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snatches of conversation, write poems, and presumably, think about God and life in general. Fulwiler allows it all.

Some teachers read every entry and write back a response in which they bare their own feelings; other teachers poke around, reading occasional entries, answering student questions and calling attention to points about which they would like to hear more. At least one teacher here never puts a grade on a journal, while another counts the journal as eighty percent of the grade.

The Journal Book has proved a personal catharsis for me. Journal keeping is a big part of my high school writing and literature classes, but I have never been comfortable with the “gushing”—to use Ann Berthoff’s word—which journal writing sometimes encourages. While I understand that it is inappropriate for a teacher, in responding to a journal, to bleed red ink over faulty sentence constructions and spelling mistakes, I do not wish to altogether disavow my role as critic. Somewhere, I get nervous about not doing my job if I do not consistently nudge students to give reasons for their opinions and evidence for their reasons. Therefore, when responding to journals, in addition to notes of deserved praise, I will regularly ask students questions such as “Why do you say this?” and “Can you give me an example?” Some contributors to The Journal Book might consider such probing intrusive. They’d say I was pushing students to write for me, detracting from the journal as a place of personal discovery. I understand this argument, but, weighing all considerations, I am not ready to change. That’s why I find Fulwiler’s eclectic collection comforting and inspiring. It’s my guess Fulwiler would be less likely to scold me for my biases than to ask me to clarify them for his next edition.

The Journal Book must be the best volume available for teachers who want to begin using journals, for those looking for new approaches to journals, and for those in search of confirmation that their enthusiasm for learning journals is shared by teachers in all disciplines and at all grade levels.

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Jerry Herman

WRITING TO LEARN
by William Zinsser
Harper & Row, 1988

When was the phenomenon called “writing across the curriculum” born? Wrong question. The right question: When does writing across the curriculum die? The right answer: about the sixth grade. These might be called trick questions and a trick answer, but that is only because educators are often terribly dense about education, discarding obvious practices that work for theories that should work but often don’t, yet those theories sometimes get entrenched in what we teach for generations. (Example: it has been known and shown for decades that teaching grammar in isolation does not improve students’ writing, but the obsession to do it persists in the face of all the evidence.)

In primary school, when one teacher teaches virtually all subjects to students, good teachers will have those students write about everything; no subject is off limits because good primary teachers know that to write about a subject is to learn it effectively. Maybe that’s too obvious because it gets scrubbed out of the curriculum when specialization begins about the sixth grade, and one teacher teaches science, another math, a third English and so on. From then on writing becomes the domain of the English curriculum, where it becomes isolated as a subject to learn, not as a means through which learning can take place. Teachers in other subjects may have their students write, or they may not. And in nearly all instances in disciplines other than
English, the writing is aimed at product, not process. Doesn’t it seem obvious that something is wrong here? Incredibly enough it didn’t for a very long time—and in most places it still doesn’t. Eventually someone got the bright idea to do things the way they are done in the third grade, and writing across the curriculum was reborn into high school and college curricula as though it were something brand new: Students can write about history, about geology, about sociology, about economics, about physics, about—heaven help us—mathematics. Even more to the point, students can explore concepts, discover connections, conceive ideas through writing if every piece of writing isn’t supposed to be complete and correct, a caricature of what is published in academic journals. Write to learn! Now why hadn’t someone thought of that before?

In his latest book William Zinsser thinks about it a great deal. Writing to Learn is Zinsser’s “Ah ha!” about writing across the curriculum, his discovery about how it works and the good sense it makes. True to the idea of writing to learn, the book itself is exploratory about writing across the curriculum. In fact, Zinsser is open enough to tell us that he conceived the book one way, but it came out another. As he wrote, he learned. Here is Zinsser in the preface recounting his original purpose:

*My book . . . would be mainly an anthology—a guided tour of good writing in the different crannies of the B.A. curriculum.*

But something happened when I actually started to write. The book took on a life of its own and told me how it wanted to be written. I found myself hankering back to many corners of my past—to long-forgotten people and projects and travels that together taught me much of what I know. I realized that my life had been a broad education and that I couldn’t write a book about learning without saying how much it has meant to me to be a generalist in a land that prefers narrow expertise. The anthology began to look suspiciously like a memoir.

