

Talking Texts

Writing Dialogue in the College Composition Classroom

JOHN LEVINE

Is it possible for an inexperienced writer to juggle the ideas of several authors to create a coherent, analytical essay? John Levine has found a way to help. He encourages students to get these writers talking to one another.

W e're five weeks into the semester, and things are heating up. I just handed out the assignment sheet for the third essay. The first assignment was something of a slow lob, a personal narrative piece, which proved to be well within the comfort zone for the entire class. The second assignment was more challenging: a textual analysis of an essay by Richard Rodriguez drawing on the ideas of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky in their introduction to the anthology *Ways of Reading*. This assignment required that I do some scaffolding, leading students through a series of steps in a way not required by the first assignment. And now, with the third assignment before my students, I face expressions ranging from blank stares to baleful grimaces that tell me that, this time, I may have gone too far.

"Any questions?" I ask. I wait. No one says a thing. A couple of heads are now down, belonging to students who are, presumably, rereading the assignment sheet. Here is what it says:

For your third assignment, frame a discussion of Paul Auster's essay "Portrait of an Invisible Man" and John Edgar Wideman's "Our Time" using the terms and ideas of Adrienne Rich as they appear in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision."

We have spent the better part of the last two weeks reading and discussing these three selections from *Ways of Reading*. The class discussions have been lively; everyone seemed to connect to the readings on one level or another.

One student finally speaks up. "So you want us to write about all three of the readings? In one essay?"

"That's right." Maybe they do get it, I tell myself.

"You mean, like, compare and contrast them?" another student offers.

"Not exactly," I say. I ask the class if anybody has any ideas about how we might deal with

three different readings, other than comparing and contrasting them. I remind them that they worked with two readings in their last assignment. More stares, more grimaces.

I press on. "You all read Auster's, Wideman's, and Rich's essays. And we've had some great discussions about each of them. Now I want you to bring them all together. In a dialogue. One text 'talking' to the other."

"So you're saying we can't compare them," the compare/contrast student tries again.

"You can, but I think what I'm asking you to do is more interesting. I want you to engage the three texts in a dialogue," I say.

A collective groan.

Time to take a new tack.

"Please get out a piece of paper. . . . I want you to imagine that you are the moderator of a panel discussion on revision ('re-vision'). The distinguished members of your panel include Adrienne Rich, Paul Auster, and John Edgar Wideman. Con-

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struct an imagined dialogue among the four ‘voices’ (the three essayists plus you) on the topic of writing as ‘re-vision.’”

I explain that I want them to format the dialogue as though it were a script. They are to write the panelist’s name, followed by a colon, followed by his or her words. I put a model up on the blackboard.

RICH: Xxxxx xxx . . .

AUSTER: Xxxxx xxx . . .

WIDEMAN: Xxxxx xxx . . .

YOU (YOUR NAME): Xxxxx xxx . . .

. . . and so on . . .

I give them approximately thirty minutes in class to work on their dialogues. To my surprise, the entire class gets busy writing, and it is not until I tell them that time is up that they stop. We spend the remaining class time sharing in pairs and then it’s time for them to go home and develop rough drafts of their essays based on at least some of the ideas that came out of their in-class dialogue writing. The rough draft is due in one week, and they are to hand in their dialogues, along with their drafts.

The next week I’m impressed by the dialogues that I receive. Here is an excerpt from one student, Parker:

AUSTER: For me, when writing of my father, I found it very difficult to look back on past events with new eyes. I had a very sure idea of who my father was. But, ironically, it was that resistance to look back that finally led me to re-vision my relationship with my father.

RICH: I want to follow up on what Paul said by showing that re-vision is inherent in writing and life.

PARKER: I see what you’re saying. Is it synonymous with the idea of “the key

to the future is the past,” or something like that?

WIDEMAN: I think that’s the basic idea.

I’m pleased with this dialogue for two reasons: the student is allowing the three texts to interact with one another, and he is weaving his own commentary into the exchange of ideas. He also uses Rich’s text to build on one of Auster’s ideas.

Another student, Peter, discovers dissonance between two texts in the following excerpt:

RICH: I was very impressed when I read John’s essay “Our Time.” In my essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” I state that “until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (604). John recognizes his prejudice towards his brother, he casts it aside, and ends up discovering a new side to his brother. However, I feel Paul has a problem in this area. I believe that Paul is unable to recognize and therefore dispose of his previous conceptions of his father. Due to this, his essay is not a revision in which he realized something new but, instead, he simply reaffirms his outlook of his father.

PETER: Well, Paul, I can imagine that you would like to respond to Adrienne.

