

Learning – Writing: A Journal
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Preface

As many of us pursue a career in English education, we will walk into many battles, battles within ourselves and with our students. As teachers, we have the responsibility of teaching adolescents the importance of reading and writing. Our students have the responsibility to learn and succeed to the best of their ability. As teachers of English, we must remember that reading and writing is not as enjoyable for all students as it is for ourselves. Thus, we must never forget to support our students in their journey of reading and writing. We must always give our students the attention they need and deserve. We must always answer their questions and never ignore their struggles. As we teach hundreds of adolescents each year, we must try not to let one of our students fall through our fingers.

We wonder: How do we keep our students from slipping through our fingers? We must give our students constructive criticism as well as praise. We must never overlook their successes, or their attempts; they will not overlook ours. We are teachers. We will stand in front of a group of students each day hoping they will learn from us, but we must not forget that we learn from them. We must never give up on our students, or on ourselves.

Learning – Writing: A Journal is the struggles and successes I faced as a student learning to write. As you will read, I hope you are able to deduce the characteristics between the different types of teaching that is described. I hope you are able to see how important teacher support is. As I said above, we must always support our students and never overlook their successes or attempts. Even the smallest shred of neglect toward our students may cause them to turn their backs on reading and writing. The accounts I have written are my experiences with neglect and writing. I was just lucky enough to be saved.

All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

*Learning – Writing: A Journal***Fall 1998****Entry 1:**

I am entering my first college English class, English 101. How difficult can it possibly be? I succeeded in English in high school. I have always liked to write, and English has always been one of my better subjects. I am looking forward to this class. Maybe it will help me decide to pick a major. Teaching high school English has been a possibility roaming around in my brain for a few years now; maybe this will be the deciding factor.

Entry 2:

I have been in my English class for over a month now. I HATE it! I do not understand what the teacher expects from us. I ask questions, but they are never answered; they are simply brushed-off or ignored. I feel like I am in first grade learning how to compose a sentence! I thought I knew how to write. I did well in high school. I know this is a college English course, but I should be able to write a paper without getting it back with GIANT red marks all over it. I don't think I even received this type of response in high school – What is going on?

And grammar...why are we doing grammar exercises in class? This seems absolutely pointless! I have not had a grammar class since sixth grade. Does my professor actually think I remember this stuff? Shouldn't I know what nouns, verbs, and adjectives are by now? Everyone in this class has graduated from high school; therefore I am sure we can all write a decent paper. Well, now that I think about it, maybe not...I obviously cannot write a good paper anymore. Did I have the most horrible teachers in high school? I don't know what is going on right now, but things need to get better!

Entry 3:

So much for thinking I don't need to learn grammar. It is obvious from Professor Smith's corrections and comments that my grammar and syntax need a lot of work. This was Professor Smith's written comment on my first paper (a narrative):

“This is a good topic and pretty good paper. It would be a B if there weren't 2 run-ons and verb errors. As it is, I'd give it a C-. I'm not sure you had a narrow enough focus for your topic – as a flashback the chronology and verb tenses gave you some trouble, and you didn't give a very clear idea of what the campground consisted of or what “membership” meant. This feels more like pre-writing or a very rough draft. Out of this you could develop a good, focused thesis and then write a more coherent paper.”

Looking back at my paper, I see what Professor Smith is talking about. However, what I don't understand is why she did not tell me some of what she wrote when she looked at my rough draft. From my rough draft, I would think that she would be able to tell if my

topic wasn't "*narrow enough*." I have never really liked writing narratives because I don't think I ever have anything interesting to write about and I find it difficult to describe an event of my life. Hopefully I will do better on future papers.

Entry 4:

I thought I wrote a well-written second paper. I was excited about my topic and thought I fixed my grammar and syntax mistakes from the first draft. I was definitely wrong about this. I managed to go up one letter grade on this paper, however, although Professor Smith said it was a good paper and interesting topic, I was still unable to develop my paper to her liking or use correct syntax. Based on my first two papers, it seems that I can come up with good and interesting topics, but do not know how to write and structure a paper. I will still keep trying, although my effort seems to be pointless. I can't help wondering what has happened to my writing skills, how did they become so terrible?

