First introduced in Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* (Oxford University Press, 1975), **freewriting**simply means putting pen to paper and writing whatever comes into your head. It is a useful tool for generating ideas and discovering attitudes. The key here is to keep writing, even when you are having difficulty thinking of something to say. Some texts even instruct that the pen is not to leave the paper. Teachers might devote as few as five minutes of class time to freewriting, though ten to fifteen minutes are the most often used times allotted for this activity. Out-of-class freewriting, especially for students attempting to generate ideas for papers, can, of course, be much longer.

Elbow suggests that at the conclusion of a freewriting session the writer should compose a single sentence that summarizes the main point--"the center of gravity," he calls it. This sentence can then be a springboard for further exploration of ideas the next writing session.

Using freewriting at the beginning of a class has the advantage of immediately engaging students in the class. Students must, by necessity, close out some of the non-course related concerns that they bring into the classroom.

While some writing texts do not discern between freewriting and**focused freewriting**, the distinction is worth noting: Focused freewriting is writing about a particular subject or question which has been posed. Professors worried that freewriting is too unstructured will find comfort in the ways that focused freewriting can generate discussion about the day’s topic(s). The nice thing about this activity is that all students have written something and one does not have to rely upon the handful of students who always volunteer their thoughts.

Sample questions:

1. What did you understand least about today’s reading assignment?

2. What points in the article you read for today are the most (or least) convincing?

3. Of what value is this knowledge? How does what you are studying apply to the world around you?

4. Had you been a peasant during the French Revolution, what do you feel your greatest fear would have been?

5. What assumptions do you make about the author of the piece you have just read?

Entry slips and exit slips are written responses from students to questions you pose either at the beginning (entry) or the end (exit) of class. They usually take no more than five minutes and you can tell very quickly from these responses whether students are with you and are understanding the material. If understanding the relationship of X to Y is crucial to the next step you are discussing, you may want to check students’ understanding by having them formulate the relationship in their own words. These slips take only a few minutes to read and to keep you in touch with your students.

**Sample questions:**

1. What is the cause/effect relationship between A and B?

2. What confuses you about the material you read for (entry) / we covered (exit) today?

3. What are three most important things you learned this class period?

***Group 1***

Students often claim to lack knowledge of or attitudes towards the topics they study. One way to illustrate that they bring knowledge and attitudes to their studies is to ask them to write on a concept **before** it is discussed in class. For example, if you are reading a primary document by a female scientist from years ago who laments people treating her ideas as serious, you might ask students to write about the word **authenticity**. What is authentic? After asking several students to read their definitions, you then bring the discussion around to the search for a writer’s authentic voice (the unique angle of vision that informs a work) and the scientific standards that have confined and perhaps even silenced those voices.

In English, if the discussion is on love, you might ask them to write about **vulnerability**. The point is to get them to see connections (that’s why you don’t want them to write directly on the topic), to circle around, always broadening their perspectives based on what they already know and/or think.

Think about an essay you teach, or will teach, what might a theme or idea you can students free write on – accessing prior knowledge. Write a quick model response below of what you consider to be an acceptable student writing.

***Group 2***

http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/images/letter_m.gifost of us agree that students need help--or perhaps just practice--with their abilities to summarize material. The following exercise gives them practice while it also aids their comprehension: Ask students to summarize in no more than 50 words the main points of their reading assignment. They might do this on regular notebook paper or index cards. The activity encourages them to read the assignment and helps them to remember what they have read. And its brief format is not threatening to them.

You might also combine this activity with small group work, asking each group to work collaboratively on the best version. They could also shorten their summary to 25 words and/or to one sentence.

Four-thought Organizer (from Marzano):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| My Summary | My partner’s summary |
| Our combined ideas | Another group’s ideas |

You and a partner create your own organizer for summarizing a lecture or reading. (For math, it might be students write a summary of a concept. In science, a chapter or lab on a topic. In Spanish, you might ask them to write in English the importance of a grammatical idea or cultural reading you did.)

***Group 3***

he following are samples of group writing activities offered by theCenter for Instruction Development and Researchat University of Washington at Seattle.

A. Ask students to work together revising a document that has already been written. This is a useful activity for work on focus, organization, support, and use of jargon. You might have them rewrite something for a different purpose or audience. You have the option of having them sit down together cold or work individually on the document beforehand and then pool their suggested changes.

