A chance encounter

Last week, a student who had been in one of my classes last spring stopped me in the hallway of the College of Education building. “Dr. Steadman,” she said excitedly, “next week I’m going to get to teach a class in my practicum. I’ve been going over all the stuff we did last year in 3815 to pick a good starter. You know, I’m not sure that I really got how I would use all those things when we did them in class, but I’ve thought about some of them a bunch of times in the last year. Then, when I looked over my notes, last night, I realized that there were some really good ideas. I’m not sure which one I will use, but I’ll let you know how it goes.”

I wished Melanie (pseudonym) good luck, zipped up my raincoat, and stepped into the cold March drizzle for the trek back to my office. As I carefully tried to avoid puddles and struggled to keep my lesson plans and textbook dry, I recalled last year’s English Education 3815 class: Composition Instruction Grades 9-12. We had spent the semester working on our own writing and ways to invite high school students into and keep them engaged in the writing experience. As we had explored roadblocks to writing, the notion of the blank page and “where to start” kept surfacing, both in my undergraduates’ initial response to writing projects that they were assigned in a range of classes and in their fears about their future students’ reactions to assignments they might give. In recognition of and response to those fears, we had spent the first half of the semester engaged in an assortment of composition starters. During that time, we had never taken them past the initial stage. We had begun, and then we had put them aside. We let what we had written percolate. In the second half of the semester, students were invited to review what they had begun earlier and to consider which one they might pick, perhaps even combining several, to use in a final composition.

The notion of percolating

As Tom Romano (1987) discusses the writing process, he defines the five stages as “percolating, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing” (p. 55). Of those steps, the most unfamiliar term likely is percolating. Romano explains percolating (rather than prewriting) as that step that “prepares writers to write” (57). This activity, or rather group of activities, occurs throughout the writing process, not just before the first draft. It is a recursive, iterative process. “Writers percolate when they sit back from their drafts and reread and consider their words and their thinking. Writers percolate when they read more about their subject or seek out someone for further talk” (p. 55). Percolating occurs at various times and various settings; for me percolating often takes place in the shower. There is something about the white noise of the water’s steady flow that drowns out the other noisy voices that distract me, and I am able to think more creatively, perhaps in a more focused way. Kernels for my best lesson plans and my best writing seem to pop in the shower. Other educators and writers have identified their most fertile settings: driving alone on familiar roads, sipping coffee at Starbucks, watching the microwave reheat leftovers, gazing out the window, listening to music, grocery shopping, vacuuming: all familiar activities that require less than 100% of our attention. These activities occur multiple times and allow for significant thinking opportunities. Percolating takes time. According to coffee makers manufacturers, a six-cup percolator takes 10 minutes, from start to finish, to make a pot of coffee. Now, even though some of our students may think that is just about the right amount of time to spend percolating ideas for a writing assignment, I imagine that English/Language Arts teachers and college/university faculty would agree that percolating writing ideas, even for the first draft, takes significantly longer. So how do we encourage students to allow time for their ideas to percolate? One way is to offer them opportunities to engage in writing activities that initiate projects, and then insist that they give themselves time for their ideas to perk before they return to complete their composing. Below are examples of some of the writing prompts, collected and adapted over 19 years of high school and university teaching, that I used in Melanie’s class.
This I believe….. (Personal narrative)

Initial instructions:
This project is modeled on the NPR radio feature of the same name.

1. For our class, I asked students to identify a personal belief that shapes their daily lives. I instruct students that they may begin with a larger, general belief, but that they will need to narrow it down to a particular life experience in order to demonstrate how that belief shapes their own lives. I instruct students to begin by thinking about their day-to-day lives. What influences their decisions, their outlooks, and their interactions with their environment? What principles guide their lives?

2. After they have established one belief to focus on, they then need to choose a specific, personal story to tell in order to illustrate this belief and how they live by it.

3. Students sketch out their examples, and then we stop… and let the ideas percolate.

Completion of project:
When students are ready to return to this essay, I inform them that this is a short essay, so they will need to be concise and choose only the most important details necessary to describe their belief. The important thing is to be specific in the details; this is an essay that can only be written by the individual student. I remind them that they will want to have a good “lead,” a sentence or two that draws the reader in and sets up the topic. They will then need to state their belief. This should be followed by a story that shows their belief in action and demonstrates how the belief shapes their daily lives. They may use humor, or they can take a more serious approach. Essays must be between 400-500 words, and I insist that they keep their essays within this parameter.

An opening line (Plot-driven short story)

Initial instructions:
Each student receives an index card and the following directions:

1. Between now and the next class, pay careful attention to everything you read: the back of cereal boxes, billboards, the covers of CDs, blogs, text messages, email, reading assignments from classes.