I didn’t fight the current. On the contrary, the writing of the book proved one of its central points: that we write to find out what we know and what we want to say.

Writing to Learn thus becomes “. . . a personal journey in which I confronted some of my own fears and lived to tell the tale.” Zinsser writes the book to ease two fears he contends American education inflicts on everyone: the fear of writing and the fear of subjects we think we don’t have an aptitude for. He finds relief for these fears in writing across the curriculum.

Zinsser’s odyssey begins in 1985 with a phone call from chemistry professor Thomas Gover at Gustavus Adolphus College, a small liberal arts college in St. Peter, Minnesota. The college was about to embark on a writing across the curriculum project. Would Zinsser be interested in speaking to the faculty and students about writing? Yes, Zinsser would, and his interest eventually led him to write the book. He charts the progress from that phone call to the writing of *Writing to Learn* with “clarity, simplicity, warmth and enjoyment,” not surprisingly the qualities of writing that Zinsser values most.

We learn of Zinsser’s trip to Gustavus Adolphus, and subsequently about his prep school days, his college career at Princeton, his World War II military duty in Italy, his years at the *New York Herald Tribune* as a writer and editor, his free lance writing, and his decade at Yale as a professor of nonfiction writing and editor of the *Yale Alumni Magazine*.

The first half of the book, then, is an engaging memoir of a writer, editor, and teacher of writing, a generalist and a humanist who preaches the gospel of clarity, humanity, and the interrelationship of thinking and writing regardless of subject or discipline. Here’s an example of how that works: Zinsser narrates how he came to research and write a complex piece on a Yale colleague, a professor of music, who wanted to show the similarities between Gregorian chants and Negro

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spiritals. As Zinsser tells the story, he recalls how he accumulated more good material than he thought he could handle, and in his despair over ever finishing the piece, he found sanctuary in this principle of writing: \ldots [W]riting is linear and sequential. If sentence B logically follows sentence A, and if sentence C logically follows sentence B, I'll eventually get to sentence Z. I also try to remember that the reader should be given only as much information as he needs and not one word more. Anything else is self-indulgence.

Few writing teachers will fail to say “Amen” to that or to the other nuggets studded throughout his narrative: “I don’t like to write, but I take great pleasure in having written—in having finally made an arrangement that has a certain inevitability, like the solution to a mathematical problem. Perhaps in no other line of work is delayed gratification so delayed.”

Another: “\ldots the essence of writing is rewriting \ldots After a lifetime of writing I still revise every sentence many times and worry that I haven’t caught every ambiguity; I don’t want anyone to have to read a sentence of mine twice to find out what it means.” That nearly astonishing courtesy to his readers is not entirely selfless since what it means for Zinsser is that he, too, in the writing of it, discovers his meaning. Through writing he learns, and so can anyone, he argues persuasively through the book.

Zinsser’s admiration and sympathy for English teachers at every level represent another underpinning to his call for writing across the curriculum:

Under the American system \ldots [English teachers] are the people who teach our children to write. If they don’t, nobody will. They do it with dedication, and I hope they’ll be rewarded, if not here on earth, at least in heaven, for there’s almost no pedagogical task harder and more tiresome than teaching someone to write \ldots English teachers ought to have some relief \ldots They shouldn’t have to assume the whole responsibility for imparting a skill that’s basic to every area of life. That should be everybody’s job.

Later, however, as he warns to the subject of the difficulty of teaching writing and the credit due writing teachers, he amply demonstrates why teaching writing has not been “everybody’s job”:

The bad habits [of writing] are too habitual. They can be cured only by the most painful of surgical procedures: operation on what the writer has actually written \ldots Like the parent who tells the spanked child that “this hurts me more than it does you,” the writing teacher wants nothing so much as a paper that’s well written—one that won’t mire him in endless repairs and emotional debris. I sometimes find myself emitting small moans as I start to read a paper and realize the magnitude of the problems ahead.

Why, then, would anyone is his right mind want to be a writing teacher? The answer is that writing teachers aren’t altogether in their right mind. They are one of the caring professions, no more sane in the allotment of their time and energy than the social worker or the day care worker or the nurse. Whenever I hear them talk about their work, I feel that few forms of teaching are so sacramental; the writing teacher’s ministry is not just to the words but to the person who writes the words.

