Write Without Worry: Creating Community in the College Classroom through Low-Stakes Writing

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that classrooms provide a sense of community and belonging that encourages learning and gives students a space to actively engage with their instructors, classmates, and the content in a way that allows for risk-taking and emotional reward. For humanities courses, providing low-stakes writing opportunities in the classroom can help achieve this. This article discusses how to implement a low-stakes writing practice called “Write Without Worry,” inspired by the work of Peter Elbow. Using qualitative research, the article addresses the practice itself, provides examples and strategies used in remedial English and composition courses, discusses how it helps build community within the classroom between students with various backgrounds and experiences, and shows how the practice can lead to increases in student engagement and success.
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Introduction

There’s no denying in our polarized, post-quarantine world that how we communicate, and the willingness to do so, has changed. In my first few class sessions, I realized that students didn’t really talk to one another and often they did not talk to me. I don’t thrive in relative silence. I don’t think learning should always be a quiet process. Sometimes, it is loud and messy, and it only happens when ideas and thoughts are communicated. I had to get students talking but wanted to also keep them writing, so I dug back into my old bag of tricks from my public K–12 days and modified an activity to fit the college classroom. I call it “Write Without Worry.”

The first time I projected the words “Write Without Worry” on the board, without missing a beat a student said from the back of the room: “Can’t relate.” I don’t think he is alone here. In fact, I know he isn’t alone. A lot of students can’t relate to Write Without Worry because writing makes them worry. There are rules, there are expectations, most things are subjective. Writing is a process, and sometimes a frustrating one. In creating Write Without Worry, I didn’t develop something new, I just called it something new. I sought to kill two birds with one stone, to work smarter not harder. I needed to get students to shake off some of their writing anxiety and maybe even improve their skills, and I wanted to get them to communicate with each other and with me.

That’s when I found Peter Elbow’s work, which focuses on the democratization of writing, of making writing accessible to everyone. According to an article published in *Currents in Teaching and Learning*, his early work promoted low-stakes writing as a "technique that helps the writer begin the journey toward ‘rational’ discourse, i.e., the formal, logical texts required in many college courses’ even outside of composition." Elbow found that low-stakes writing prepares students for their current needs and for their future as this type of writing, he argues, allows investment, freedom, risk, fluency, and voice, all while intellectually pushing them toward learning and improving their overall writing skills, even without evaluation.

Prior to embarking on this project, my concerns were that students would think this to be a juvenile activity and that they would not take it seriously because it wasn’t graded. I worried that students wouldn’t move from their desks when asked to move around and meet someone new or that they would revolt entirely. Buy-in was not immediate, but by the third or fourth writing session, once it became a habit, buy-in was present, and the project was making a difference.

The Explanation

I begin Write Without Worry with an explanation of the project. When I tell students they will begin each class session with writing, in half the class eyes bulge, sweating starts, and bodies freeze up. Then, when I tell them they’ll also be sharing this writing with their peers, the other half joins them. To temper these initial reactions, I explain the basic tenets of Write Without Worry:

1. We will do this daily.
2. This is not graded.

3. Spelling and grammar don’t count.

4. Everyone will be talking to someone, so there are no spotlights to fear.

The Prompts

This is where, as an instructor, I initially panicked. How will I find prompts that matter, that are interesting, that reinforce what I want them to learn and know plus ones that will get them talking to each other? I eventually found three types of prompts that work well for Write Without Worry: stealth learning prompts, relationship-building prompts, and current event prompts.

Stealth learning prompts help prepare students for future course discussions or assignments. My English 101, for example, ends with a research paper, so I use the following prompt around the time I need students to start brainstorming topics:

Today, take five minutes to write about three things you're curious about. These can be things you know a little about but want to learn more about, or they can be something you've heard of but don't have any ideas about.

This prompt is intentionally broad and general. At first, students may not even be thinking about their final research paper; however, what they write about here very well could turn into their research paper topic. One student, for example, listed and wrote about social media use, fracking, and types of censorship. At the next class meeting after going over the research paper guidelines, we started to brainstorm and he said: “Can we use things from our Write Without Worry, or does it need to be completely new ideas?” In essence, he had been pre-writing before he knew he was pre-writing because of this prompt. He had not been aware that he was a step ahead for his research paper.

Relationship-building prompts are less attached to course content and instead focus on trying to get students to build relationships with one another based on their backgrounds, interests, likes, and dislikes. My favorite prompt for this category is about things that are “cringe.”

"Cringe" universally means to "recoil in distaste" and now it’s used a lot to describe social media trends, celebrities, and embarrassing actions. What are three things that you consider "cringe"? Avoid specific people and belief systems.

