TEACHING MINDFUL WRITERS

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TEACH WRITING?

Where to begin? At the beginning, before we're neck deep in a writing task with students.

The chapters in part I will help you understand, and then plan, writing assignments for mindful writers. We begin with First Principles—specifically, how we have come to see FYW as the site for teaching students to understand writing as a social act (rhetoric) and an iterative activity (writing process) best performed mindfully (metacognition) (chapters 1–3). We'll talk about a learning cycle (chapter 4) you can use to plan each unit of writing instruction for a major writing task. To engage with the learning cycle, students will need a meaningful writing task (chapter 5) organized with ends in mind (chapter 6) and laced with minor writing interventions that will build metacognitive skills (chapter 7). First, let's take a brief look at how people learn to write.

WRITING FROM THE START

It is remarkable that almost all children, in any culture on earth, with the ability to send and receive sounds, can learn to speak a sophisticated language structure with hardly any formal training—by just babbling to the people they live with. Whether this is an instinct (Pinker 1994) or a faculty (Yule 1996) or some other ability, children pick up complex morphological, syntactic, and semantic principles in speech without us forcing them to use flash cards or complete drills. Even their so-called mistakes are brilliant. We learn to speak in social environments—some more language-rich than others—that fuel our need to understand, connect to, and influence the world around us. This is a sociocognitive theory of language.

While we routinely point out that writing, unlike speech, is an unnatural act (see Dryer 2015), we know from research that little children participate in prealphabetic writing—that is, scribbles lined up like prose—for the same reasons they participate in speech: out of a desire to

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communicate, to "take part in literacy activities with adults and to form friendships" (Rowe 2008, 403). Our earliest forms of full writing—sets of symbols representing phonetic values and abstract ideas—emerged ostensibly from a desperate need to interact with others, specifically to interact economically (Robinson 2009). As symbol-making animals, our first shot at written language was something like, "You owe me."

Unlike speech, writing takes a long time to master—by one account over twenty years (Kellogg 2008). While there is no absolute sequence for learning to write, children must understand that letters represent sounds, that letters combine in a particular order to form words, that one word is distinguished orthographically from other words (in speech, there are no spaces), that words muster up in particular orders called sentences, and that these sentences combine to create texts that serve a variety of social purposes. And that's just what the young writer needs to *understand.* Without also mastering the orthographic labor of writing (including handwriting and typing), children can't move to the higher-order dimension of writing as social discourse because their working memory is jammed with the challenge of just getting words on the page (James, Jao, and Beringer 2017; Tolchinsky 2016).

In short, writing is a cognitive, sociocultural, technological, and embodied activity—"a complex social participatory performance," writes Charles Bazerman, "in which the writer asserts meaning, goals, actions, affiliations, and identities within a constantly changing, contingently organized social world" (2016, 18). We write to commune.

TEACHING PEOPLE TO WRITE

Then the formal schooling kicks in. As Deborah Brandt has taught us, we all learn and use writing under the influence of *sponsors of literacy*—"any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy" (Brandt 2009, 25). I see two important takeaways from Brandt's research: (1) "literacy takes its shape from the interests of its sponsors," who control the "ideological freight" and use of reading and writing (27), and (2) sponsorship takes place under "unequal conditions" of opportunities to learn and use reading and writing (29). We learn to write, as Tom Miller explains, under "prevailing ideologies and social practices" over which as children we have little control (2011, 14). While writing to commune may be a sociocultural impulse, its learning and practice are governed by sociocultural forces that don't always support equal and healthy literacy practices.

This overview of language acquisition is important to you because you are now a sponsor of literacy. You are a writing instructor with the potential to enable, support, teach, and model for a novice writer. More specifically, you are a writing teacher at the college level, and you teach a class that has been historically constructed, institutionally molded, and discursively contested for over a century.

Of course, writing instruction is way older than that. For all that Mesopotamian clay scratching to make sense, both sender and receiver had to know the conventions. Archaeologists have discovered a 4,000-year-old clay tablet upon which a student in a scribal school explains, in cuneiform, that when his headmaster reviewed his writing, the headmaster said "there is something missing," and then "caned" him as a result—an early example of how sponsors of literacy "regulate" learning (Robinson 2009, 126). In the Western tradition, writing instruction in ancient Greece was both "oral and literate," since nobody really read anything silently and most everything written was meant to be "performed aloud" (Enos 2001, 16). Greek writing students—all males, yes, like nearly everywhere else in the world for millennia—learned from a single master as apprentices, whereas the Romans instituted a system of writing education with classrooms and a common rhetorical curriculum, a system that "dominated European practice" for 2,000 years (Murphy 2001, 37).