Take a primary source document and create an assignment based on the above suggestions: Have them take the source and make it contemporary or change its audience. (Pick a document you know your students will read – something from history, for example—and go through this process. I have a copy of an editorial to use for this activity.)

***Group 4***

Still another use is as an in-class activity. Have students write a concept or a sentence/short passage from the text across the top of a sheet of paper. Student #1 responds to the passage in the left-hand column; students then exchange papers with the second student responding to Student # 1’s comments with her own in the right-hand column. They may want to exchange papers several times until they have exhausted their ideas on the subject. (I have had some of my liveliest class discussions after using this activity the first 15 minutes of class.)

**Example #2: Passage from text: student to student**

*"Her soul is beginning to come of age, she thought; and within those moments she herself became much older, much nearer to her own death, and was content to be."*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Student #1** | **Student #2** |
| Mary had just previously made the realization that Jay might already be dead, whereas she was kind of talking herself out of the idea. This accounts for her thought of Mary’s beginning to come to age. Hannah thought she had already done this and it was almost as if she were looking down on Mary, as if she had become much older. And with this she was content with herself. | I agree that Mary’s realization that Jay may be dead is what Hannah was referring to when she says that Mary is beginning to come of age, but I don’t think Hannah is looking down on Mary at all when she says she felt older. I think that she probably feels older because Mary has been like her own child to her, and when she realizes that Mary is mature enough to handle this situation, Hannah realizes that she herself is old. |

Talk about the advantages of using this. How does it apply to the definition of student-centered? How does this activity help students engage the knowledge of the course but also help create something? What are the cons of this? What does it look like in a math/science class OR humanity class?

***Group 5***

**Example #3: Sample Student Handout/Assignment--Double Entry Notebook** *from Center for Instructional Development & Research, University of Washington at Seattle*

|  |
| --- |
| What is it?  a notebook in which you record information and ideas taken from readings, discussions (both inside and outside of class) lectures, films, television, and radio.    What is its purpose?  to provide an impetus to read, listen, and view thoughtfully and critically    to encourage verbal response to materials being studied    to provide a record of information and reactions that may be useful later for writing papers, for discussion participation, and for studying for exams.    How do you do it?  Use blank notebook paper. Make an entry once a week for material you have read or viewed related to our course of study. Each entry will have two parts:**Record** and **React**. Divide your page in half with **Record** in the left-hand column and **React** in the right-hand column.  The entry format for the **Record** column is:  Date:  Name of author / lecturer / program:  Pages read, length of program, source of program:  Main subject of what you have read, viewed, heard (this should be about a one-sentence position statement made by your source).  Summary of the main points and of the information and arguments given supporting the source’s position statement.  The entry format for the **React** column is:  Write your position statement on the subject.  Compare your position statement with the one in your source.  Explain your focus on this reading, lecture, program--why is it important, disturbing, controversial to you?  Relate the material to our course.  How will it be evaluated?  the instructor will evaluate **two** of your entries this term, and/or other students will help you select the **two** best entries to be evaluated. |