AUSTER: Indeed. I avidly disagree with Adrienne. I agree that one must enter a revision process with an open mind. However, it is ludicrous to say that in order for one to properly revise something they must discover something new. I revisited my father’s past with an open mind; I just did not

happen to have my point of view changed by this revision.

Although his speeches go on a little too long, Peter’s dialogue demonstrates his ability to use Rich’s text to comment on Wideman’s and Auster’s texts.

Getting students to construct dialogue is one thing. But how does this dialogue exercise transfer when the students write their essays? Before going on, I should explain how and why I came to use this approach in my writing classroom.

My background is in dramatic writing and, as a playwright, I felt less than qualified when I first began teaching English composition. But when I graduated from San Francisco State University five years ago with a master of fine arts degree in creative writing, no one came banging on my door looking for college playwriting instructors. Fortunately, while at San Francisco State, in addition to my creative writing degree, I had completed a twelve-unit certificate program in teaching college composition.

When I began teaching my first freshman composition class at Rutgers University, I had already compartmentalized my graduate studies into two categories: my playwriting toolbox and my composition toolbox. I told myself that my composition skills would pay the bills so that I could pursue my playwriting ambitions in my spare time. In other words, teaching composition would be my day job. If someone had told me then that my work as a dramatist would be invaluable to my composition teaching repertoire, I would not have believed her. As it turns out, someone—the director of the Rutgers Writing Program—did tell me just that. He assured me that playwriting is an ideal background for teaching expository

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writing. The two genres are complementary in their use of multiple perspectives. I appreciated his words of encouragement. But, I didn't believe a word he said.

Fast forward five years. Plays are a staple of all the classes I teach, from developmental writing to freshman composition to advanced critical thinking courses. I have used works by David Mamet, Anna Deavere Smith, David Henry Hwang, John Guare, Athol Fugard, and others. In the process of analyzing play scripts, I talk with my students about the function of dialogue in a play. And I also explain that when I write plays, I often begin with dialogue as a means of getting started. Dialogue, for me, is a great brainstorming tool. Even if I did not use plays as texts in the classroom, I would draw upon my knowledge as a playwright in helping my students to interact with reading selections as a means of complicating their arguments.

Back to Rich, Auster, and Wideman. Here is how another student, Alicia, develops an essay from her dialogue. Her draft begins:

What exactly does the word revision mean to a writer? This is the question Adrienne Rich tries to answer in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." If the word revision were broken down into two parts, it would look like re-vision. Vision means "to see something," and the prefix re- means "again" or "back." The word re-vision means "to see something again." Rich takes it a step further, saying it is important to see it with new eyes, and to look at it differently than before. . . . When studying the works of Paul Auster and John Edgar Wideman, one can see how they use many of the same principles of revision to help them in their

writing process. Auster is making an attempt to describe the man his father was, but uses many of these steps of re-vision while making his discoveries. Wideman uses many of the ideas of re-vision while giving a narrative of how his brother ended up in prison.

Alicia goes on to discuss Auster and Wideman in greater detail, using Rich's ideas about re-vision as her guide.

Nancy asserts in her introductory paragraph that "Paul Auster and John Edgar Wideman are using their writings to act out Rich's definition of re-vision to persuade readers to believe that their writings are based on actual facts instead of a make-believe fairy tale." This concept of using revision to separate fact from fiction presented itself to Nancy in her dialogue exercise. Since Auster and Wideman both write fiction in addition to nonfiction, and both allude to their fiction-writing selves in their essays, Nancy zooms in on this duality as she applies Rich's concept of re-vision to Auster and Wideman.

However they feel about their final essays, most students enjoy the dialogue prewriting exercise. When asked to reflect

on the entire process of putting together the third assignment, Sohrab responds: "[The] dialogue initially helped get some ideas out, but those ideas proved to be just the tip of the iceberg." Peter writes, "The prewriting assignment was like an improvised brainstorming for me. The majority of my main ideas streamed from the exercise." And Alicia explains that the dialogue "forced me to look at what all of these people think and how 're-vision' can be applied to their writing."

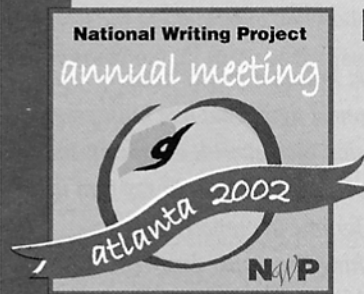
Admittedly, not all students make the leap from writing dialogue to framing two seemingly disparate texts using a third, equally dissimilar text. But even if their final drafts of this assignment are not perfect, these first-year college composition students have begun to enter the larger conversation of academic discourse. And it all begins with dialogue.

References

Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky. 1999. *Ways of Reading*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press.

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