This enduring system of writing instruction is fascinating in light of our recent turn to transferrable habits of mind (which I'll discuss in the next chapter). Quintilian had argued that the primary learning outcome for writing instruction was *facilitas*, the "habitual capacity to produce appropriate and effective language in any situation" (Murphy 2001, 36). Up until the eighteenth century—and here I'm getting necessarily breezy; see *A Short History of Writing Instruction* for the details—facilitas was practiced in the Western world almost exclusively in Greek and Latin, in exercises in imitation, literary analysis, invention, style, declamation, letter-writing, argumentation, elocution, and "themes" (written, says one Renaissance writing teacher, "with exceeding paines and feare" by the schoolboys; Abbott 2001, 161). Many of these exercises were meant to prepare students to use their writing to master public speaking. The idea that you'd write in your own vernacular (English, e.g.) for a private reading audience was not widespread in writing classes in the West till the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I'm compressing the story in pursuit of a higher theme: Writing instruction is a historically dynamic, culturally contingent practice that has never really been "one thing." Over the centuries, rhetoric—as

classically conceived as a mode of invention and eloquence for public discourse—has waxed and waned as the theoretical base for teaching young people to write. But in some form or another, it has remained a paradigmatic constant, perhaps because it is hard to suppress language's sociocultural *telos* (though I had a few language arts teachers do their darndest). College writing instruction has been influenced by larger cultural trends (like, who goes to college, like technology) and by the sponsors of literacy at the colleges and universities that popped up in the United States between the Civil War and World War I—the era of the "Great American University" (Thelin 2004).

FORCING STUDENTS TO WRITE

But our story—yours and mine, as first-year writing teachers—takes shape from two pivotal historical moments: (1) the invention of first-year writing as a required course at the university, and (2) the construction of something called "composition studies" or "writing studies" as a profession. In 1885 Harvard University instituted if not the first then the most influential required first-year composition course, English A, with Adams Sherman Hill's *Principles of Rhetoric* as the primary text (Brereton 1995, 11). According to an early, rather grouchy report (in 1892), the course required teachers to perform "mental drudgery of the most exhausting nature" and was believed, by many Harvard intellectuals of the day, to be an "absurd" distraction from the "proper functions" of a university (75, 77). And yet English A spread across the country, becoming by 1920 the most required undergraduate course on campus (with an undergraduate student population cresting 1 million). It was also perceived as an academic backwater, an embarrassment of remediation, taught by an underappreciated cadre of overworked teachers and taught as a futile, audience-irrelevant task of correctness.

Welcome to the team!

Wait, there are alternative histories. John Brereton's collection of primary documents presents a complex intellectual struggle for the soul of first-year writing, with plenty of theoretical fuel for a more compelling model of learning to write. Even in an era obsessed with efficiency, there were progressive heroes in "comp," carrying John Dewey's banner: Scholars such as Edwin Hopkins, Fred Newton Scott, and Gertrude Buck (early writing program administrators) and various contributors to *English Journal* believed that FYW could be "student-centered, project-oriented, community-based," rhetorically sophisticated and intellectually engaging (Gallagher 2002, 21). More forward-thinking institutions

serving underrepresented populations (women, African Americans, the working classes) taught writing as community service and civic engagement (Kates 2001). Institutional reformers developed writing programs that made FYW just the beginning of knowledge-making persuasion in the disciplines (i.e., students' majors), in the professions, and in public culture (Russell 2002). We have quite a legacy to draw from when we approach methods for teaching FYW and other writing courses beyond.

So, that's the first legacy: the creation of required FYW as a battleground for various ideologies and an enduring site for contingent labor (see Crowley 1998). The National Census of Writing tells me that 96 percent of the 643 institutions surveyed require FYW and that 54 percent of those require two semesters of it (National Census of Writing 2013). On the labor issue, in a 2008 study 76 percent of writing teachers at two-year colleges and 58 percent at four-year colleges were non-tenure-track faculty (Jaschik 2008). Our institutions want to teach writing badly enough to require it for incoming students, but not badly enough to offer full-time status to all those who teach it. Many of you are grad students passing through a writing program on your way to full-time careers. If you are an adjunct, I sincerely hope that the institution you work for is making efforts to apply the recommendations found in the "CCCC Statement on Working Conditions for Non-Tenure-Track Writing Faculty." I'll have more to say about professionalization at the end of this book.

