the Writers' block

writing studio

Issue 3, Spring 2009

Director's Note

By Jennifer Holt, Katherine Fusco, and Gary Jaeger

Spring is a busy time on college campuses. Our graduating seniors are transitioning to new life adventures; our first-year students are discovering their intellectual passions and shaping their academic identities. Here at the Writing Studio, we are busy planning a major event that taps into the relationships among writing, academic identity, and intellectual curiosity. Through the two components of this event, the *Vanderbilt Undergraduate Writing Symposium* and the faculty and graduate student symposium *Writing and Discipline*, we hope to bring together members of the Vanderbilt community for a celebration of and thoughtful discussion about writing as it intersects with and shapes the work that goes on at Vanderbilt.

Writing and Discipline will address the topic of writing within and across academic fields of study. The day and a half symposium will occur on Thursday and Friday, March 19 and 20, 2009 and will consist of panel discussions and presentations by faculty and graduate students from across the University. Participants will address issues of writing practice and pedagogy, the roles of discipline and creativity in writing, and the ways in which shifting conventions inform, shape, and re-shape our experiences as writers. *Writing and Discipline* will bring together voices from across campus whose writing lives include teaching, mentoring, editing, policy-making, and scholarship. We hope that you will be able to attend a panel discussion or other session during the event. For more information, see the *Writing and Discipline* program.

Although we are eager to bring together so many voices representing so many theoretical perspectives on the practice of writing and writing pedagogy, we also realize that no writing symposium could be complete without a celebration of the practice of writing itself. And who better to celebrate than our students? For this reason, the symposium will also include a full day of panels on Sunday March 22nd in which undergraduate students will read and discuss exceptional course papers in a conference-like setting. These papers have been competitively selected after having first been nominated by instructors from across the disciplines. The Writing Studio is excited to be able to offer this opportunity to undergraduate students since we know that scholarly writing relies so heavily on presenting one's work to one's peers. These panels will give students a chance to receive feedback from their fellow students and from other members of the University community. The opportunity for conversation will continue with an on-line forum where students can respond to each others' papers in a blog format. For more information, see the Undergraduate Writing Symposium program.

Given the Writing Studio's process-based and collaborative focus, it is fitting that our two symposium events highlight both the collaborative discussion that so often sparks intellectual fire, leading to strong writing as well as the polished individual works that result from lots of thoughtful conversation between instructors and students. In this way, the symposium weekend encourages us to think about what it means to write for others, whether for a class, for a discipline, or for a much broader community. All symposium events are free and open to the public.

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Reflections on Dinner and a Draft

By Erin Bradfield, Graduate Writing Fellow

The aroma of burritos, rice, and tortillas wafted down the hallway. As six o' clock approached, a group of students gathered at the Writing Studio in preparation for our session. I had invited Professor Jonathan Neufeld to talk about his writing process over dinner. The students in attendance ranged in ages and interests, but many were familiar with Professor Neufeld from his aesthetics courses in the philosophy department. Prior to this event, I was also familiar with Professor Neufeld. As a graduate student in philosophy, I attended his job talk; I audited several of his courses; and I see him on a regular basis at our department's colloquia series. With all my philosophical experience with Professor Neufeld, I still had questions: What is his writing process like? How does his writing relate to his pedagogical style and the content of his courses?

In most academic settings, students turn in papers to professors in order to gain insight into their work and to receive an evaluation. Over the course of their college careers, undergraduates write many papers in many different subject areas. However, it is rare for professors to present their writing to students as part of their courses. On occasion, professors give lectures in their home departments or at conferences, in order to share their work with other scholars in their field. However, this doesn't serve to bridge the gap between professors and students; often it widens it further. As a result, the writing done by students often remains disconnected from the writing done by professors – even though they share a common enterprise. Both aim to communicate their ideas clearly through writing, even if the level of scholarship differs.

And so Dinner and a Draft was born from a sense that we students often wonder what a professor's writing is like, or what he or she writes about. Have you thought about whether or not your professors struggle when embarking upon a new project? Have you considered what their end products look and sound like? Many of us have pondered such questions, but haven't had the opportunity to pursue the answers. Dinner and a Draft allows students to reflect upon writing processes and habits through a dinner conversation with a guest professor. For one of the first Dinner and Draft events, I invited my own professor, Professor Neufeld. I wanted to begin this series of conversations about writing with someone I knew well. In this case, although I was the facilitator of the discussion, I was also a student participant. This seemed an appropriate place to begin, since Dinner and a Draft is about the convergence of goals and perspectives in an event in which students and professors get to think together about their own and each others' writing processes and products.

Dinner and a Draft creates a spirit of community among its participants. Part of this is due to the collective reading of short drafts contributed by the guest professor. We read together, eat together, reflect together, and ask questions together. In an ideal session, the conversation happens naturally; we proceed organically from topic to topic. It feels as if we are all at the family dinner table, except that instead of talking about the issues of the day, we talk about issues of writing, and the topics therein that interest us most. At the Dinner and a Draft event this February with Professor Brooke Ackerly, one of the participants echoed this sentiment by stating, "There's something wonderful about gathering together for discussion over food." In my mind, Dinner and a Draft is the 21st Century equivalent to the 18th Century Salon. Dinner and a Draft brings faculty and students together to share their processes, concerns, and questions. I hope you'll join us for dinner sometime soon!

