

Aaron Grimes

Dr. Raymond

EN 6233

January 25, 2013

Why do we write? Why do I observe?

I sat in the back in the back of the Composition I classroom waiting on class, intermittently staring between the clock and my desk. I was straight-backed and stiff in the hard metal chair, but mentally I was slumped down and nodding off; it was early, I had skipped breakfast, and I was counting off in my head all of the assignments I had due in my seminars with mental anguish. It wasn't that I thought my assignment as a TA in LaToya Bogard's Composition I class was a waste of time; on the contrary, LaToya Bogard is an excellent teacher and it has been an excellent learning opportunity to observe her in the classroom. The real reason for my sluggish mental state was that I knew for the next 50 minutes I wasn't expected to do anything: I wasn't going to teach; I wasn't going to answer questions; I wasn't going to complete an assignment; I wasn't going to get ahead on my seminar reading. No, I was going to sit quietly while passively observing an undergraduate level Comp I class. The students trickled in, physical representations of my sluggish mental state mirrored in their droopy eyes, baggy sweatpants, and baseball caps thrown on to cover up morning cow-licks; yet if the students were a reflection of my mental state, LaToya represented the opposite of that intellectual sloth. As usual, her energy and enthusiasm was contagious. LaToya marched in, giving a sharp look to the class over the rim of her thick black glasses as she began to take attendance. She called out the roll quickly, as if she never expected to not receive an

audible “Here!” after each name. It was revision day 1 of their literacy narrative drafts, and the students were learning revision strategies that would guide them while revising their next draft. As the class continued, the “process” aspect of the way LaToya taught became more clear. LaToya, through her demonstration of several revision strategies, clearly aligned her teaching with the “how” of writing a paper. Her classroom strategy did not stick rigidly to any one theory; rather, it was a unique blend of theories that created a learning environment conducive to participation by the students.

To begin the class, LaToya wrote five “Categories of Revision” on the board: Purpose, Meaning, Information, Structure, Clarity and Style. The class then consisted of a review of what each of these categories of revision entails. As of yet, LaToya has not seen the student’s essays; draft one of the essays was responded to by peers. She allows the students to revise the essays before she looks at them. *RWT* states, “Students learn to write by writing. Guidance in the writing process and discussion of the students’ own work should be the central means of writing instruction” (256). LaToya’s class demonstrated this notion perfectly; instead of writing what the students “should” do down on paper comments, LaToya chose to allow the students to explore their own mistakes and revise their papers on their own. Therefore, LaToya encourages the learning process by having the students take charge of their own writing.

The students in the class participated in the revision process by giving examples from their own papers and talking about what they think each category of revision means. *RWT* states, “process-centered courses are characterized by verbs: talking, listening, reading, planning, researching, drafting, revising, collaborating” (258). Each one of these verbs was present in the classroom during revising day. The students were very active

during the collaborative discussion about the revision strategies. During the “Information” section, one student shared where he thought he was lacking in information for his literacy narrative: “I don’t really know. I was diagnosed with dyslexia early, and I went to a specialist, so I wrote about that. But when I was in the fifth grade, I just didn’t read much. So I didn’t know what to write about.” The class then collaborated to help him discover *why* he didn’t read much during that time period, and what caused him to lose interest. He then realized that he could write about what distracted him from reading. LaToya again demonstrated aspects of a process-centered course by having the students collaborate in order to help a fellow student find the gaps in his narrative.

The most active part of the discussion came at the beginning of the class when LaToya asked, “What is the purpose of your writing assignment?” Her question was followed by an ominous silence; I found myself willing the students to answer the question. Because of the classes that I have taken in the past, I knew that the students had the unique opportunity to learn about their past in a much more explicit and concrete manner through writing than if they merely thought about it. Finally, a student gave an answer: “To explore and explain.” How relieved and satisfied I felt to hear such a simple yet accurate answer! After hearing the answer to her question, LaToya embodied my excitement as she retorted, “That’s good! Who said that? Now what exactly are you exploring?” The class then proceeded to build upon this answer by discussing the different ways they explored their personal literacy narrative. One student bashfully answered “We are exploring ourselves.” The students collaborated and made their learning experience more obvious and explicit through the revision strategies. The “process” aspect of the course became explicitly apparent during the revision day.