The second historical trajectory has more to do with the content of the class you teach. When I interviewed to teach FYW for the first time in 2001, I was asked, "What kind of texts would you use to teach writing?" I said, "Uh . . . like . . . the *Best American Essays*, maybe?" I didn't know it at the time, but my clumsy answer reflected an unspoken theory, however half-baked, about teaching writing. In this case, my assumption seems to be that you teach writing by having students read what Alan Lightman or Cheryl Strayed believe to be the year's best magazine nonfiction. By reading Stephen King's account of being hit by a car in 1999, my students would . . . what? Well, learn what it means to write good! Lacking any pedagogical content knowledge, I had full faith that students would internalize the tricks of the masters just by reading them—kinda like you'd learn to bake a good razzleberry pie by eating one at Marie Callender's restaurant.

All teaching, whether the teacher knows it or not, proceeds from certain assumptions about the way the world works—in our case, the way we learn, the way language works in the social world, the way (and the *why*, and the *ought*) people develop literacy practices. These assumptions can come from experience—intuition about language cultivated by a lifetime

of reading and writing and forming judgments about them—and they can come from a more systematic inquiry into these questions—what we would call *research.* In the early days of required FYW, it seems the leading intellectuals thought of teaching writing as an art, not necessarily a science worthy of the name "field" or "discipline." It didn't stop them from forming the first professional society concerned with teaching writing, the National Council of Teachers of English, in 1911. But it wasn't until the 1960s that a research agenda started to emerge, with graduate programs encouraging doctoral students to study student writers and the processes by which they write. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps explains, "Composition Studies" became a self-aware field in the 1960s and '70s, when three major traditions merged: a teaching tradition in higher education, a rhetorical tradition that renewed the paradigm situating writing in the classical study of eloquence, and a new research tradition studying the writing process using a variety of methodologies (including ethnography or sociolinguistics) (Phelps 1996, 124). This merging made possible a variety of theories related to teaching writing. To paraphrase the Geoffrey Chaucer character from the movie *A Knight's Tale,* we walk in the garden of this turbulence.

(A quick aside: When we talk about research in FYW, we often separate *composition studies* from *writing studies.* Writing studies is a more broad field of inquiry about writing as a human activity in any setting, for example, workplace writing or public writing. When folks in the field talk about *composition,* they're most likely talking about FYW and the research/admin apparatus of that single college course.)

THE METATHEORIES

Call them theories (Berlin 1982) or approaches (Fulkerson 2005) or pedagogies (Tate et al. 2014), we now have a host of emphases for FYW that take shape around various values and research findings from the field. The FYW course you teach will reflect one or more of these theories, as your program has embraced and packaged them in a first-year curriculum. Each program draws from these theories to make their own recipe, but the two essential ingredients are *process* and *rhetoric.* These two, I would argue, are the metatheories of FYW.

Process

It is not easy imagining how writing was taught before process theory took over, because for decades process has been the water we fish swim in. Even though there were dynamic and rhetorically savvy scholars of

writing studies before the 1960s, the standard version of FYW, according to some of the scholars who endured it (Clark 2012, 3–4), expressed indifference to the process by which students wrote. They (the students) wrote on their own time, and then their work was "corrected." "The best way, indeed, to become a good writer," wrote someone in *Century Magazine* in 1896, "is to be born of the right sort of parents" (cited in Brereton 1995, 240). Failing that, your best bet was to take a college writing class in which you were assigned to read a British novel and a book on the History of England and write a "theme" on "How a Rosebud Uncloses" (494). Your overworked instructor would then "mark" your theme in red ink in esoteric codes indicating your vulgarities, and then you'd write another one. How you did the writing was mostly up to you. I'm caricaturing a bit for rhetorical effect, but this description isn't far from the average old-school writing course.

In the 1960s and '70s, composition folks turned the field's attention from the products of writing to the process of writing—to the way students use writing as an act of discovery in the service of learning something more important than how to write an error-free essay. Writing instruction, then, was imagined as a series of interventions in a writer's process: helping students come up with ideas, draft them, get meaningful feedback, and then try again to discover what they want to say. The focus shifted from the final, always inadequate text to the kinds of capacities students develop to produce those texts (Anson 2014, 217). In some sense *the students,* as learners, become the texts, capable of being revised. Early on, these interventions were canonized into a linear process of prewriting, drafting, and revising, and this three-stage process is still popular. (I learned it in high school; I taught it as a graduate student.) Subsequent research on writers at work revealed that writers did not follow these linear models. Different writers do different things for different situations and tasks, often in a recursive process that reflects messy creativity rather than instructions to put together an Ikea dresser.

