

Minnesota Writing Project

---Demonstration Lesson---

Title of lesson: Writing from Our Strengths

Suggested grade/age: graduate students (especially doctoral students)

Approximate time needed to complete lesson: 90-120 minutes

Learning objective(s) and significance of lesson:

Workshop Description:

When it comes to academic writing, how do we maintain the integrity of our voices and the specific contexts of the communities we come from? Join us for a workshop that blends generative discussion with strategies where we will explore questions about how we can write from our strengths.

The purpose of this writing workshop is to recenter writing as a practice that is connected to our embodied histories. The lesson is for writers across the curriculum and is intended to be a space for graduate writers to not only think about the disciplinary gatekeeping they encounter in their training, but to also identify strategies for resisting and reclaiming agency in one's writing.

Brief summary/outline of lesson:

This lesson is part of a one-time out-of-class workshop in which participants may not know each other very well, if at all. The overall workshop can take up to two hours, but for the one-hour MWP teaching demonstration, I focused on three activities, as follows:

1. Activity: Guided breathing
 - a. Visualize a spot in the room you haven't been in. Go there. (Rationale: disrupt the space!)
 - b. Take a moment to settle into your body. You might close your eyes. Feeling self-conscious? Don't! No one's paying attention to you! ☺
 - c. Let's do some guided breathing. I will count aloud: 4 counts in, 4 counts out. (Repeat a few times. Slow the count down.)
 - d. Now let's increase the exhale. 4 counts in, 6 counts out. (Repeat a few times.)
 - e. The following to be said at some point during steps c and d:
 - i. Now deepen the breath, go lower in the abdomen. Go full body with the breath.
 - ii. Visualize the place where you are most relaxed. Bring that breath to the place you are most tense.
 - f. When you are ready, open your eyes.
 - g. Group discussion: why do you think we did this breathing today?
 - h. Rationale: breathe from the gut, write from the gut. Writing is an embodied, emotional, personal act. This may seem obvious, but the personal nature of our writing often comes up against academic and disciplinary writing

practices that we learn in formal education. Today, we want to play with that tension.

2. Activity: Naming your strengths
 - a. Theoretical framework
 - i. Beth Godbee, “writing up”
 - ii. Rasha Diab, “critique against/ critique for” dialectic
 - b. Freewrite on the following prompt: Describe your writing background (or how you came to be a writer). What would you say are your *strengths* as a writer?
 - i. five minutes
 - ii. I will ask you to share one strength with the entire group.
 - c. Large group go-around: everyone *must* name at least *one* strength you have as a writer. NO apologies, no qualifiers.
 - d. Check in (with large group): How did that feel?

3. Activity: Group discussion on a critique for epistemic rights
 - a. Theoretical framework
 - i. Godbee, epistemic rights
 - b. Discussion questions:
 - i. How might viewing your “writing as an assertion of epistemic rights” (Godbee) influence your approach to research, writing, and how you think about your scholarly identity?
 - ii. Or, what would it mean to view your writing (in academia) as your epistemic right?
 - c. Groups of four: circular response activity (see below for protocol)
 - d. Large group discussion:
 - i. Play the “believing game” (Elbow) with epistemic rights. Think aloud to articulate a “critique for”: where are the opportunities for our own voices in disciplinary writing?

Circular response protocol (from S. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking* (p. 184)

- 1st person speaks up to 1 minute on response to the topic or question.
- 2nd person (to left of 1st) speaks for up to 1 minute -- responding to, building on, questioning, countering, engaging the 1st speaker's comments.
- This process continues around circle (with each subsequent speaker continuing to build on earlier responses) and then moves into open conversation for final minute.

Related Resources:

1. For embodiment activities for community-building:
see Rohd, Michael. *Theatre for Community, Conflict, and Dialogue: The Hope is Vital Training Manual*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.
2. For the "circular response" protocol and other small group activities for critical thinking:
see Brookfield, Stephen D. *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012.
3. For more on the “believing game” and the “doubting game”:
check out Peter Elbow’s 2008 paper, "The Believing Game--Methodological Believing," available at http://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/20/.

4. For more about the "critique against" and "critique for" framework: check out this 2013 [article](http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/race/diabetal.cfm) (http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/race/diabetal.cfm) by Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, Beth Godbee, and Neil Simpkins.

Otherwise, our discussion came from Diab, Rasha. "The Reflective Art of a Peaceable Disposition: Rhetorics of Peace, Manifestations of a Peaceable Composition Pedagogy." 2013. Unpublished manuscript.

5. On epistemic rights, I was referring to a forthcoming manuscript by Beth Godbee on "Writing Up: How Assertions of Epistemic Rights Counter Epistemic Injustice" (to appear in *College English* 79.6 in July 2017).

Otherwise, Godbee has discussed this in a [blog](http://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/2014/10/31/linguistic-prejudice-and-a-call-for-epistemic-rights/):
<http://www.digitalrhetoriccollaborative.org/2014/10/31/linguistic-prejudice-and-a-call-for-epistemic-rights/>.

Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs:

The discussion prompt on epistemic rights could be retooled for different audiences. For example, for the MWP teaching demo, I posed the following questions:

- How might viewing "writing as an assertion of epistemic rights" influence (1) your approach to teaching, (2) how you think about your students' identities as writers, and (3) your own identity as a writer?
- Do we believe that students have epistemic rights? Does your practice acknowledge this?
- Does our educational system believe that students have epistemic rights in their writing?
- "Critique For": Where are the opportunities for a "critique for" epistemic rights in our teaching and/or among the students we work with?

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