



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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TRANSFORMATION VIA THE (RE)WRITTEN WORD

Many of my students prefer text messaging over face-to-face communication. This semester, I spent a substantial portion of a recent class period letting students in an introductory English section know that their term papers were not to read as if they were song titles penned by Prince: “Nothing Compares to U.” I noticed that some of my students continued to write papers in shorthand, and I wondered why I was not able to reach some as quickly as others. I also noticed that some students seemed to have a difficult time reading and comprehending—not such a problem in previous semesters.

After researching current trends in teaching and society, I came to the conclusion that many of my students simply are glutted with information, having never known a world that predated the Internet. They are more wired than any previous generation. At any point in time, they can create an Internet social networking site based on themselves and live in a virtual reality that exists on their profiles and in their comments—the written equivalent of sound bites. Some are so accustomed to instant (and oftentimes inane) information, constantly connected to all manner of gadgets, that they seem barely able to focus completely on one person, place, or thing at a time.

Of course, this may lead to students living in a state of continuous partial attention, to wallowing in the mire of carelessness, and to working much too hard at doing too little work. My life mission as an educator involves teaching students not only to write a sentence free from shorthand, but also to teach them how to follow instructions, meet deadlines, and be self-starting, motivated, and reliant. These are all attributes that employers claim to need from professional employees but sometimes do not receive.

After a few days of morose research into these potentially alarming trends and a sincere period of grief for the future of the students, the community, the nation, and the world, I met with a sympathetic department

head. Then I met with the Dean of Institutional Effectiveness in a conversation that went at least somewhat as follows after I flopped down with a scowl and clenched fists: “Fifteen mistakes plus per paper, Dean. This is wearing me out, physically and psychically. I try so hard, and they seem to be trying so little.”

“Danny,” the dean stated in her refreshingly frank way as she peered over her glasses, “you are taking on the work they should be doing.” She then graciously proceeded to suggest the following system that worked for her. I amended this system in ways that suited me and have come to call it “transformational (re)writing.”

From that point forward and until the end of the semester, I did not mark the students’ papers at all. I circled the appropriate commentary and point value on my rubric and handed it back to my students, entering the ensuing grade in my book. The student then could either keep the grade earned or hand in a complete rewrite (as opposed to changing a few words or sentences around) within a week’s time. I informed our devoted lead tutor at our Center for Academic Success that I was offering a few tenths of a point for legitimate verification of having consulted with a tutor during the rewriting process.

Students have the option to learn lessons of staggering importance from these potentially transformative (re)writes, ones that all would do well to learn in order to self-actualize:

- You must not mistake instructions for mere suggestions.
- You must read instructions closely.
- You will make mistakes.
- You can correct those mistakes to a large extent and learn from them.
- You must take time in order to germinate greatness.
- You have the capacity to begin a project.
- You have the capacity to see it through.
- You have the capacity to rely on yourself to get things done.
- You *can* do it, but you do not *have* to do it.
- You must accept that you and you alone have ultimate responsibility for how you deal with what happens to you.



Toward the end of this particularly taxing semester, I discovered that my remaining students had a much greater capacity to follow basic instructions, began to trust their own knowledge and intuition, could take charge of and manage their own professional development better, and rely on themselves as well as others. Transformative rewrites and their pedagogical aim can be transferred in the same way or with minor variations to any class, even ones that do not involve essays. For example, a mathematics instructor may, without marking up a test at all, note correct problems or simply note how many were correct. The transformative (re)writing component would require the student to at least correct the problem, if not find the incorrect problems and correct them, in order for a grade change.

The transformative rewrite has changed at least a few of my students into men and women who are able to handle both fright and freedom much better. Words that denote gloom and despair must be transformed into words that make better educational paradigms. In this way, and in our own way(s), we can create better versions of students, communities, states, nations, and the world.

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