

Beyond Rhetoric

A Reflective, Persuasive Final Exam for the Workshop Classroom

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I suspect many teachers who have embraced the workshop model in their secondary classrooms often wrap up a wonderful semester with great student portfolios, but then, as I do, run straight into a school requirement for an exam at the end of the term. For me, the traditional end-of-term exam was at odds with the workshop experience.

It's five o'clock. I stagger through the front door carrying the mail, my lunch box, my schoolbag, seemingly loaded with bricks. It's the end of a crazy exam day; grades are due tomorrow. I leaf through the mail, check the messages, talk to the cats, pour a drink, get comfy on the couch, and plow into the exams my sophomore and junior English students have just turned in. But this year, there's a difference: Unlike previous years when I approached this experience with a combination of dread and foreboding, this year I can't wait to find out what my students have to say.

Believe me, it hasn't always been that way. Exams haven't always been high on my list of compelling reading material. In fact, this entire end-of-semester experience was often depressing. The problem was that I didn't know how to give an exam that was consistent with what I had been doing all year with my writing and reading workshop classes. I tried out some alternatives, creating objective tests over writing craft, asking students to report on authors they

had read. But techniques such as these did not seem to mesh with what we had been doing. What I wanted was a final exam that served as a reflective review of the year, one that showed me what the students had learned.

I suspect many teachers who have embraced the workshop model in their secondary classrooms often wrap up a wonderful semester with great student portfolios, but then, as I do, run straight into a school requirement for an exam at the end of the term. For me, the traditional end-of-term exam was at odds with the workshop experience.

It was one of my Eastern Michigan Writing Project colleagues, Michelle McLemore, who helped me find a way out of this dilemma. Michelle has her students do a "detective story" exam in which they bring "evidence" of good writing in their work and present it to her in a conference. I decided to take this idea in another direction.

Now, I ask my students to write a persuasive essay that tells me what grade they think they should get and then convince me that they deserve it. They must wax eloquent about how much they have learned from the class. They can pull from anything that we have done during the semester or year. The key to convincing me is the use of detail. They can't simply say they improved as a writer—they have to give examples and even quote their own writing. They can't just say their vocabulary improved—they have to use some of their favorite new words. And they can't just say something was helpful—they have to tell me why they thought it was important, how their thinking changed, or how they applied it in everyday life.

I give them a list similar to the one below to evoke ideas.

Write about:

- *favorite books you've read during the year and why you liked them*
- *poems that have led you to deeper understandings*

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- *how your writing improved, with specific examples*
- *new words you've acquired*
- *concepts or genres you've learned about*
- *editing skills you've mastered*
- *minilessons you've thought were useful*
- *writing prompts and revision techniques you particularly liked*
- *reading and writing habits you have developed or changed*
- *what you've learned from the class overall.*

Since we have not worked with the persuasive genre before, I work with the students to help them provide supporting details and examples to make their pieces convincing. As these students will have many more experiences with persuasive writing, this topic so closely connected to them, one with a very real purpose, seems like an ideal introduction to the genre.

I ask the students to tell me the grade they think they deserve and tell me why they think they should receive it. The first inclination of many students is, of course, to butter me up, to place at the center of their piece a thesis testifying to how great the class was, how great I am, how much they loved everything. Flattered as I may be by these testimonials, I won't really be convinced of students' growth until I see evidence of their learning—examples from their own writing, thinking, and living. This use of specific, supporting detail is difficult for students, and many write unreflective essays that simply repeat what I've told them during the year. Some essays are all rhetoric and no substance, or, on the other end, occasionally give a bare list of topics with no persuasive appeal. For instance, one student wrote: "I also learned that many

things can effect the quality of the poem. A few of these things are line breaks, shape of the poem, tone, fresh use of language, and literary devices."

While responses of this sort tell me the student was able to remember or refer to notes we used in our poetry study, they don't show if those devices were ever used personally. And tempting as it may be, I cannot allow a strong voice punctuated by humor to dissuade me from my insistence on specific examples.

