**Developing New Literary Practices for Out-of-the-Ordinary Assignments**

**What I Analyzed**

When I wrote standard writing assignments like research papers or five-paragraph English essays in high school, I usually ploughed straight through, knocking out one paragraph at a time. If I found while writing later paragraphs that my argument was not working, I would force what evidence I had to fit regardless in order to avoid the work of restructuring my argument. Such papers were assigned across disciplines, but they were all similar enough that these rote writing practices were always applicable. The pieces of writing that I chose to analyze for this paper were ones that stood out to me because the assignments for which I wrote them were different than the standard papers and essays. These few assignments offered unique challenges that pushed me to develop new, more effective writing methods. The resulting pieces of writing, as well as the process by which I stretched to develop new writing practices, are what I attempt to deconstruct in this paper.

**“Work the whole canvas.”**

 My high school Art 3 and 4 teacher used to tell us to “work the whole canvas,” a reminder to look at each of our pieces as a whole and to develop all areas of the composition in unison rather than focusing on only one area of the canvas at a time. The first practice I noticed when I examined my memories of the writing process for these papers was not consciously repurposed from art class, but it reflects this practice I was taught in art class. I found that I tend to work on all sections of a paper simultaneously, rather than, as I have been taught to do from as early as elementary school, starting with a rough introduction and then moving through to body paragraphs and, lastly, a conclusion.

 To do this, I start with what could be considered a written sketch then, as with a piece of visual art, refine, erase, rearrange, and add layers of complexity until I am satisfied that the paper or other written piece communicates what I want it to. I begin by writing down my thoughts and evidence in bullets, moving from section to section as I happen to think of ideas and transplanting bullet points to different sections as I shape the arguments of each section and of the paper as a whole. From there, the bullet points become starter sentences. I move through the whole paper at this stage; when I get stuck on the wording of one sentence I leave it to work on another, then return later when I have a better understanding of what I need that sentence to say. As I flesh out more bullet points into starter sentences, I link them together and adjust them until they form cohesive paragraphs, and together a cohesive argument. I continuously work on the entire paper at once, cycling through sections and allowing their development to influence each other. Unlike my method for writing less challenging papers, this practice allows me to maintain a mental image of the argument’s composition and helps to ensure that all its elements are unified.

 This practice was especially evident to me in the last of a series of literary analysis papers I wrote for 12th grade AP English Literature. For each iteration of the assignment, students had to read a novel and form our own analyses about the existence of and author’s purpose for themes, symbols, motifs, etc. in the novel. My teacher expected every assertion to be supported by ample evidence from the text, so by the final paper I had begun to start the writing process even as I read. I kept a Microsoft Word document in which I typed out quotes and page nubers while I read, and as I developed ideas for arguments even in the first chapters, I would copy and paste quotes into the paper’s various headings, reshaping arguments as I continued through the book and found evidence to support or discount what I initially predicted. However, I did not develop this strategy until the final paper in the assignment.

**Adaptability**

I realized when examining my pieces that this practice of “working the whole canvas” aided me in not only assessing my argument throughout the process of writing but in developing an entirely new writing practice as well: assessing and changing my approach to solving an assignment’s particular challenges while in the process of writing. Similarly to the way Dr. Kevin Roozen modified his research question and methods over the duration of his 2010 case study in which he analyzed the repurposing of his subject’s literacy practices, I found that I tend to change my strategy for completing a new assignment as I write. This practice is possible because as I constantly revisit each piece of my paper, I refine my understanding of the new type of writing and am able to better gage how best to approach the assignment as I go.

My strategy of keeping a list of quotes and beginning to form arguments as I read for my literary analysis assignment provides, again, an example: I developed that practice over the course of the assignment and did not refine it to the above state until the third and final paper of the assignment. The literary analysis, though, was completed in three stages, and I was able to learn from the grades and teacher’s feedback I received on my first and second papers and then adjust my strategy for the third one based on that outside feedback. In a year-long self-reflection writing project I was assigned in American Literature the year before, I modified the way I thought about and wrote for the assignment simply based on feedback I gave myself in process of writing. When I began the assignment I was not used to self-reflective writing and wrote in an awkwardly formal manner. However, after completing several of the twenty five “entries” that made up the finished project, I came to better understand the assignment’s purpose, which allowed me to change the way I wrote for it and ultimately develop a personal writing voice. Though I did not recognize this modification of my process as a writing practice at the time, I did note its occurrence in the introduction, which was written retrospectively after I had completed all twenty five entries. In the introduction I mused “It’s funny, the difference between my approach to writing when I started and when I finished… I rewrote most of [my original entries] to reflect the style [that] I developed throughout the process.”

**Discussion**

 The teachers who assigned the unique and challenging pieces that allowed me to develop these practices undoubtedly acted as “literacy sponsors” in my life (Brandt, 1998). Though the tasks they asked me and my fellow classmates to complete were demanding and caused a lot of stress at the time, the challenges that they each posed were so different from any that I had previously encountered that they forced me to create my own writing practices in order to complete them. Ultimately, my ability to rise to the challenges and produce pieces that I was proud of empowered me in both my writing and my general academic self-efficacy. In the writing of this paper, I was able not only to repurpose the practices of “working the whole canvas” and adapting my writing process, but I was also made more consciously aware of them, which only increased the impact they will have on my future writing.

References

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