Classroom Practice Report

Freewriting: A Fun and Fruitful Way for Students to Begin the Writing Process

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Overview of the Classroom Practice

The history of Freewriting goes back to the work of Dorothea Brande and her textbook *Becoming a Writer* which was first published in 1934. Since this time, Freewriting has received mixed reviews both from teachers and students. The popularity of Freewriting peaked during the late 1960s and early 1970s only to be relegated to the ‘back of the room’ during the back-to-basics movement of the mid-seventies in the United States (Fox & Suhor 34). Well-known proponents of Freewriting, Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray and Peter Elbow, have published extensively on this subject, promoting it as a tool that will improve student’s writing and fight against writer’s block. However, there are also some academics that are not in favour of Freewriting in the classroom. They believe this practice to be chaotic in nature and full of unusable material (Reynolds Make Free 81). After reviewing the scholarly literature on this subject, I would argue in favour of Freewriting as a fantastic tool that can be used in conjunction with other practices in the classroom by professors to improve the writing skills of their students.

Let us pick up the debate surrounding Freewriting at its peak in popularity in the 1960’s when professors pushed students to write in “more truthful, and realistic voices” (Fox Suhor 34). At this time, both Macrorie in his book *Engfish* and Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* emphasis letting go of pretentious writing in favour of more personal communication (Fox Suhor 34). Since the publication of these and other influential texts, the debate over whether Freewriting actually helps students write better continues. For instance, Clark Brown argues in “The Devil’s Syllabus” that freewriting does not reach those students who really need help improving their writing: “Freewriting’ has a limited value, but the real trick is maintaining both the excitement of ‘freewriting’ and a sense—possibly subconscious—of order. Unfortunately, the students who profit most from freewriting are those who already write well” (366). I disagree with Brown that Freewriting has a limited value. I would argue that Freewriting is a limitless tool that is meant to break barriers such as writer’s block, help generate new ideas, uncover unconscious thoughts, and open students to ideas that they had perhaps not considered.

There are other academics who share Brown’s view of Freewriting as a limited classroom exercise. George Hillocks’ work, *Research on Written Composition*, analyses, compares and contrasts different modes of teaching. Based on his research, Hillocks claims that the “natural process mode,” characterized by a less structured teaching method (Freewriting), is more effective in teaching writing to students than the “presentational mode,” which is teacher dominated (Fox Suhor 35). However, Hillocks concludes that the “environmental mode,” which “focuses on both student interactions and thoughtfully structured classroom activities” (Fox Suhor 35), as the best possible way to teach composition in the classroom. I find Hillocks’ argument elementary because he is comparing modes that are not necessarily supposed to ‘stand on their own’ in the classroom. Using a fruit analogy to clarify my argument, imagine that the “natural process mode” is an Apple, the “presentation mode” is a Banana and the “environmental mode” is Fruit Salad. You cannot compare Apples and Bananas to a Fruit Salad! Fruit salad will win every time! Like the apple, Freewriting is not an exercise meant to stand alone. It is however meant to be apart of a process with other exercises which work together towards the common goal of improving student writing. Thus, I agree with Hillocks’ rather obvious findings that students do learn more about composition from a professor who uses a variety of teaching methods in his/her classroom.

If we agree with Hillocks that Freewriting, coupled with other classroom practices, is the most effective way of creating skilled student writers, then what do we do with the evidence that Kim Stover presents in her article “Riposte: In Defense of Freewriting”? 
Contrary to Hillocks, Stover believes that the Freewriting process provides ample opportunity for students to learn composition skills: “Somewhere in between freewriting and the final draft, they [students] learned to add detail, delete unnecessary repetition, repair sentence errors, sharpen word choices, write sentences with ‘surprises’ at the ends—while telling the truth” (Stover 62). For Stover, Freewriting is an activity that allows students the opportunity to grow as writers without sacrificing their own inherent voice. Stover qualifies this idea when she argues, like Hillocks, that Freewriting cannot stand on its own. She feels that “Freewriting uncovered buried images and allowed new ones; editing got rid of the fat. One without the other is as effective as one chopstick” (Stover 61). I imagine that this coupling of Freewriting and editing is how Freewriting can be most effective in a classroom setting.

Leaving the academic debate surrounding Freewriting aside, let us look more specifically at how undergraduate students might feel or think about this classroom practice. I take my definition from The Everyday Writer handbook, since this is the manual that first year students are assigned at CASE. Lunsford defines freewriting as “a method of exploring a topic by writing about it for a period of time without stopping” (36). This definition is a fairly basic description of Freewriting, but it does not take into account the many benefits, outcomes and/or drawbacks of this practice. In fact, it makes Freewriting sound boring. I wonder how we as teachers or tutors, (in my case), are to make Freewriting sound more appealing to our students? Perhaps using a different term for Freewriting would generate greater interest on the part of the student. Other names that have been used in the past to represent Freewriting are, “spontaneous writing, stream-of-consciousness writing, saturation writing, flood writing, free association writing, open writing, non-stop writing, forced writing, automatic writing, shotgun writing, and intensive writing” (Reynolds Freewriting’s 81). Perhaps “shotgun writing” would seem more appealing and/or violent to our students? Maybe the names we give to Freewriting in our SAGES, ENGL 150, or any classroom do not really matter. What is important is that student’s writing can benefit from this classroom practice. To me, that makes this exercise a worthwhile practice to use in teaching composition to first year students.

Example Assignment

I take my example assignment from Reynolds’ article “Make Free Writing More Productive.” He lists twenty different strategies students can use to enhance their freewriting. I include here three of Reynolds’ strategies. These exercises are the ones I believe would be the most effective for first year composition students:

1. Take the ideas extracted from the freewriting and make a tree diagram in an effort to see relationships among them. Place what seem to be the large ideas across the top of a blank sheet of paper. Let lesser ideas branch out beneath them, trying to think of as many subpoints for each main idea as you can.
2. Provided your free writing contains nothing too personal, read it to a friend or classmate, or re-read it and “tell” it to a friend. Discuss it seriously. Be alert for questions your listener asks. If new ideas or insights result, jot them down.
3. Put your freewriting aside for a few days. When you return to it, imagine it was written by someone else. What in it is interesting? What new ideas occur to you? Jot them down. Make marginal comments where appropriate and record additional details as they occur.

Annotated Bibliography

In seventeen points, Brown describes some radical ways teachers can improve their student’s writing. Many of his ideas are contrary to current classroom practices. Some of his suggestions include: Abolish all rhetorical models, thesis statements, and research papers.

Fox, Deborah and Charles Suhor. “ERIC/RCS Report: Limitations of Free Writing.” The English Journal 75.8 (Dec. 1986): 34-36. 19 Oct. 2005 <http:www.jstor.org>. In this report, Fox and Suhor outline the history of freewriting and the research that has been done in this field. They conclude that freewriting will not produce better writers, but that it may cultivate better writing skills in students.


Stover, Kim. “Riposte: In Defense of Freewriting.” The English Journal 77.2 (Feb. 1988): 61-62. 18 Oct. 2005 <http:www.jstor.org>. In this article, Stover reveals both her own experiences with freewriting as a student of Ken Macrorie as well as her experience teaching students this practice. She feels that freewriting is an indispensable tool in the classroom when it is coupled with usage lessons which she calls “editing lessons”.