To move on to my next term, let's see if you know what a foot is, no I don't mean the thing connected to your ankle. It's the smallest repeated pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poetic line. Believe it or not this is a very helpful hint to remember.

Though essays heavy with this kind of writing are not exactly what I'm looking for, I'm not gravely disappointed in them either. They do show evidence of learning. But they don't get the highest grades.

I'm learning to better teach students to work in this way by providing them with models and specific instruction. I ask students to tell little stories of how they made a connection in real life with something they learned in class. One student told how she felt a little surge of pride when she was the only one in her family to know the answer to a *Jeopardy* question about literature. Another wrote of how she knew exactly how to answer the question on the ACT about genre because we had talked about the concept so often. And there were students who made larger connections between what we had learned and their own lives:

One of the authors that you read from said something along the lines of

"being aware of details, don't forget to live," this has helped me to notice things in a different way. I remember flipping through a magazine a few days ago and looking at a few pictures and thinking about what great poems could be made out of them. Even when we were in Washington, D.C., I saw people and could think of how they might be feeling and why and create a poem in my mind. Such as when I saw an elderly woman standing in front of Robert E. Lee's house in Arlington I would find myself thinking of her "overlooking the solemnly quiet cemetery. All the white blurring together in a bare blanket of glory for the deserving soldiers. Her eyes were remorseful, as if she had lost something and didn't think to regret it until it was too late. She was standing there alone, but not lonely. She had stopped being lonely." It was sad to think of, but was an amazing moment for me, to be able to see someone and make up a past and be able to remember it. —Stephanie

Of course, topics on which we had spent the most time in class come up frequently in the essays. This past year, my sophomores and juniors did a genre study on poetry that lasted most of second semester, so they wrote a lot about poetry in their essays, telling how their perspectives on poetry had changed and giving examples from their own work. Krist said, "You showed us that poetry isn't all common sense, it's our dreams gone wild." He quoted from his response to a dream-write where he used alliteration inspired by a *National Geographic* picture: "Monkeys—hairy furry flamboyant hanging on powerful power lines with a sunset that's powdery pink."

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Students spent a lot of time revising their poetry, putting to work poetic devices. Camelle referred to her inclusion of metaphors in a revision of her first poem:

The volleyball flew over the net. There's really nothing much to read into—so let's compare it to something descriptive: The volleyball flew over the net like an asteroid flies through space. Doesn't that sound much more descriptive? It gives life and meaning to your statement.

Trae cleverly demonstrated his understanding of figurative language by incorporating an example of these devices right into his sentence:

Using similes and metaphors is like breathing to me. . . . I have noticed a great difference in my writing and so have my parents. They can tell the difference because when they read my poems they asked me did I copy them from somewhere. . . .

Other responses, while not rich in content, were startling in their level of understanding. Melissa talked about our Socratic Seminar discussions of poetry, which were difficult for her to jump into even though she saw the value. “Some of the poems you had us decipher were tough,” she said, “but I think we did a good job of digging in to dead people’s souls and finding out their deep, dark secrets.”

One of the best features of this project has been the way it clarifies the use of minilessons in my classroom. My lesson on the use of the thesaurus, for instance, had made an impact in ways I had not anticipated. Students wrote about learning new words and using the thesaurus, and they commented on some of the extra advice I included in the minilesson as well as how

their new skills made them feel. Dylan wrote, “Words like *skinny* and *dull* are now replaced with *gaunt* and *somber*. I kind of like how these words enhance my profile from an intellectual perspective.”

Camille said:

But Mrs. Lorenz did tell us to make sure that we don't use the thesaurus as a way to use big words and confound everyone, but to use rich words. Like instead of saying fast, you could say abruptly. Abruptly sounds better and it doesn't confound anyone.”

Some minilessons were very short and focused on practical matters of usage or common errors. “I learned a ton of stuff this year. I even learned that *a lot* is two words,” wrote Sean. The very practical lessons, things I never used to even recognize as content but just as stuff I’d throw in for “free” were now recorded as minilessons, and this helped us recognize their value.