Almost all writing courses have adopted process as metatheory. A more sophisticated list of the assumptions behind process can be found in *Naming What We Know,* a book on threshold concepts in writing studies (Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle 2015; more on this in chapter 2). If the concepts listed in *Naming What We Know* accurately describe what research tells us about the writing process, then process teachers (like yourselves?) believe that writing is

"a knowledge-making activity";

"a technology through which writers create and recreate meaning";

both a "cognitive" and "metacognitive activity";
"performative."

They also believe that

"writing involves the negotiation of language differences";
"writers' histories, processes, and identities vary";
"a text is an object outside of oneself that can be improved and developed";
"revision is central to developing writing";
"reflection is critical for a writer's development."

A course drawing from process pedagogy will lead students through strategies of invention, prewriting, drafting, collaborative review, revision, and reflection. Process is now "deep in the discipline's bones" (Anson 2014, 226). This book's marrow is process through and through.

Rhetoric

The second metatheory that informs how writing is taught is *rhetoric.* And let's admit at the outset that the word in popular usage is unquestionably toxic. In an unpublished analysis of the word using digital corpora of global and contemporary American English, a grad student and I discovered—really, confirmed everyone's hunch—that most of the time when the word *rhetoric* is used, the speaker means empty, deceptive, or inflammatory speech. The word has experienced pejoration, a term linguists use to describe when a word goes through a gradual semantic souring into infamy over time.

Well, that's a shame. The word is just too dang useful to throw out. In fifth century democratic Athens, when an assembly was called to debate an issue, the people gathered in the Pnyx, an outdoor amphitheater that could seat 6,000 people. Once everyone was in place and a pig had been slaughtered and its purifying blood thrown around the Pnyx, the official cryer would open the meeting by praying "a curse (*ara*) upon any speaker (*rhetor*) who should attempt to lead the people astray." Any citizen brave enough to stand on the speaker's platform to put forth an argument was called a *rhetor* and crowned with a laurel wreath "as a mark of his dignity" (Hansen 1999, 142–44). The noun *rhetoric* may have been coined by Plato to criticize his rivals, but after Plato and Aristotle's treatments, the word came to describe a theoretical body of work concerned with the art of public discourse—the "available means of persuasion," as Aristotle famously put it (Aristotle 2007, 36; Schiappa 1999).

It is important to think meta about Aristotle's *Rhetoric.* Ignore what he is saying in the text: What is the man trying to *do*? He (through his students' lecture notes) is trying to construct a systematic accounting of what people do when they try to persuade other people—how they reason, establish credibility, draw from common categories of thinking, evoke emotional responses, cater to audience types, organize a message, turn words into art, influence attitudes. Those who followed Aristotle in "the European tradition" of education expanded, refined, and sometimes repudiated his enduringly stubborn categories of thinking about these issues (Conley 1990). You can read about the fortunes of this tradition in a number of books; it wouldn't hurt to start with Susan Jarratt's encyclopedic article on the subject (2007). Rhetoricians have also sought to transform, transpose, or throw out this European tradition in an effort to develop international, decolonial, transcultural theories of communication (Wanzer-Serrano 2018). Fundamentally, and to simplify the topic recklessly, I think of rhetoric as the study and practice of how we use symbols to influence the attitudes, judgments, and behaviors of others in culturally situated communication. Writing, of course falls into this study of symbolic artfulness. Rhetoric is never really rhetoric, as in one thing, but *rhetorics*, a variety of culturally contingent practices and assumptions about how we use language in social action in any field of human (and maybe even animal?) interaction.