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Writing Anxiety

By Christina Foran, Writing Studio Staff

Its tell-tale symptoms include heaviness in the pit of the stomach, avoidance facilitated by excessive facebook checking, and a mind completely… blank. Diagnosis: writer's block, more formally known as writing anxiety or apprehension. This distressing emotional state plagues students and professionals alike, regardless of their writing ability. By understanding the source of writing anxiety and utilizing problem-solving and coping strategies, writers can counteract the anxiety involved in the composition process.

Writing anxiety arises from a combination of cognitive, emotional, and physical responses. George Mandler, author of Mind and Body, explains that writing arouses emotion when a cognitively developed plan, like a prescribed writing process, is interrupted. This interruption stimulates the Automatic Nervous System and results in physical responses like tense muscles, increased heart rate, or sweaty palms. The brain, in turn, interprets this physical reaction "according to our past experiences or current situation" (McLeod 431).

Surprisingly, such anxiety-producing interruptions may be an inherent part of the writing process. Flower and Hayes found that before writers place words on a page, complex planning occurs (McLeod 431). Writers first encounter difficulty when putting those plans into action and then again when formulating their thoughts to fit the constraints of the printed word.

However inevitable interruptions may seem, they need not always result in writing anxiety. Some writers are able to harness this stimulation and convert it into excitement and motivation. Yet other writers are overwhelmed because they possess a limited "repertoire of plans," adhere "to rigid writing rules," expose their work to "premature editing," and perpetuate negative beliefs about the writing process (McLeod 432).

Flower and Hayes identify the most common treatments for writing anxiety as either waiting for inspiration or following prescribed writing exercises (451). However, both these strategies place additional limitations on the writer and often result in writer's block, the very debilitation that they were trying to cure.

Although waiting for inspiration seems like it could be the most satisfying strategy, it actually leaves the writer the most vulnerable. Relying on inspiration alone may create an external locus of control where the writer can play no active role in the success or failure of his or her work. Inspiration strikes, or it doesn't. Flower and Hayes suggest that "many writing problems are thinking problems that inspiration is ill-adapted to solve" (451). In other words, writers can't wait around until their brain synapses begin firing in synchrony; they need to use generative (brainstorming) strategies to activate cognitive connections.

On the other hand, prescribed measures often do not provide the agency that they claim to. These measures may include fill-in-the-blank outlining, textbook formulas, and other rigid writing rules (Flower & Hayes 452). Unlike inspiration, the prescription strategy seems more laborious and dry. Although such practices may prove helpful, they do not adequately facilitate the cognitive activity required to convert ideas into words because they reinforce a "linear writing process" that makes the constraints of the written word even more rigid. Instead, if writers adapt their strategies as their plans begin to change, the emotions associated with writing can become positive.

If we accept that the writing process perpetually presents the writer with a series of problems, then building a repertoire of problem-solving strategies is crucial. As opposed to strict, prescriptive formulas, problem-solving strategies activate higher-order thinking skills. While prescription may call for outlining, Flower and Hayes promote "treeing" ideas thematically so the gaps in information or reasoning can become apparent (456). Flower and Hayes suggest several strategies for generating, planning, and composing, which can be used flexibly at any point in the writing process.

Even more important than problem-solving strategies may be learning to cope with the emotions associated with writing anxiety. The work of Salovey and Haar suggests that merely altering one's understanding of the writing process is not enough to be able to work through writing anxiety; writers must also examine their cognitive interpretation of their emotions.

In their study, Salovey and Haar used the work of Flower and Hayes to train two groups of students about the writing process, but to the second group they also provided counseling in the form of cognitive behavior therapy. The members of this combination-therapy group were taught to identify negative statements about

their writing and reframe them as positive statements about themselves.

Although the combination group reported still experiencing negative emotions about writing, they composed higher quality writing than the training-only group (Salovey & Haar 523). The writers in the combination group learned to identify their anxieties and cope with them by interpreting their emotions positively, which in turn enabled them to choose a problem-solving strategy to help fulfill those positive expectations.

Both problem-solving and coping strategies spring from the idea that the writing process relies on interaction between writers and readers, rather than solitary effort. This interaction is available at campus writing centers. The problem-solving strategies of Flower and Hayes require the writer to think like a reader (458), and writing consultants introduce this perspective to those with whom they work. In some ways, the relationship between the writing consultant and the writer resembles the therapeutic relationship offered in counseling. Counselors help counselees identify negative thoughts and behaviors as well as empathize with them about the shared reality of their struggles.

Writing consultation, like counseling, relies on the power of words and communication to facilitate agency when it is made vulnerable by anxiety. This overlap between consulting and counseling uniquely positions writing centers to assist anxious writers through the tumultuous process of shaping ideas into their written form.

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