

The Crisis: Finding Meaning in Reading and Writing

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Introduction:

As if there were not already enough anguish for today's students, events of September 11 further complicated their lives. Now those of us in Academe must deal with the fallout from students' typical heartaches: broken relationships, substance abuse, or financial strain—further complicated by threats of national and international violence.

How are we to help students deal with these additional elusive threats? I believe we must offer students opportunities to express themselves in their reading and writing. We must permit them; indeed, we must encourage them to use their own "war stories" as a means to examine the human condition. I offer arguments for use of a Reader Response approach as well as a Thematic approach for selection and study of texts because these approaches focus on the students' basic interests and ability levels as well as their need to find meaning in their assignments. I am committed to finding ways to engage the students in active reading that can lead to stimulating classroom discussion, which in turn will provide the basis for substantive writing. Increasingly, I find that students must take ownership of the assignments we offer; otherwise, the products will continue to be lifeless and superficial.

September 11th:

When I heard the news that day, I had difficulty believing it. It wasn't until I could see for myself the televised news with its disturbing scenes of the crash, people

actually jumping from the buildings, and people rushing through the streets that I could believe we were involved in what some were calling the beginnings of World War III. And for days I had difficulty processing what was happening to people in New York and across our nation. I remember that in my classes in those first days we took some time to talk together about what was happening. Reports came in of people on campus who had relatives or friends associated in some way with the attack, but only one of my students was directly affected. His father was in the second tower but fortunately he escaped and suffered only minor injuries. Even though emotional levels ran high for several weeks, gradually we returned to a normal classroom routine.

It wasn't until second semester that I decided to create a formal writing assignment for my students in the Freshman Composition courses relevant to the crisis. I hesitated because I felt it might be too soon for students to process their feelings, that I might receive merely a litany of the news broadcasts, that the students' papers would be overdrawn clichés and that it would therefore be difficult for me to offer sensitive but constructive feedback. To avoid those problems, I decided to ask the students first to reflect on the crisis and then to tie that event to one of their own personal crises.

To help the students get started I used the following description:

Writing Assignment for Freshman Composition

Personal Narrative

Getting Started:

Spend some time thinking about the September 11 crisis. Think about how you were affected at the time, where you were,

what you did then and in the following days, how you processed your feelings, how you reacted to others who were affected by the events of that day, how your thinking may have changed since then, what you may have learned about yourself and about our country since that day.

Next:

Focus on some crisis in your life that has affected you deeply—something that has changed the way you think or feel about yourself and your abilities to be yourself.

This crisis may have happened a long time ago or recently. Take time to make notes and to prepare journal entries. And perhaps talking about the crisis to a trusted listener will be helpful. Don't rush the process: it takes time to get in touch with our deepest feelings.

Sharing papers:

We will share these papers with the class, in our usual manner, so it will be important for you to avoid writing material that you or your peers may consider too personal. Also, should you write about an incident that happened on campus, be sensitive about revealing identities.

Results of the Writing Assignment:

I was pleased with the results. The students did give similar reactions to the events of September 11, with reporting of the key facts, but because they were personalizing the event by giving their whereabouts, their feelings, their thoughts, and their actions, none of us were bored with that portion of the assignment when the students read for us. It did in fact provide an introduction for the telling of their personal stories: death of a parent, death of a friend, divorce of parents, estrangement from a parent or a companion, severe auto

accidents, and overwhelming health problems for themselves or family members.

Not only was I pleased with the students' command of the assignment, but also with the degree of pride the students took in editing and preparing their final drafts for their Portfolio. I realized again, as I have so many times before, that when students write about something that they care about, they deliver a good product.

An even greater product of the assignment was the sense of community that this sharing of personal "war stories" provided. By having the students read these papers aloud for peer response, two at each class period, I could see and feel the sense of community establish itself the first day. And we continued to build upon that base.

Working with Literature:

Since September 11th I've become even more aware that students need to have assignments in both reading and writing that help them find more meaning in their lives. If the study of literature remains cold and clinical, merely an assignment to be gotten through, what lasting purpose can it provide? Furthermore, as many have acknowledged, today's students are not always prepared to work successfully along traditional lines. Indeed, literary analysis of a text cannot begin in my classroom until I've helped the students find their attachment to the meaning of the text.