When most of us writing teachers began our careers, we had little idea that we were entering the clergy, much less any cognizance that the moral imperatives of the job were to be so stringent that merely persisting at our task would qualify us for sainthood. Doesn’t this throw up a formidable “Beware, all ye who enter here” sign for anyone in another discipline who entertains the notion of teaching writing? Apparently so, since historically faculty from few other disciplines have challenged English departments for the privilege of instructing in the elimination of the dangling participle or the concept of the copulative verb. However, our colleagues’ criticism of English teachers for not turning all of our students into writers of clarity and correctness, if not charm and wit, has been abundant. But isn’t that, after all, what martyrdom is all about?
If Zinsser says we English teachers are not in our right minds for our dedication to teaching writing, a duty that comes with the territory, who the heck are these crazies from other subjects who want to do it voluntarily? He introduces many of them in the book: virtually the entire faculty of Gustavus Adolphus College; John Rodgers, geology professor at Yale; Joan Countryman, high school math teacher in Philadelphia; Naola Van-Orden, chemistry professor at Sacramento City College. As Zinsser reports his conversations with them, not one of them seems psychotic, not even on the verge of a nervous breakdown. All of them believe, however, that writing about their subjects will teach their students more than all the multiple choice tests they can throw at them.

VanOrden, for example, wants her chemistry students to synthesize what they have learned from the chemistry text, so she gives them pertinent “real-life” chemistry problems to write about. The premise of one assignment has the student as the manager of a pet shop. A customer complains that the fish in her pond are dying. The manager’s job is to analyze the water to ascertain the cause of the fishy fatalities, then to write a letter to the customer explaining the cause and suggesting chemical treatment that will render the lethal pond harmless. VanOrden writes, “I believe that writing is an effective means of improving thinking . . . Writing also improves self-esteem because mentally processed ideas then belong to the writer and not just to the teacher or the textbook author.”

The second part of Writing to Learn is a series of chapters on excellent writing in disciplines other than English. Zinsser not only quotes extensively from eloquent writing in those fields, but provides a running commentary on how he discovered the writers and what qualities he admires about their writing. Many of the writers quoted are recognizable geniuses in their fields: Einstein on physics, Darwin on zoology, Rachel Carson on oceanography, Virgil Thompson on music. But there are also wonderfully readable excerpts from scholarly articles by academics unknown outside their fields. In the chapters on math and chemistry, Zinsser publishes engaging student writing responding to creative assignments like VanOrden’s above.

If I had to characterize Writing to Learn in a sentence, I’d call it the best example I’ve ever read of Ken Macrorie’s I-Search concept, where a writer chooses a subject that fascinates him, finds out all he can about it, and writes from a personal perspective not only what he has found but how he went about making his discoveries. Naturally William Zinsser is not a college freshman assigned an I-Search paper who has heard about writing across the curriculum and hopes that it might make an interesting topic. His I-Search book is by an author for whom writing has been bred into the bone, whose On Writing Well has become a minor classic as a writing text. As a devout teacher of writing, he felt compelled to spread the good news about this phenomenon called writing across the curriculum that all those third grade teachers had been keeping secret from the rest of us for so long.

I like Writing to Learn not only because of its information and ideas but because I like the writer. Zinsser condemns typical academic prose for being “. . . squeezed dry of human juices—a Sargasso Sea of passive verbs, long and generalized nouns, pompous locutions and unnecessary jargon.” Not to worry about Writing to Learn. The warmth of Zinsser’s human juices radiates from its pages. I never stumbled over a pompous locution. Zinsser himself captures my feeling about him and his book: “. . . what a pleasure it is to be in the company of a writer with enthusiasm for his subject . . . . It doesn’t matter what the subject is . . . . This is the personal connection that every reader wants to make with a writer; if we care about the writer we’ll follow him into subjects that we could have sworn we never wanted to know about.” I felt the personal connection. I was Zinsser’s companion on a 236-page exploratory journey, and he was very good company indeed, a man who knows a great deal about writing but who genuinely wants to know more, a writer, thank God, who practices what he preaches.

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