In writing studies, we have embraced rhetoric as a pliable theory of discourse for a modern, multicultural student body. The Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement (version 3.0) reads: "*Rhetorical knowledge* is the ability to analyze contexts and audiences and then to act on that analysis in comprehending and creating texts. Rhetorical knowledge is the basis of composing. Writers develop rhetorical knowledge by negotiating purpose, audience, context, and conventions as they compose a variety of texts for different situations" ("WPA Outcomes Statement" 2014). We write for specific people, and we write to accomplish something. This truth seems so self-evident that it's hard to describe what the alternative would be. (The lyrics to "Nowhere Man" come to mind.) Since James Kinneavy's 1971 masterpiece *A Theory of Discourse*, writing studies folks have sought to flesh out a theory that turns classroom writing into more than double-spaced fodder for the grade machine. Taking as a starting point that writing is a social act, writing instructors use rhetorical theory to enhance the way students think mindfully about writing projects. If we turn again to *Naming What We Know*, we see a variety of concepts from rhetorical theory about genre, audience, and purpose. We want our students to think of themselves as

actors situated in a social milieu, writing to other people in a manner those other people, for whatever reason, might find acceptable, even actionable. Rhetorical thinking requires writers to construct in their minds social imaginaries in which their writing plays a part.

* * *

Process and rhetoric—the metatheories. Beyond that, there are dozens of approaches to FYW that offer often competing *axiologies*; that's Richard Fulkerson's term to describe the "theories of value" our courses present to students (Fulkerson 2005). Some courses emphasize creative nonfiction to develop voice, without much concern about audience or rhetorical need. Many teach a version of what Ann George describes as "critical cultural studies" meant to "revitalize students' conceptions of freedom and inspire them to collectively re-create a society built on democractive values and respect for [cultural] difference" (2014, 80). Other cultural studies classes focus on consumerism and the value of resistance through analysis; others focus on nondominant identities of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability. There are still approaches that assign literature (as in fiction and poetry); more common, though, are those that foreground public discourse or multimodality as the ultimate expression of rhetorical agency. Many courses focus on argument, others on what's been called "academic writing," or the writing expected in learned communities; others teach linguistics and the politics of language to engage diverse language users and learners (Matsuda and Hammill 2014). There's been a recent surge of interest in a "writing about writing" approach, which assumes that writing studies itself—a subject usually reserved for rhet-comp nerds (like you?) in graduate programs—is a "relevant subject of study" for FYW students (Downs and Wardle 2012, 131).

I'm not just talking about content here. If you use a reader focused on the environment, your axiology is not "the environment." The axiologies of FYW are more philosophical than that. They represent theories of how and why writers write: how writing reflects or refracts or otherwise constitutes reality, how people learn to write from and for others, how language functions descriptively and prescriptively in social situations, and so on. You can have a class on the environment with an axiological bent to creative nonfiction, or public argument, or collaborative writing, or writing with sources. You can adopt theories of writing that could work nicely in a variety of teaching contexts (students, assignments, texts, etc.). As I said in the introduction, this book presents a theory of metacognition and writing that I hope can be applied to a variety of learning contexts, using a variety of topics and texts as support.

If this is your first semester teaching, you might not give two hoots about axiologies of composition. You want to know what to do in class *tomorrow*. I understand that concern. But surely it is not too early to think about the theoretical assumptions that inform your teaching. Practice, after all, whether intentional or not, is theory on the move. What do *you* believe about how students make knowledge? Or learn to write? How would *you* define rhetoric? What assumptions about language, power, and literacy do *you* bring to the classroom? There are very good researched reasons why these metatheories have endured as long as they have. I'd encourage you to take advantage of this generous legwork as you develop your own theory for teaching writing.

Let me see if I can nutshell what is most important about what I've said in this chapter. Teaching writing has a long history, and it hasn't meant the same thing in every historical era. The modern first-year writing course has been influenced by undergraduate requirements and the common practice of using contingent (non-tenured) labor to cover all those required sections. Historical practices, program interests, research findings, textbooks, student population dynamics, and technological change all exert a force on the FY curriculum. The FYW course takes different shapes based on the assumptions we bring to it. In the 1960s and '70s a *field* called composition studies emerged, with a professional apparatus pushing for interdisciplinary inquiry into best practices. Competing theories of value create different "brands" of FYW, like critical cultural studies or argument, but most programs teach the two metatheories of *process* and *rhetoric*.

What, then, does it mean to teach college writing? It depends on the assumptions we bring to it. On a grander, more philosophical level, teaching people to write is helping them *self-actualize*. Language is power. Learning language is empowerment. In the best cases, students walk away from our classes with improved judgment, sharpened skills, and greater confidence in their ability to tackle writing tasks with the kind of mindful orientation that psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed was at the heart of all language learning (1978, 26). In the next chapter, we'll talk about what it means for students to be mindful writers, no matter what axiology we eventually adopt.