Approaches of Robert Scholes and David Bleich:

Much has been written about this problem of helping students analyze texts. Robert Scholes in his book *Textual Power* provides an overview of the history of textual analysis as well as discussion of the current components of literary criticism. He argues that we cannot abandon the use of

literary criticism in the classroom, but we do need to modify the method. He believes that it is possible to bring a strong understanding of the cultural and political influences lying beneath the surface in ordinary texts. He uses a short story from Hemingway to demonstrate the teaching of interpretation based on an understanding of the usual rules for taking a text apart. Beginning with an invitation to retell the story, to then expand upon it, and finally to answer basic questions about the story, Scholes demonstrates his method of analysis with the students. He maintains that students can be led to see the links and argues that "the more culturally at home in a text our students become, the less dependent they will be on guidance from the instructor" (27).

David Bleich, well-known as an advocate of Reader Response Criticism, argues effectively that "no student or teacher can work alone" (qtd. in Cahalan and Downing 19). He discusses the value of community, recommending collaboration as a means of coming to understanding. He wants us to "eschew our patronizing task of 'introducing' students to 'our' style of study, and instead ask all our students, younger or older, to introduce their own ways and thoughts for mutual sharing" (21-2). He sees this method as a means of bringing members of different communities together, an attempt at bridging the gaps in communication that divide, especially marginalized groups. Bleich believes that the focus in early childhood years and during the early years of education emphasized appropriately the sharing and relating to others, but that it has been replaced with a focus upon individualism. That in turn, he maintains, promotes a more sterile approach to learning (34).

I see a blending of Scholes' and Bleich's theories in my work with students. Using the Reader Response approach, I begin by asking the students to find their

own meaning of the text. I assure them that as long as they can support their argument with relevant details and lines from the text, I will listen to their rendering. To make everyone more comfortable and prepared for discussion, I ask first for an overview of the text. Students may take turns giving a few sentences about the plot until we have the basic story and main characters in mind. "A & P" by John Updike provides a good example. In Updike's story, Sammy, a nineteen-year-old grocery clerk, becomes enthralled with three teenage girls, dressed in bikinis, parading up and down the aisles, giving Sammy and others in the store ample chances to form opinions about the scantily clad beauties. When the manager takes exception to their lack of "respectable dress," Sammy impulsively decides to defend the girls. He and the manager exchange words that lead to Sammy's quitting the job; however, when Sammy steps into the parking lot, the young ladies have vanished (Updike 881-85).

After students tell the basic story, I ask them to talk about how the story may relate to them. Have they ever had a summer job that was boring? Have they ever had to face their parents, knowing the disappointment they would encounter? What are some of the inner conflicts that they've experienced when they've had to make difficult decisions? This portion of the discussion complies with a Reader Response approach. Next, I ask them to take a stand—to form an arguable thesis. Is Sammy a hero or is he a fool? In their journals they make columns of details that point to the two possible characterizations. In groups they compare their lists. In debate, they try their cases. When it is time to write their analytical paper, they have material to support their argument. They have learned to find the details and the quoted lines that back up their position, and in delving into

the text at this deeper level, they have honed their analytical skills.

To further their understanding of the texts, I select texts that can be similar in theme but different in form. I might align "A & P" with "Araby" by James Joyce, the story of a young lad who has an almost obsessive crush on a friend's older sister, a girl who is unattainable (Joyce 861-65). Both young men, for different reasons, fail to achieve their goals. At the easiest level of comparison, the students see differences in attitudes, the age differences, the stylistic differences.

Once the easier threads are found, I introduce cultural, political, and historical issues that may affect the reading of the texts. If students wish, they can explore these areas when they do their research for the longer analytical paper our department assigns.

Conclusions:

Many of our entry-level students, unless they have been in advanced placement courses or honors classes, struggle as they take the layers of meaning apart in their reading and writing. I begin with their personal accounts—their struggle to make meaning of their own experiences. Then I find ways to help them transfer that kind of analysis to their reading and writing assignments. By the end of the course, most of the students can write a 500 to 700 word essay that shows a reasonable command of the assignment. They are able to choose a thesis that they are prepared to argue, one based on and supported by textual analysis.

It is in these ways that I try to help students connect to their reading and writing and at the same time connect with one another to build meaning that draws from their past and present experiences, which ultimately empowers them to become members of the academic community.

Works Cited

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