Entry 5:

Just when I was about to give up, I wrote an A- paper. This definitely brings back some confidence and shows my effort is not entirely pointless. I actually received comments that verified my strong effort to use correct syntax. Professor Smith wrote, "*Very good, Tania. Clear, complete and reasonable comparison of the 2 attitudes. Very-well written and focused.*" Although Professor Smith's comments expressed a well-written paper, I could not help but wish she had said something about my improvement; that would have meant *a lot* to me.

Entry 6:

Due to the grade and comments of my last paper, I began to have confidence in my writing skills again. However, after receiving the comments and grade of my fourth paper, I feel as I did before receiving back my third paper (the A- paper). My confidence in my writing is once again lacking and I wonder what the point of my effort is; it obviously does not result in a good paper. I wonder what Professor Smith's criteria of a "good" paper is? The comments I received on my fourth paper were absolutely devastating. I understand that teachers can become frustrated with their students, especially if they should be improving. However, if I were a teacher, I would never write the word "*BLAH!*" on students papers no matter how much I did not like or agree with what they wrote. I understand my writing needs a lot of work, but that is why I ask questions and ask for help before I have to write my final draft. Nevertheless, although my writing needs work, I put a lot of effort into the papers I hand in. I cannot correct or work on things when my questions are ignored. Thus, in no way do I think I deserved to receive X's on my paper accompanied by the word "*BLAH!*" For example, Professor Smith's comments were as follows:

"C+ This is not a good argumentation paper, though it is well-written and organized. You have some strong points but undermine them with discussion of the other side, which is not a rebuttal. You neglect making the appeal that there are other ways to ensure progress than the test. . . The action seems unrelated."

Furthermore, parts of my paper looked like following (professor marks are in red, as they were in original paper):

“Therefore, comprehensive exams can be beneficial, but the results of this test can be more threatening than promising.”

“A letter about the test can be written to the Board of Education or Dean of the College. This letter should be simple but persuasive. It should contain viewpoints of how students feel about the exam and support why they feel this way.”

Again, I wonder what Professor Smith deems as a “good” paper. In the first example, “BLAH!” does not explain or even allude to what is wrong with the sentence. It simply suggests a dislike or disagreement of a “bad” sentence. Similar to the first example, in the second example I obviously made a mistake. Instead of writing “BLAH!” I am positive there is a better way to express an unintentional mistake. As a first year, fall semester college student, I was not aware of the hierarchy of the academic institution. Thus, resulting in, by mistake, a fallacy to who a letter arguing against comprehensive exams would be addressed. I believe the written “blahs” on my paper demonstrate a poor response approach. I am certain that there are better approaches to responding to students papers than the ones’ I have received from Professor Smith.

Entry 7:

It is the end of the semester and I have apparently written only one good paper. I just received a D on my final paper. I am boiling with anger! I want to scream and throw this paper in her face. I thought I was writing about an important issue? I thought I was challenging myself? As angst-ridden toward Professor Smith as I was (and still am), I was moderately excited when I turned in my paper, thinking I might be able to earn another good grade. No – a D! I wish I knew what I was doing so terribly wrong? The comments I received from Professor Smith on my final paper were, by far, the most heart-breaking and disturbing comments I have ever received. Not only did I receive heartless comments, but entire passages were X’ed out in red ink. For example, her comment said,

“Tanya, this paper doesn’t make sense. It has nothing beyond some very obvious and very basic and pretty much unrelated observations to make. The language is colorless and vague. The paragraphs do not develop well and are in some places not unified.”

This example shows frustration and carelessness by Professor Smith. Although I obviously (according to her comments) did not meet the requirements of the final paper, I do not feel that the response given to me was appropriate. Also, though a small detail, I find it slightly offensive, that in addressing me, Professor Smith misspelled my name. I think the misspelling of my name shows, even more, her carelessness and possible annoyance. Professor Smith has called on me and has graded and responded to my papers all semester without once misspelling my name. Although the misspelling of my name was probably an innocent mistake, it still negatively affects my feelings toward Professor Smith.