Many students referred to a minilesson I’d given on writing sympathy notes as one of the best, which was a real surprise to me. Students talked about terms that we learned: “I had never heard of a line break before February twenty-third two thousand and one,” said Chris, and Aaron revealed some interesting wordplay that had been going on inside his head:

An outstandingly helpful minilesson was #9, which talked about repetition and personification. After learning about these techniques, I created my own tool, Personification, which gives Caucasian-like characteristics to an animal, object, or concept.

Who ever finds material like this on a multiple-choice exam?

Writing-craft lessons came up in the essays. We had had many minilessons on the use of specific detail, so I was gratified to find many students mentioning it in their essays.

Now, when I write something, I don't just say the room was dark. I would describe the eerie glow it had about it, the dancing shadows on the walls and the creeping feeling of doom all around me. —Nate

Instead of telling the reader that you're eating fruit, tell the reader that the juice from the oversized pomegranate was dribbling down your chin. —Stephanie.

For example, don't say your “car.” Say something like “my gleaming red hot rod convertible.” —Chris

You can never use too much detail. Details are the insides of the story. Without them, we would all be lost. Be specific. Instead of saying “there was a pretty flower by the windowsill” say “there was a radiant geranium sitting on the windowsill’s left.” Now you know what kind of flower it is, where it is, and what kind of “pretty” it was. —Beckie

Beckie provides here the kind of example that I try to share with other students. She develops the concept not only with an example, but goes on to analyze the reasons for using detail.

Students talked about books they had read during independent reading, an area of learning I had never even tried to assess on the final exam. While many of these comments tended to be more general than I would have preferred, they did give me a clear idea of the variety of learning that was taking place during independent reading

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time. Nate admitted, “*Slot Machine* was the first book that I have ever laughed out loud while reading.” Andy revealed that he had read over seven hundred hours this year. And Alex, who avoided reading at all costs in the past, wrote how he had changed:

I figured out what kind of book I like to read. I like to read factual books and I would have never found out about that if it weren't for you. . . . After all that reading, my imagination, once a non-existent part of my life, started to unfold. My concentration level grew after that, and I started using the right side of my brain.

Other students wrote in convincing detail about what they had taken away from our writing conferences:

You were looking at one of my poems that had no feeling or thought behind it. Then you brought up Emily Dickinson and how she only hints at something else for the reader to find. It's really incredible how she does that, so I went and read a few of her poems. It took awhile to digest them and go over them again to figure out. But once I figured out one or two of them, I realized what you were talking about. I then thought about how amazing it would be to have people reading those kind of poems, making them sit down and try and get into your mind, your innermost thought, and why you wrote that. I know I'll never be Emily Dickinson, or even close to it. But that really inspired me, and gave me something to work towards. And I want to thank you for that.

Elsewhere in the essay, she reflected on her writing process:

Emily Dickinson wrote, “The Brain, within its groove / Runs evenly and true; / But let a splinter swerve / 'Twere easier for you / To put the water back / When floods have slit the hills . . .” I feel like this is me, when I get distracted.

—Stephanie

Laying on my couch, beaming idiotically, I feel like maybe I am doing something right after all.

As my students have worked with this end-of-the-term persuasive essay format, the benefits to them have become increasingly clear. But I also benefit. I often would come to the end of the semester wondering despairingly, “What did we accomplish?” I would create new lessons based on errors I saw in students’ writing or on topics that arose serendipitously, so it didn’t always feel like I’d covered a lot of weighty topics in depth. Some minilessons are so short and focused—like the use of *a lot* or the thesaurus—that I frequently have felt as if my direct instruction was haphazard and random. This is not as much of a problem now. As I’ve introduced the persuasive essay final, I’ve also required students to record all minilessons in a special section in their learning logs, and this is one of the main sources they draw from when they write their persuasive papers. It helps them take minilessons more seriously during the year, and it offers a substantial review, which is the purpose of an exam. Further, students and teacher alike realize that we really did cover a lot during the year. It’s great to go from wondering, “What did we spend all our time on this year?” to thinking, “Wow—we really did cover a lot of ground.”

