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Wading the Deep Waters of Writing

“Let’s make an appointment to talk about this assignment.” I read the comment written on the last page of my paper as an impending sense of dread filled my entire body. Based on my previous experiences, whenever a teacher wanted to talk to a student personally about an assignment, it never meant anything good. Writing was always my best subject throughout high school, and I had sailed through my advanced placement English classes with minimal effort. Often times, I was the first person my siblings and friends would come to when they needed help with their writing. While I may not have been the best student in terms of math and science, I always felt confident in my ability to express myself through my words. However, this first college paper assignment seemed like an impossible undertaking, and I had never felt more overwhelmed about writing before. Not only was I in serious doubt about my future as a college student, but I would now also have to confront my professor who evidently was thinking the same thing and wanted to break the news to me in person. However, when I sat down in Dr. Anderson’s office the next day, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that he thought I actually presented some good ideas, albeit severely underdeveloped. In our meeting that day, we went through my paper piece by piece as Dr. Anderson explained the expectations of scholarly writing. While I had left high school believing I was a very strong writer, it was not until this Shakespeare class with Dr. Anderson my freshman year of college that I truly learned the essentials of academic writing, and I believe this first paper assignment in particular greatly enhanced my writing skills and influenced my whole academic philosophy.

The first day of class was seriously intimidating. I had tested out of freshman composition, and at the advice of Dr. Anderson himself, I enrolled in Shakespeare in Film. To my horror, I ended up being the only freshman, and the entire class consisted of about ten people, so unfortunately there would be no hiding my insecurity from the back row of the classroom. Dr. Anderson's teaching method was unlike anything I had experienced before. He lectured very little, mostly inviting students to share their own thoughts and opinions. I dutifully completed all of the reading, but when it came time for class discussion, I never felt like I could contribute anything meaningful. A typical class period ended with me leaving both confused and amazed at how my classmates could find so many things to talk about regarding a single line of text when I could not find anything to say about the entire play in general. When the first paper was assigned several weeks into class, I nearly fell out my desk. Basically the only information that was provided on the assignment sheet was the page length requirement and the due date. When I asked what we were supposed to write about, Dr. Anderson simply replied, "Whatever you are interested in writing about." While most of the other students seemed excited about this freedom to choose, I was dumbfounded. I felt like I had been pushed into the deep end without first even being taught how to swim.

After a while of Google-scouring, I decided I would attempt to write on the different female characters in Hamlet. I was pretty impressed with myself for actually coming up with a topic on my own, but my excitement was short lived. Once I sat at my computer to start writing, I realized I really did not know how to start. I wrote everything I could possibly think of about Ophelia and Gertrude, but I was still lacking on the page requirement. When I turned the paper in, I knew it was a mess, and, even more humiliatingly, I knew Dr. Anderson would be able to immediately tell that I had no clue what I was saying. I handed him my paper, avoiding all eye

contact, and practically ran out of the room. For the first time in my life, I felt unsure, even ashamed, about a writing assignment I was turning in. When I got the paper back a few days later, all I found was that disturbingly ambiguous comment on the last page. I kept reading it over and over again, trying to anticipate the level of emotional and psychological trauma I would need to be prepared for when I went to my teacher's office to talk with him.

However, as I walked in to Dr. Anderson's office the next day, he was welcoming, cheerful, and seemed almost excited to talk with me about my paper. "First thing's first," he said, "What do you think about what you've written?" I told him the truth—I thought it was an abomination. Thankfully, he was not so harsh. He told me he thought I had good ideas, but it was clear that I was not sure exactly how to present and fully develop these ideas. Dr. Anderson understood that I had missed the usual instruction most freshmen get in composition classes, but he also explained how he thought I could easily get up to speed. We went paragraph by paragraph through my whole paper, as he asked me to verbally explain what each section was about and why I decided to include the quotations I had chosen. I had no problem talking about the ideas going on in my head, and verbally discussing my topic helped me to realize the information I had left absent from my paper. I specifically remember one section in which I compared Shakespeare's Ophelia as she was presented in the text in opposition to the presentation of Ophelia in the 2000 film version we watched in class. In my paper, I had written a skimpy, five or six sentence paragraph that explained that I thought the film version of Ophelia was more liberated than the textual version. For my evidence, I cited a scene in the film in which Ophelia is shown developing photographs in her own apartment, but I had provided essentially no analysis of the scene. "You're definitely on to something here," said Dr. Anderson, "but what about this scene makes you see Ophelia as liberated?" After a little bit of thinking, I replied that

by giving Ophelia her own apartment, the film creates a space for her character to exist independently of her father Polonius and her brother Laertes. “Exactly!” Dr. Anderson said, “But you need to include that information in your paragraph. You need to tell me the *what* and the *how*...flesh out your analysis.” As we went through my paper, I was shocked to discover that I already had all the information I needed in my mind, I just need to learn how to properly structure it in my analysis.

