THE WRITING/LEARNING PROCESS: GETTING STARTED

by Ron Gestwicki

Review by Dixie Dellinger

As I read Dr. Ron Gestwicki’s booklet The Writing/Learning Process: Getting Started, I felt as if I were watching through a two-way mirror the ingenuous and ingenious efforts of children to make sense of some phenomenon of nature. However, in this case the “children” are college students, the phenomenon is their own encounter with new subject matter, and the adult who is directing them is also engaged in a new activity, with equal innocence.

This book is the story of a college professor not content with the level of thought that his students had previously been reaching or their ability to express themselves in writing—a discontent with which many teachers can empathize—and willing to do something highly radical about it; to change his entire way of teaching without any guarantee of success and then to tell the tale exactly as it happened. In two 101 classes in Religious Studies, Dr. Gestwicki assigned no papers and gave no tests. Instead, he invited his students to write freely in response to the readings and class discussions, and he replied—in writing. By using this method, which he calls “conversational writing” and which he learned from Dr. Sam Watson and Ms. Dixie Goswami, Gestwicki invited his students to put into writing their initial, tentative stages of affective as well as cognitive encounters with the subject matter, stages of encounter that are usually never recorded. Then, he tried to use that writing as an instructional model of collaborative discovery.

Dr. Gestwicki originally planned this booklet as a “sub-text” for his next semester’s classes. Intending to furnish subsequent classes with the “how to” of the approach and a commentary on the class texts, he gathered excerpts from the students’ responses and complete texts of his own writing to the class. By adding a narrative of the experiment, his conclusions, and his plans for future use of the approach, he has made a handbook for any other student or teacher who would want to approach any subject in this way.

This is truly a pioneering piece of writing. It is not a book in the usual sense of “writing a book.” Its stapled, quick-copy format both underscores its tentativeness and asserts its special validity. Gestwicki’s voice tells the story without craft or pretense, “warts and all.” Unedited excerpts from students’ writing show young people finding themselves as thinkers—trying out ideas, fumbling with words, probing for meanings.

Even in its tentativeness, or perhaps because of it, this is a success story. In Gestwicki’s students, I see exactly what I have seen in my own for the past two-and-a-half years as a result of making the same radical change. Their writing shows a gradual deepening of commitment and intellectual engagement, as well as a growing sense of self-reliance in opening up the subject matter for themselves. This fact—that the dynamics of the experience as well as the cognitive results are so remarkably similar—confirms, to me, the essential truth of the “write-to-learn” approach.

Not only is it a success story for the students, but for their teacher. The book shows Gestwicki’s “coming-of-age” as a “real” teacher. In writing to his students, his voice is engagingly innocent in its pleasure with their progress and his own discoveries, yet instructive and—on occasion—even reproving, to effectively chide the sluggards. It is the voice of a real teacher actively engaged with his students as they explore a subject, not one who reluctantly leaves his private study or laboratory long enough to read from notes and leave an exam on the table.

In a way, that is what this book is all about: real teaching. As its title hints, it is an unfinished story of a personal experiment. But by telling it, Dr. Gestwicki has mapped enough of the terrain for others to set foot upon their own trail.

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