Entry 8:

Based on the comments, grades, and corrections on my papers, it is evident that I needed extra help. When I asked for help I was ignored and therefore, in the end, punished for it. Through every paper, the writing process became more frustrating because my questions were brushed-off and ignored. Many times I was given a smirk and walked away from. I feel many of the comments and marks written on my papers are inappropriate and uncalled for. I truly think, if Professor Smith could have taken the time to talk with me about my questions or my writing process, I could have written better papers. However, Professor Smith had no concern for her struggling students. I was not the only student that was ignored; it seems any student having trouble with their writing was ignored. I do not understand how Professor Smith could give the comment she gave and grade the way she did when she overlooked the majority of her students, ironically, those that struggle with writing.

I am beyond disappointed in my grade for English 101. I no longer have any confidence in my writing skills and ability. Any confidence I had has been burned with the comments and grading from Professor Smith. I am completely devastated. Now, I absolutely despise writing. I must have been hallucinating when I thought I was a decent writer.

Entry 9:

Any desire to be an English teacher has now vanished. How could I ever teach reading and writing when it is obvious that I am unsuccessful at these tasks myself? Writing was something I actually enjoyed. Trying new ways to write, as well as new issues and ideas to write about, all seem hopeless now. I guess I have been living in a dream world for most of my life. The one thing I actually thought I could be good at – teaching English – is gone. I have no desire to ever write another paper. English 101 is now history – this makes elates me! I received a C in the course. At least I won't have to retake it; that would be a nightmare. How depressing, a C in English. At least I found out that teaching English is not my calling. This makes me rather sad.

Spring 1999

Well, I got a C in English 101. At least I didn't get a D, which could have been possible. So, the next semester has started and I only have two classes. I have absolutely zero motivation for school right now. I will eventually have to take the English 102 class, but I am putting that off as far as possible. That semester was so depressing. I don't want to go through all those emotions again because then I might think I am really a failure. I used to like school, but now I hate it. I hate getting up in the morning to go sit in classes that I greatly dislike and see no use in my future. To think that my unpleasant and sickening attitude toward school is the result of one horrendous English class is pretty upsetting.

Fall 1999

Entry 1:

I have signed up for 18 hours this semester. I possibly may have lost my mind! In these 18 hours I have signed up for my English 102 class. I am extremely afraid of this class. I have not written a decent paper in over a year, and that was back in high school. I hope I can figure out what it was I was doing so horribly wrong. This semester is the determining point of my college career. I hope I can come out on top.

Entry 2:

The first paper for English 102 had been assigned. Until this point I have really enjoyed the class. We have been reading texts that I enjoy and understand. I am beginning to remember why I like English and why I wanted to become a teacher. However, my first paper has got me terrified. I understand what I am supposed to do, but I can't seem to get started. I have written down all my thoughts and ideas I think need to go into the paper, but I am terrified to begin. I am afraid I will only fail once again. I am making myself sick because I am so nervous. I just sit and stare at my notebook. I cannot bring myself to write one sentence. Debating on what to do, I have decided to gather all my notes and prewriting and go talk to my professor tomorrow. I have no idea what to say and I don't want to represent myself as a complete idiot. I need to think of intelligent ways to articulate my questions. I hope she will help me and not ignore me like Professor Smith did.

Entry 3:

I went to my English professor today. I planned for total chaos, but instead I received absolute encouragement. I was incredibly nervous, which my professor could see because she told me to calm down, not to worry, and that we would work everything out. After we talked about ways for me to approach my paper, she told me that I really didn't need her help, and all that I needed was have confidence and write all the things I told her. I thought to myself, "Easier said than done. If only you knew my English 101 experience." My professor then asked me why I felt as though I could not write this paper. I briefly told her my previous experience and how I have lost all confidence in my writing skills. She was very supportive and told me to see her whenever I needed. This was too good to be true. It seems like Professor Brauch cares about my writing and wants to help me succeed.