This project has other benefits. It provides a way of thinking about language arts skills that gives a bigger picture than the reflective piece typically included in portfolios.

Portfolio reflections still have a place, of course, but they are highly focused on the pieces included in the portfolio and don’t usually address the class as a whole. Reflection of any kind is often difficult for students, and teachers’ demands for reflection on portfolio entries can be vague and frustrating. While the persuasive essay is also reflective, it has a very direct and business-like purpose and audience—it’s for me, and it’s for a big grade. That may not seem very kind and gentle, but it’s honest, and it sure gets great results.

The review is also valuable because the students think about how much they have learned and grown in the workshop format. Because workshop is different from traditional teacher-directed classes and is very student centered, kids sometimes don’t realize that they are learning or even doing work. Nate said, “The methods of teaching were such that it gave the illusion that we were not really being taught. . . . In a way, we taught ourselves with the assistance of a teacher.” Students often comment that they are surprised at how much they’ve gained. As Adam admitted:

I'm ashamed to say it but here it goes. I like writing. Yes, it's true. The student with the absolute worst attitude in the school towards anything involving ink actually enjoys putting the stuff down on paper. Especially poetry (Don't tell my friends.)

On a practical level, this is an assignment that can be done during the exam period itself, but is better outside of class as a take-home exam. Either way, I provide students with a prewriting assignment or worksheet. In class, I go over the minilessons and other material that we have covered, and I provide models of the type of writing that is

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The appendices also include usage sheets for helping teach the “literary fixes” stage of the writing process, a content-focused “Format for Writing an Essay” that offers innovative ways for student writers to organize their own thinking in ways more honest than the five-paragraph bore all those standardized writing tests so often encourage, and a truly inspirational “List of Useful Sentences for Writers in a Tight Spot”—a set of thoughtful sentences for writers to memorize and use when they need to fend off intellectual bullies.

Bly’s final appendix, “The Robertson-Bly Ethics Code for Teaching Creative Writing to Middle and High School Students” is a call for

honest talk about serious issues in the teaching of writing, a conversation those teenage mothers—and many other students—are continually inviting us to join. It’s a great way to end a great book.

Reference

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appropriate. I use old essays that received an A. I explain to my students that A papers are rarely under four pages typewritten and often up to eight pages, because of the level of detail required to persuade me of A quality. If students are to explain the content learned over an entire semester or year and include detailed examples in a persuasive format, they will need to elaborate. It’s possible to do this in fewer pages, but that means very tight, clever writing—something that takes as much time as writing more.

I’ve found that students are usually accurate and honest when giving themselves a grade. Their assessments almost always come close to mine. Students who put a lot of time into their writing do so on this essay as well, so they ask for a good grade and, as a rule, get it. Students who don’t put the time in write shorter essays with less information and often get grades that reflect their previous work. But they usually recognize it and ask for a B or C.

I began using this assignment without much thought. It was a quick solution to the

annoying end-of-the-term required exam. As I have reflected on the process, I’ve begun to see the great benefits of an assignment that elegantly combines reflection, persuasion, review, craft and detail, and the course evaluation. At first, the essay was an isolated task at the end of the year, but now I see that it can be an integrated, important part of my practice. Now I will talk more about this final project at the beginning of the year, allowing more time for planning and peer conferencing, and creating a rubric with the students for more consistent grading.

Settling down to read these exams, I realize the personal mental health benefits for me. It’s a great way to combat end-of-the-year fatigue, and it helps me understand what students have found important and memorable about the class, even as, on this last day, they learn a few more things about the process of writing.

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to demonstrate the need for uniformity in format and for adhering to schedules and page limits.

The entire exercise is a lot of work for the students—and of course for me—but this process provides a valuable lesson that can help students understand the kinds of writing skills and processes they will be called upon to use in the corporate or educational world after graduation. This kind of preparation gives them a jump-start on their future.

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