Students typically engage in the liveliest discussions around this prompt. They meet classmates who wrote about the same “cringe” things as they did, or they add something to their “cringe” list after another student mentions it. They share stories and reactions that break the ice and start to build relationships.

Current event prompts are a bit of a mix of the first two. They’re used for learning about what is going on in the world, to form opinions, to see what others believe, and to be more aware of the world around them. This prompt can be tricky. I tend to stick to less controversial issues but still provide students with options that make them think critically. For example, I projected an image...
of a broken art piece knocked over at an art show. I showed the image without telling them what it was and asked students to guess what was happening, what the damage cost, and why the image might matter. Students shared some interesting responses. No one guessed the cost of the damage, but they all guessed that the image depicted some kind of art show, which led to questions about what made something “art,” how “art” was valued, and what we could learn from it. This discussion was a perfect segue into a literary analysis paper. (The image was of a broken, very expensive blue dog balloon animal by artist Jeff Koons, in case you’re curious. At least two people bid to buy the broken pieces for even more than the original!)

The Writing

The prompts start as a catalyst for the writing. The writing is the main event. The students can handwrite or type these assignments. They are told many, many times not to worry about grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and sometimes even organization. I want content instead at this stage. I want them to think on the page. One student’s first Write Without Worry was a bullet-point list of two fragmented thoughts. His last one was a fully formed paragraph. Was it perfect? No, but it was complete and showed his ideas fully. It showed his growth in his ability to organize and expand his thinking, too.

The Sharing

After the writing comes the sharing. Sharing is probably the most daunting part for students. Some people do not like to talk, they don’t like to share their thoughts, and they don’t enjoy or feel uncomfortable meeting new people. I don’t force anyone to share. For every person who doesn’t want to move around and talk, usually two go above and beyond, and, in many cases, these students make an effort to include the quiet students by sharing with them.

One student came in on the first day and did not say a word to anyone including me. She did not participate in Write Without Worry that day. On the second day, she went to the restroom during that time, but at some point during the semester, she moved closer to other students, talked to more students, and eventually talked to me too. She began to write a lot and talk a lot because she felt comfortable. That’s the goal with this project. Sharing and talking may be awkward, especially with people you don’t know, but once students realize that they are a part of a community for however long the class is, they realize it’s a lot easier to talk with others going through the same thing as they are. I always remind students to only share what they want to: to share something, listen, and interact in their own way. Sometimes, students choose me as the person they share with and ask a wide range of questions.

The Results

The process is nothing without some results. I’ve peppered in some of my qualitative data throughout my stories and examples, but I am also a visual person. I noticed visible changes. Over the course of the semester, students were making friends. The room went from everyone spread out with desks and space between them to all of the students on one side of the room. Unprompted, they created their own text thread. They met outside of class. I saw them eating lunch together on days we didn’t have class. On multiple occasions, I saw two very different
students hanging out in the patio area outside of our building on campus. Students planned study sessions and had inside jokes. I felt a little left out, sure, but I was happy to see the relationships that were being formed.

Write Without Worry was mentioned on almost all classroom evaluations at the end of the term as an activity that helped students and stood out in the course:

• “Write Without Worry forced me to push past my comfort zone and interact with people despite my nervous, awkward nature.”

• “Some good parts of the class were the writing exercise we did at the beginning of class.”

• “I really liked the informal writing activities as your prompts force you to push yourself out of your bubble every time.”

• “Even though I felt forced to talk to people in the class, I enjoyed myself. I don’t really like talking to people I don’t know in class, but because [it was expected], I was able to meet some nice [people].”

• “Without the informal writing assignments, I would have never talked to some of the people in class. _______ is so different from me, but now we’re good friends.”

Conclusion

Like Elbow, I have seen how removing the worry from writing for at least ten minutes per class session has affected the way students approach not only writing but also each other, me as their instructor, their assignments, and even their worldview. While Write Without Worry is a natural fit for English courses, it easily could be adapted to any humanities course with relative ease. One study found that introductory psychology students who completed short free-writing assignments “demonstrated enhanced factual and conceptual learning of course concepts, improved class attendance, and better exam performance than control students who simply thought about course concepts.” Elbow says that these types of assignments can even be used in math courses! I’m using it now in my English courses, and, though it is still too early to gather much solid data, I see students talking, interacting, writing, and sharing, which was my original goal. I was worried about it being too elementary or taking up too much time, but like the assignment itself, I just needed to remove that worry to see some results.

AUTHOR BIO

Stephen Wilson is a full-time instructor in the English Department at York Technical College in Rock Hill, South Carolina. After eight years of teaching middle school and high school, he now teaches first-year English composition, business communications, and literature courses. A graduate of Concord University in Athens, West Virginia, and East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, he is interested in building community in the composition classroom, diversifying the literary canon, and implementing student-led seminars in literature courses.

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