2. Select one sentence from all of that reading. WARNING: Don’t be in a hurry. You may think that you have a great sentence…until one that captures your attention even more pops up. Write down all sentences that intrigue you, and the night before this assignment is due, select your favorite, and write it on your index card. Do NOT put your name on the card.

3. Bring the card to class. I will ask you to place your card in the “magic hat.” (I have a hat with glow-in-the-dark stars and comets that I use for these kinds of occasions, but a shoe box or basket works just as well.) Once the students have deposited their cards, I shake the hat and go around the circle again, asking them each to draw one. If they get their own line, they must redraw.

Directions for writing:

1. The line you have drawn is the first line of your story.

2. This (complete) story must be no longer than 50 words (not including the first line).

3. Students have 10 minutes to write their story.

4. When I call “time,” students are frequently frustrated. Fifty words are not very many, and 10 minutes is a short time frame. Sometimes they beg for more time. I smile and insist that they will get a chance to expand on this attempt, fit hey choose.

Completion of the project:
When students return to this project, they expand upon it, developing the plot and enriching description.

Character prompts (Character-driven short story)

Initial instructions:
Teacher preparations: Select pictures of individuals from magazines, avoiding very famous people that students may recognize. Cut out the people, trying not to include any extraneous images. (Pictures from political magazines work especially well as they are usually high quality photos of people that students may think look vaguely familiar.) Mount the pictures on construction paper.

1. Each student selects a teacher-constructed picture.
2. Students have 7 minutes to look at their pictures, create, record, and then share the following information:
   a. The person’s name
   b. Age
   c. Occupation
   d. Family members
   e. Goal in life
3. Other students ask questions about the people, and as the original student answers, he or she begins to develop a
ccharacter. Students are encouraged to write down the information that they provided.
Note: this activity may be repeated several times so that writers begin to collect an eclectic group of characters.
Completion of the project:
Writers return to their characters and place them in the center of their stories. They may decide to feature several of
their characters in one story. As their stories progress, writers may decide that their original main character will
become a minor character, and a new central character emerges.

Vivid descriptions (Descriptive paper)
Initial instructions:
Students recognize that vivid descriptions do not drip miraculously onto a paper or a computer screen, but they rarely
stop hoping that this will happen. In this activity, students work in pairs to develop strong sentences. After reading
vivid descriptions from Flannery O’Connor, E.B. White, and others, students receive the following directions.
1. Have students partner up.
2. Each student selects an index card from a (magic) hat. Written on the card is a specific location (the steps of
   Joyner Library, the bowling alley at Mendenhall, Dowdy Student Store, etc). If the student is completely unfamiliar
   with the place, they may select another card.
3. All students then write a list of images that they think they might see, smell, hear, feel, or taste (4 minutes).
4. Students select two images and develop both into full sentences.
5. When finished writing the sentence, writers pair with partner. Partners select the stronger of the two sentences
   and explains why it is stronger than the other.
Completion of the project:
Before moving forward with this composition project, students go to visit the places identified on their index card.
They spend at least 20 minutes observing the events occurring around them and recording those events in as much
detail as possible. No interpretation is allowed, just observation. Students then leave their location. As they begin
the drafting stage, they are called upon to be selective. Rather than trying to jam every recorded observation into the
essay, they are encouraged to select the elements that they believe are the most interesting, colorful, evocative, etc.
and to place those elements at the heart of their writing and then work from the center outward.

Group Story (Fantasy, science-fiction, or creative short story)
Initial instructions:
1. Divide the class into groups of no more than five students.
2. Each person draws from the magic hat an index card with one word on it.
3. At the signal, everyone begins writing a story that incorporates the word/phrase on the index card.
4. When time is called, everyone passes his or her paper to the person on his or her left.
   a. Round 1: 5 minutes (Introduction)
   b. Round 2: 3 minutes
   c. Round 3: 4 minutes
   d. Round 4: 5 minutes
   e. Round 5: 4 minutes (Conclusion; can only write two sentences)
5. Each person reads aloud to his or her group the story he or she is holding to his or her particular group. After all
   the stories are read, group members vote to select which of their stories will be shared with the entire class.
6. Suggestions for words/phrases:
   a. Starfish
b. Four slice toaster

c. Black stiletto
d. Wagon
e. Candlestick
f. A shadow

7. The class selects the best story and defines why it is the best.

Completion of the project:
This writing activity involves all students in the development of at least three stories (depending on the number of people in the group). Because each writer has contributed at least once to each story, he or she has started percolating thoughts about where the story should go. In completing this project, writers select what elements of the group story they wish to include and which elements are to be discarded. Individual writers then augment the story, often keeping only the bare bones and taking the story in an entirely different direction.