Students talked and listened both to the teacher and each other. They read each others drafts, and they planned their own drafts. Although traditional MLA based research wasn't included, students researched their own literacy history by delving into their memories in order to deem what was significant to their literacy. The students drafted, revised, and collaborated on their revisions.

LaToya's class blended its focus between the individual and the individual's place in society. Although not all students were eager to share, one student discussed what it was that she explored: "Well you told us to find out who the heroes and villains were in our stories. I realized my mom was the hero. She would read to me every day. Even when I came home from school upset that I couldn't do what the other kids did, she would calm me down and read to me." LaToya then asked, "Well, that's good. Now, would you say that helped you grow in just your literacy? Or did it help you grow as a person too?" The student responded, "Yeah, I think it did. I mean, just knowin' someone was gonna be there to help me. It made me realize I wasn't alone." This notion of a student's literacy growth coming as a result of collaboration reflects ideas in *RWT*: "To portray writers as solitary individuals is to divorce them from the social context in which language always operates. Language is a form of social interaction, a process of shaping our environment even as it shapes us" (260). The assignment LaToya gave to the class helped them to realize that their literacy comes as a result of this "social interaction." Although the assignment focuses on the individual, it makes explicit the connection between the individual and society. The student who said she "wasn't alone" came to the realization that her personal literacy narrative connects her own life to the lives around her.

Although most students probably don't realize it, the chronological order of specific paper assignments isn't an arbitrary process; the syllabus, like the student's writing, has a purpose: it builds upon itself. The fact that LaToya began her semester by having her students write a literacy narrative has several theoretical implications. In *Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product*, Donald Murray argues, "When you give [a student] an assignment you tell [the student] what to say and how to say it, and thereby cheat your student of the opportunity to learn the process of discovery we call writing" (Cross-Talk 5). Donald Murray, then, may not agree with LaToya's choice of beginning the semester with a specific writing assignment, but the parameters of the literacy narrative justify her choice. Although LaToya assigned a specific genre for the students to write about, the paper still became their own. The students choose their own story, and they write as they see fit. Murray argues that writing is a "process of discovery," but if the self is not first discovered, what opinions can be fully formed? LaToya begins by giving her students a specific writing assignment, and by doing so she probably helps a few of them overcome writer's block or the stress of being in a collegiate level writing course. She even gives them a few choices to choose from such as their technical literacy or their reading history. To let the students write on anything might be too stressful for the students to handle; however, she still lets the students discover and explore their own literacy. In this way, the writing assignment allows the students to discover their own history before analyzing other materials.

The discussion during the class took up the majority of the time, and students were not given any in-class time to reflect on what was presented. While I believe that some journaling or freewriting may have been beneficial for some of the students,

especially those who chose not to share their writing experiences, I understand why the discussion took the entire allotted class time. The class is only 50 minutes, and students were bouncing ideas off of each other and the teacher the entire time. There was never a point where the discussion became completely stagnant. The students are assigned journals outside of class time in order to reflect on what is presented during the class period. *RWT* states, “Freewriting and keeping journals... help writers make sense of their experiences and find truths to tell” (259). Although in class time was not given, LaToya still encourages her students to freewrite and keep journals; thus, LaToya yet again demonstrates her class as a process-centered course.

LaToya’s class, through its use of revision strategies and class discussion, was definitely process and “how” centered. LaToya presented the material, and she was still able to find a way to involve the students. She took a traditionally lecture-based lesson and allowed the students to participate; this made for a more meaningful and personal learning process. I found that LaToya didn’t stick rigidly to any one theory we have discussed in class; instead, she blends the theories to make an effective learning environment in the classroom. I enjoyed the way in which LaToya included the “why” aspect of the paper in students’ revision strategy. She let them know the “purpose” of their assignment, and she did so in a way that let the students answer that question on their own. As the students discovered why they write, I found myself discovering why I observe. Just like them, I observe because I want to explore and explain. I want to explore the different ways that teaching composition can be done at the college level; I want to explain what is effective and ineffective for teaching writing; I want to explore

the intricacies of the college classroom before I delve into them, and I want to be able to explain my own teaching strategy and place in the classroom.

Works Cited

Lindemann, Erika. "Designing Writing Courses." *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 252-79.

Murray, Donald. "Teaching Writing as a Process Not Product." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Ready*. Eds. Victor Villanueva and Kristin L. Arola. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011. 3-6. Print.