I was also surprised to learn the different expectations of college-level, scholarly writing versus the simplified version of essay writing I had done in high school. Step-by-step, Dr. Anderson went over exactly what each part of my paper should do. What interested me the most was the conclusion. In high school, conclusion paragraphs were basically four or five sentences that just restated all of the information from the introduction. Now, my conclusion could be the most important and engaging part of my paper—my chance to explain the significance of my writing. In this session, I discovered I was leaving my reader with too many unanswered questions for my writing to be considered effective, but thanks to Dr. Anderson’s guidance, I left not only with the opportunity to write a revision of my paper, but also with the knowledge and confidence to do so.

The next class meeting, I turned in my revised paper, which I had proudly managed to extend beyond the minimum number of required pages. I was less panicked as I turned my assignment in this time, and when I got it back again, I was pleased to see a much more satisfactory comment on the final page: “Great work revising your paper. Keep it up. Don’t be afraid of working through intellectual discomfort.” Even more pleasing was the big red “A” circled underneath the comment. I went back to my dorm room that afternoon and put my paper on the refrigerator without the smallest feeling of pomp. I had worked hard for my grade, and it

had been a struggle, but I did it. When it came time for the final paper for the end of the class, I tackled the assignment armed with all of the information Dr. Anderson had given me from the beginning of the semester. However, the lessons I learned from my first paper on Hamlet proved useful not just in my approach to my final paper for the class, but also for essentially all the other writing assignments I have been given since, and the explanations and suggestions Dr. Anderson gave me that day in his office have guided me throughout my college writing career.

Although I initially felt as if my academic world was sure to destruct, Dr. Anderson's approach to teaching greatly benefited my own approach to writing as a student. While I first met the idea of formulating my own topic with some resistance and feelings of uncertainty, it was through this first paper assignment on women in Hamlet that I ended up discovering an interest of mine that had previously been unexplored—feminist literary criticism and gender studies. In fact, a large majority of papers I have written since I have been in college have in some way focused on how female characters are constructed in literature. Though I now have developed my own method of finding meaning in a literary text using this feminist perspective, my interest in feminist studies essentially found me through my first paper for Dr. Anderson's class. This process of allowing students to determine their own topics directly aligns with Donald Murray's theory of writing as a means of self-discovery. Murray explains, "It is not the job of the teacher to legislate the student's truth. It is the responsibility of the student to explore his own world with his own language, to discover his own meaning. The teacher supports but does not direct this expedition to the student's own truth" (5). Without Dr. Anderson pushing me through the intellectual challenge of forming my own topic, I would have been deprived of the opportunity to learn something about myself that has greatly influenced me as an English major.

Not only did I learn the mechanics of scholarly writing from this assignment for Dr. Anderson's Shakespeare class, but I also was provided with information from this experience that has served as the foundation for my own professional aspirations. The meeting I had with Dr. Anderson was the first experience I ever had where getting help from my teacher was not completely confusing or terrifying. Although the teachers I had in high school were, for the most part, nice and well-intentioned, getting individualized help at a school my size was pretty much impossible. To make matters worse, I was always a very shy student and would much rather struggle with something on my own than attempt to approach the instructor. However, Dr. Anderson's attitude was helpful and attentive. I could tell that teaching was his passion—not just lecturing, but really engaging with his students, and I still am very grateful that he took the time to help me improve my paper, when he could have very well just have given me a grade and left me to wade the deep waters of Shakespeare on my own. The lessons he taught me about writing I still apply to my papers now, but I also remember his approach with me in my interactions with my own students. Especially as a first-semester freshman, college classes and professors can seem distant and cold. Many times, it is easy to feel like just a number, and I have had several students tell me that their favorite part of composition class in college is that it is their only class with so few people. However, I always try to emulate the attitude Dr. Anderson had with me as well as with all of his other students, striving to establish a comfortable environment in which my students feel that their ideas are respectfully considered and that help from the instructor is always available. I never will forget the excitement I felt the first time one of my students came to me after class to ask for help on his essay. He was having trouble with his conclusion and could not understand why his cut-and-pasted thesis statement was not sufficient. Recalling the very same information Dr. Anderson had imparted on me years before, I told him, "I want to know

why I should care about all the information you just told me in your essay.” He verbally listed off several reasons, to which I replied, “Great, now all you need to do is write that in paragraph form.” He seemed almost relieved at the simplicity of this revelation, saying, “That’s it? I can do that. Thanks for your help, Ms. Swisher.”

Work Cited

Murray, Donald M. "Teaching Writing as a Process Not a Product." *Cross-talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Villanueva, Victor, and Kristin L. Arola. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2011. 1-6. Print.