Directed Response (Argumentative/persuasive essay)

Initial instructions:
Provide students with cubes that direct how they are to respond to a common statement. Written on each side is either "describe it," "argue for it or against it," "compare it "apply it," or "analyze it," or "associate it." At the signal, each student rolls his or her cube and has 8 minutes to respond in the way that the cube dictates to a statement, passage, or quote that is read to the whole class.

Examples of possible quotes are:

1. Only ambitious nonentities and hearty mediocrities exhibit their rough drafts. It's like passing around samples of sputum. ~ Vladimir Nabokov
2. When my horse is running good, I don’t stop to give him sugar. ~ William Faulkner
3. The reason one writes isn’t because he wants to say something. He writes because he has something to say. ~ F. Scott Fitzgerald
4. If you ask my why I came into this world, I, an artist, will answer you: I am here to live out loud. ~ Emile Zola
5. Writing is a fairly lonely business unless you invite people to watch you do it, which is often distracting and then you have to ask them to leave. ~ Marc Lawrence
6. All the words in my stories can be found in the dictionary – it’s just a matter or arranging them into the right sentences. ~ Somerset Maugham
7. The pen is the tongue of the mind. ~ Miguel de Cervantes
8. I don’t pretend to have all the answers. But the questions are certainly worth thinking about. ~ Arthur C. Clarke
9. The mind that doesn’t feed itself, eats itself. ~ Gore Vidal
10. Writing is a lot easier if you have something to say. ~ Sholem Asch

Writers are provided with a copy of the selected text.

Completion of the project:
Writers may decide to respond to the text in a different way than their cube originally dictated. The goal is to construct a strong position and defend it, attempting to persuade others to agree with your stance on the issue.

Percolating Outside the ‘Pot’ of Composition

I returned to Melanie’s comments several times over the next few days, her comments niggling me. I sensed that I was not recognizing the full import of her words, of her experience. The other morning, however, as I turned on the shower and waited for the water to warm up, I suddenly identified the elusive aspect I had been missing: Melanie’s statement on composition starters applied to far more than the idea of writing. Not only had she and her classmates needed time for their writing ideas to percolate, they had needed time for their teaching ideas to do the same. Melanie had said, “You know, I’m not sure that I really got how I would use all those things when we did them in class, but I’ve thought about some of them a bunch of times in the last year.” I recalled that when I had heard those words, a slight irritation and perhaps disappointment had welled up, but in the rush of the moment, the need to get to my office before the rain began in earnest, I had not focused on it. Rather than dwelling on her lack of immediate understanding and embracing of how to apply those strategies in her own class, I had chosen to recognize and
celebrate her excitement at having the opportunity to use one of the composition starters for the first time in her practicum experience. In doing so, I ignored an essential aspect of teacher education that her comments suggested, an aspect that often does not receive appropriate emphasis: the need for preservice teachers to reflect. In order to move from being an education student to being a professional educator, our students need time and opportunities to revisit essential concepts of pedagogy. They need time to allow what they have encountered to percolate. Donald Schön’s work (1983, 1987) on reflective practice, when applied to teaching, suggests that effective teachers regularly reflect on their own practices within two time frames: they consider their actions after they have occurred (reflection on practice), and they consider their actions as they are happening in the classroom (reflection in practice). Often, in teacher education, reflection in action is privileged over reflection on action because the ability to reflect in action is regarded as evidence of a degree of flexibility required to redirect on-going classroom situations. Such a skill is highly desired in day-to-day classroom interactions. Perhaps, however, in focusing on the desired end-product of teacher education (the ability to reflect in action), we have underestimated the time – and percolation - needed to be able to reflect in action. Schön’s concepts emphasize the importance of providing novices in a field with multiple opportunities to learn by practicing in low risk settings while simultaneously being supported by those who have already acquired the desired knowledge and skills. Thus, Melanie’s need for time to recognize how she would apply the composition starter strategies within a classroom should not have surprised, and surely should not have irritated, me. Teacher education students need to encounter concepts, to learn by practicing them, and to have the support of more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978), in low risk settings. The logistical difficulty, however, demanded by these recursive, multi-step processes is significant, requiring teacher educator programs to be well-designed, well coordinated, and constantly mindful of the time demands of learning. As teacher education programs across the nation increasingly face criticism of our efforts to develop competent, well-started beginning teachers, we may find it beneficial to consider ways to strategically embed those elements required for effective teacherly thinking to develop. Competent and creative teaching, like skillful and creative composing, takes significant time for the nearly invisible act of percolating.

References


