Penelope chapter in Joyce's *Ulysses*, but I could definitely see the personal journal as a place where students can feel free to

simply blurt out whatever they're thinking. That sort of writing is completely free and natural; it is their own voice and nothing else. There is no need to worry whether it is "garbage." No one has to see it (except me, but I'm not evaluating it anyway) and you never know when you might come up with something you can use later. Writers are capable of coming up with some excellent ideas when things like "planning" and "arranging" aren't allowed to get in the way. Even if the student spends as little as 5-10 minutes writing their thoughts in the journal, the practice will have a positive and "gradual effect on future writing" (Elbow 11). Simply stated, the more a student writes, the better he or she will become at it. I hope that through personal journaling, my students will become less anxious at the prospect of producing written work and even come to like it. In their personal space, they will become better acquainted with their own voice, which I believe will lead to better and more confident thinking and writing in the public space.

It seems to me that good intrapersonal skills are necessary for a student to write well. If there are a significant number of students out there who are anything like I was, then it is clear that educators are failing to help students develop their "self smarts." Students who are self smart display qualities such as a sense of independence, a realistic sense of their strengths, and a good sense of self direction. They also tend to have high self esteem and learn from their failures and successes (Armstrong). The whole point of journaling is for students to develop the skill of searching and drawing out their inward thoughts and feelings and making them external. Once they are external, they actually can *see* how they think and can then proceed to make life adjustments from there. If

students fail to develop this knowledge of self, then it can hurt them later in life when they are faced with important decisions that no one else can make for them.

### **This Writer's Own Personal Purposes**

As I've been writing this, I've noticed that I feel drawn to spend more time on the issue of personal writing rather than academic. I said earlier that I wanted the journal to be the "groundwork" or foundation of all writing for my classes. Recalling my own experience, I believe that I struggled so much with writing because I never laid this foundation. I did eventually learn to write better, but I think both my school and personal experiences would have been better if I had a base to stand upon.

I am now sure that writing can help people sort through ideas they wish to understand and personal problems they wish to overcome. If I can just make myself take the bold step of putting pen to paper, then I can write my way to a deeper level of understanding about myself. William Zinsser says it better:

*Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know—and what we don't know—about whatever we're trying to learn. Putting an idea into written words is like defrosting the windshield: The idea, so vague out there in the murk, slowly begins to gather itself into a sensible shape. Whatever we write—a memo, a letter, a note to the baby-sitter—all of us know this moment of finding out what we really want to say by trying in writing to say it. (Zinsser 17)*

To move toward this better understanding, I've begun to keep a journal of my own. I even bought a journal keeping book that offers suggestions for how to use it. It's nothing fancy, just one those black and white speckled "composition books." I don't write in it everyday. That's not the point. I write in it when I need to, especially when I find that

I'm struggling with something or simply need some healing time from the events of a particularly harsh day.

When I write, it seems that I'm more *awake* to lessons I can glean from the course of daily life. Hard as it may be, I acknowledge personal faults that I have and what I might do to change them. And I try to write as honestly as I can. I think it was businessman J.P. Morgan who said, "There are two reasons why a man does anything. There's a good reason and there's the real reason." That's what I want to know: my heart's motives behind my actions and the reasons behind why I respond to life in certain ways. There is a certain measure of risk that comes with writing candidly in a journal. I've found out some things about myself that disturb me. But once I have thoughtfully exposed my own lack of character in a certain area or a past emotional wound, it inspires me to press onward to the fullest possible realization of what I think. So far it seems that what I have learned about journaling is all true. There are things that I didn't know had touched me until after I saw my words written on the page.

### **Conclusion (or *is it?*)**

Here is where this piece of writing must come to an end. But my journal keeping will go on because there will always be more things I want to know. How well do I really know my self? Are there still more secrets locked away in my heart? Writing honestly in my journal still seems very risky and I still feel helpless against the challenges that face me out there in the "real world." However, it is that sense of helplessness that moves me to write. I think we all experience it at some point or another. Thankfully, journaling is for the helpless.