Entry 4:

I got my first paper back. I got a B! Not only did I get a B, but there were no giant red marks and condescending comments all over my paper! Instead, any comments on my paper were written aside in the margins, written in pencil, and not trashing my ideas. Also, I was told what I could do better and what I could have included, not what I did wrong and what I left out. Furthermore, I was given praise. My professor told me about things I did well! I forgot teachers did that! Some of Professor Brauch's comments included:

Tania, I really liked paper because you include such great information. The second paragraph has some impressive analysis about how the Misfit forgets killing his father and therefore avoids guilt. Your mechanics are generally strong

while your arguments are reasonable. If you revise, and you should consider doing so because I know you can make this one stronger, work on developing the fourth paragraph. . . I like the idea that the grandmother is being Godlike by the babies comment, but you have to explain that a lot more. Then, you have to show how that comment causes the Misfit to have his realization. What does he do to lead you to such a conclusion. . . Explain those ideas a lot more fully. . . This paper really shows many strengths, and I am confident you can revise it successfully if you choose to do so. Great job.

I couldn't believe how drastically Professor Brauch's differed from Professor Smith's. It looks like I have a good professor that wants to help her students succeed, not watch them plummet into the terrifying world of failure.

Entry 5:

It is almost the end of the semester. I have been working very diligently and it seems to be paying off. I currently have nothing lower than a B in any of my classes! Hopefully I will do well on my finals! My English 102 class has been great. I am learning so much. My writing process has been very difficult, but since I have had the support of my professor, I have been able to compose better papers than I ever thought I could. Also, I have received great comments on my journal entries. Professor Brauch has written comments such as

“Excellent details,” “Great job – You really show that you understood the readings,” “Excellent discussion,” “Good points!” and “Tania – What a great response! It’s full of strong insight and show that you really thought about the story.”

All of professor Brauch's comments demonstrated that she actually read her students writing. I really like how she gives so many comments. Her comments have really helped me have more confidence as a reader and a writer.

Entry 6:

I have been working on my final research paper. We have to research an author or poet and write about their writing. My research paper is on the writing of Emily Dickinson. I have always enjoyed studying and reading her poetry. I find Dickinson's poetry highly intriguing. There seems to be a softness about her poetry that I really enjoy. Emily Dickinson is definitely one of my favorite poets! I am really excited to be writing my research on her. I hope all my hard work pays off. Last time I was really excited about my writing, things turned out horribly; hopefully the outcome will be different this time.

Entry 7:

The semester has ended. I got an A in English. Also, I got an A on my Dickinson research paper! I can't believe it! I am extremely proud of the time and intense work I have done this semester. Maybe I wasn't working hard enough last year. I am not sure how my change in school came about, but I definitely feel Professor Brauch had an

immense impact on my success. She helped me realize that I can write and write well. I feel that I have learned so much from her this semester. I became a better reader and a better writer. I also learned to have confidence in my work once again. What a relief! I hope to take with me all I have learned this semester, as well as through the rest of my college career – (I feel that I have one again)!

Spring 2000

Entry 1:

I have decided that I want to go into teaching. Based on my experiences thus far, I feel that I could have a lot to offer as a teacher. I want to teach high school English. Although I know I have a great amount more to learn, I feel that I can succeed in my remaining courses at JJC and transfer to ISU. I have talked to an advisor and planned out the rest of my time at JJC in order to earn an associates degree. If all goes as planned, I will be attending ISU one year from now. Due to last semester, I have more confidence in myself as a student and can't wait to learn more this semester.

Entry 2:

I have Professor Brauch for my Women's Literature class. This makes me very happy and puts me at ease about writing more papers. I hope I do as well in this class as I did in English 102.

Entry 3:

Professor Brauch continues to encourage and support my writing. She continues to fill my papers and journals with constructive criticism, as well as praise. I really feel I have a better grasp on how to analyze texts and respond to them formally and informally. I feel I can express my thoughts better, which thus makes it easier when turning my thoughts into written form. Although I feel that I am able to compose better papers, I still struggle with writing. My writing process seems to take so long. One of my biggest struggles is writing an introduction for my papers. I know the rule is to write the body and conclusion of a paper and then write the introduction. However, this rule does not work for me, and I have tried it numerous times. I feel that I cannot continue writing until the introduction is finished. By writing the introduction first, I feel I can better comprehend my thoughts and turn them into written words. Maybe if I can overcome this aspect of my writing, I can become a more proficient writer.

