

Composition Weekly



November 11, 2011

Restrictions on Student Writing?: When Freewrites become too "Free"

This font is terrible. However, by using it, I have made a conscious decision as a writer. I realize that many people in the department might refuse to read this newsletter because of this. But no one in the English department has put any restrictions on my newsletters, so I've decided that this font expresses the freedoms of my position - or, whatever. My point is: what types of choices are composition students making in their writing and what are the implications of these decisions? Are they aware of the topics they are choosing to write about - and if they are, how are we holding them accountable? I believe there are many ways of handling student accountability, but I'm interested in starting a discussion on freewriting and teacher accountability.

What is the purpose of freewriting in the composition classroom? And are teachers setting their students up for success or failure by assigning these freewrites? I'm not sure if I agree that students can ever really write about whatever they want when there is a chance that they will be penalized for it later. Otherwise the student code of conduct and (in)effective risk taking would never be taken into account when the teacher issues grades for these assignments – but these things *are* considered.

The level of comfort the teacher experiences when reading student writing becomes a factor of the student's standing in the class. If an essay is too personal – but there is nothing horrendously inappropriate (or threatening) in its content – the teacher may feel uncomfortable around the student and a new, detractive dynamic may form. This type of tension could easily affect a student's ability to learn, as the student might sense that his/her questions or concerns are unwelcome to his/her teacher. Students have also used freewrites as a medium to express their aggression in the past – whether it's towards the teacher, other students, the class, assignment, etc.

I don't think that teachers can ever fully guard themselves and their students from these issues in any form of writing or discourse. However, by imagining how students will receive certain assignments or activities, teachers can revamp their lesson plans before bringing them into the classroom. During my TA training in fall 2010, Sarah Stanley had my cohort write prompts and essays responding to our prompts. Although I did not write an essay that would make my-teacher-self uncomfortable or my-student-self penalized, I realized that my prompt was

probably too advanced for a first year composition student. Since this exercise, I have always contemplated how my students might react to my teacher persona, lesson plans, prompts, activities, etc., and I have made a conscious attempt to make my instructions more accessible.

With freewriting, however, a teacher rarely knows what to expect – but there is such a thing as directing freewriting. As an undergraduate student in Carolyn Kremers' Research Writing class, I was asked to freewrite about my paper topic on several different occasions. I was encouraged to write down any thoughts that I had related to it - even if I simply wrote down my doubts about the topic. It proved to be extremely generative for me as a student, so when I brought "freewriting" into my first year composition classroom, I gave my students flexible prompts.

While freewriting is supposed to encourage students to continuously practice writing at a low-stakes level, if teachers are going to collect and grade these student texts, they need to be aware of the potential problems that may arise. Students need to be held accountable for what they write when it is inappropriate. However, teachers can help their students achieve success by directing student writing. Sometimes, students have momentary lapses in judgment - especially during midterms and finals, and the dark and cold months - and by becoming prescient teachers, we can help them avoid those moments. What students choose to write about in these freewrites shouldn't ever fall back on the instructor; however, by giving students the smallest amount of direction, teachers can avoid having to deal with these unpleasant situations.