Also, it seems to me that I spend too much time thinking about each sentence. As I write, I want each sentence to be perfect. Thus, instead of writing continuously and getting my thoughts and arguments written, I often do not go on to the next sentence until I feel that the previous sentence is as good as it can be. I know that writing this way often causes me to lose my train of thought, but I just can't seem to kick this habit. I know these are some of my weaknesses as a writer that I need to work on. Therefore, I will continue to try different strategies in order to become a better writer.

Entry 4:

I received an A in my Women's Literature Class. I can see the progression of my writing since last semester. I guess all it takes is practice and support. I have proved to

myself my capabilities as a student and as a writer. I know I can write well, I just have to keep writing so I can continue to grow as a writer. I hope growth and success is not a fluke. I do believe that I earned my grades in all respects. Now that I know I can do A work, I hope to continue A work next semester.

Fall 2000

Entry 1:

I went to the first day of my American Literature and found out that I have Professor Brauch once again. By now, I am fairly aware of her expectations. It's comforting to know that I have Professor Brauch again. I hope she can see how much her support has helped me grow academically, especially in reading and writing. My goal from this Professor Brauch's class is to continue to improve and develop as a writer (and student) and hopefully take my writing to a greater level.

I plan to work on my writing using the suggestions that Professor Brauch has given me in the past two semesters. Since I have had the privilege to work with Professor Brauch for three semesters, and she has been very supportive and encouraging of my work, I want to demonstrate my improvements and show her that she has helped me greatly. I honestly do not think I would have come this far if I did not have her as a teacher.

Entry 2:

Professor Brauch has been able to witness by writing progress over the last three semesters. As I am sure she became very familiar with my style of writing, she still continued to give me both constructive criticism and praise as she had done in the past, and as she does with all of her students. In the last entry I talked about how I wanted to demonstrate my improvement and growth in writing. The only person I really needed to prove that to was myself and I think I have proved that. However, Professor Brauch enhanced these notions with the following comments I received on my papers:

"Tania – Great response! There's not all that much for me to say except you've done such a nice job showing how Bradstreet was ambivalent, wanting both sides but ultimately choosing believing in god. Nice job – your writing continues to improve each semester."

"This is a thoroughly enjoyable and insightful paper. You use great quotes to illustrate how European's views of Native Americans changed. I'm particularly impressed with your views of Rowlandson. The Franklin and Freneu sections need to acknowledge that these writers went further even. . . Still, you have a well-written paper here. You have come a long way since the beginning of English 102, and while you still have more to learn, I am confident you will do well at ISU."

Entry 3:

I can honestly say that I believe I have come a long way since the fall of 1998, when I first started at JJC. I look at my writing from high school compared to my writing

in English 101 and I am completely lost when trying to figure out where I went wrong. It seems as though I forgot everything I ever learned. Looking back at the papers I wrote in English 101, I guess I deserved the grades I received in that class. However, I still feel strongly about the *way* I was graded and the lack of help and support from Professor Smith. Furthermore, I still feel Professor Smith's comments could have been better constructed; they could have been less rude and offensive. Based on the different ways in which I was given feedback from Professor Smith and Professor Brauch, I am positive Professor Brauch's unwillingness to help me when I asked for her help, along with her crude comments, had an immense impact on the work I did in her class; thus resulting in the grade I received. However, when I look at the work I have done since Fall 1999, it is visible that I have made a drastic improvement. I know my writing has a long way to go, but if I have come this far, I am confident that I will continue to improve.

Entry 4:

Through my experiences thus far, I have learned that writing is more than putting words on paper. Writing is a process that needs to be guided and revised. With each new piece I have written, I have learned something about my writing. As I have continued to write numerous informal responses, I have learned the value of deeply analyzing texts. Furthermore, I have learned how to formulate and express my thoughts through words in ways which my readers can also form an opinion or see my feelings of that piece. Moreover, I have learned *how* to compose an essay and a research paper. In other words, I have learned and developed my own language that appears on paper. I have learned that even though structure is needed for any type of essay, the voice through which the words on paper speak is different for everyone. I always thought there was only a right way and a wrong way to write and compose an essay. However, I have learned there are many ways, many voices, many opinions, and many arguments to be made and supported in a written text. I have learned all of these things, but my learning has just begun.