**Example #3: Sample student response--double entry notebook** *from Center for Instructional Development and Research, University of Washington at Seattle*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Date**: 4/17/86 **Name**: Joseph Giovanni, New York*Times Magazine* A Sense of Place. "The Material Art."  **Subject**: Architects across the country are using common. indigenous materials to convey a sense of place in the houses, public buildings, and furniture they are involved with.  **Summary**: Architects are now using materials that are strongly associated with a region or city to capture the spirit of the place. Use of indigenous materials gives buildings both feeling and meaning as well as identifies their whereabouts. Architecture is considered to be a material art and creatively used materials can convey a sense of place.  Traditionally, the materials used for construction were of local origin. They were easily found at hand and didn’t require freighting in. Typically, these were natural elements as opposed to those that were manufactured. Originally they were also the cheapest materials available. But they also reflected a care and craftsmanship that is missing from most contemporary materials.  Though cost is largely irrelevant today, many local or vernacular materials are purposely being used rather than international products in an effort to regain a sense of the basics. It is a move away from high-tech design and from the idea that machines will automatically produce a better product.  Vernacular materials are being used in furnishings, homes, and public buildings to create a feeling of regional uniqueness. An L.A. house with a kitchen floor of asphalt is an extreme but illustrative example.  Building materials are also seen as having a sense of social place and position. Buildings and architects can manipulate social imagery through their choice of materials. Plywood and marble combined in a table "would confound any passing Marxist."  The use of traditional materials to connect a building to its region gives it a social context. This makes a place "that helps people know where they are and by extension, who they are." | **Position**: I found this analysis to be very interesting. It provided me a new way of looking at the architecture around me. Though I have noticed differences in style and construction of the homes and buildings in areas I have visited, I seldom gave it much thought. Viewing materials as a means to create an environmental sense of place can, I believe, enhance our understanding of the built world that surrounds us.  **Compare**: The use of common or vernacular materials can heighten our sense of place in a city, a region, or a country. Awareness of this can enhance our feelings of belonging to a place, of having roots.  **Explain**: In a rapidly developing technological world where mobility and rootlessness are endemic, this movement back to basics in Architecture is reminiscent of the current trend of "country" furnishings and knickknacks. It is as though people, uneasy with a world and technology they are hard pressed to understand, are seeking the old, safe, comfortable stability of a known past. The obsession with hand crafts as opposed to computers further indicates this is a popular need.  Interestingly, the most contemporary architectural examples of new buildings in the Northwest, other than houses, do not seem to reflect this material art philosophy. Colubmis Center resembles a black glass, 2001 monolith and the Portland City Office Building is more reminiscent of the Nile than the Willamette River Valley.  Nevertheless, on a smaller scale, in homes and furniture, vernacular materials are used quite successfully to convey a sense of regional uniqueness. In the face of miles of motorhome communities, acres of cinderblock, suburban ramblers, and endless lines of white, plastic Italian chairs any effort that resists creeping homogeneity is a positive move.  **Relate**: The operational and perceptual environments in which we operate encompass a fantastic number of elements, many of which we are not fully aware. Buildings and furniture often just fill space and we are conscious of little else save their presence. Understanding the motives and materials used in design and architecture can provide us with yet another dimension of understanding the physical world. | |
| What are the pros of this type of activity? How would you use it in your class? How does it apply to the definition of student-centered? How does this activity help students engage the knowledge of the course but also help create something? What are the cons of this? What does it look like in a math/science class OR humanity class? |

***Group 6***

http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/images/quotes.gif*Generating faculty enthusiasm for a writing-across-the-curriculum effort is not an easy task. As long as content areas instructor think of writing instruction as doctoring up the grammar of term papers, there can be little hope of progress. A successful writing-across-the-curriculum program therefore demands some conceptual blockbusting. One of the best blockbusters we have discovered is the microtheme--an essay so short that it can be typed on a single five-by-eight inch note card (Work, 1979).*

*John C. Bean, et. al.  
"Microtheme Strategies for Developing Cognitive Skills"*

http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/images/letter_o.gifne of the best examples that the microtheme, despite its brevity, can relay a significant amount of information is a microtheme on the writing of microthemes.

**A MICROTHEME ON MICROTHEMES**

The MICROTHEME, a brief essay limited to one side of a 5" x 8" index card, is an ideal instrument for painlessly increasing the written content of a course. Brief and thus easily graded it is educationally sound, for a great deal of thinking must precede the writing. There are four main formats, each of which challenges and cultivates writing and cognitive skills in a different way.

**The Summary-Writing Microtheme**

The student must read a body of material, discuss its structure (main idea. supportive points, connections among its parts), condense it while retaining its hierarchy. and eliminate frill in order to write a summary. This exercise strengthens reading comprehension and writing ability. It also targets "egocentrism," that is the tendency of the "maturing" student thinker to impose personal opinion on data, veer from the topic, and distort an author’s perspective.

**The Thesis-Support Microtheme**

The student must take a stand and defend it. A topic citing Spock’s childhood permissiveness as the cause for the sixties revolution becomes the thesis "The student revolutionary movement in the sixties was not causally related to...." This exercise strengthens the ability to discover, state, and defend an issue, using clear evidence and logical reasoning.

**The Data-Provided Microtheme**

Data is provided in the form of tables or factual statements. The student must comment on its significance. Selecting, arranging, connecting, and generalizing about data develops inductive reasoning. Students thus progress from merely listing facts to making assertions.

**The Quandary-Posing Microtheme**

A practical occurrence or puzzling situation is presented. The student must explain the underlying scientific principles in clear terms and pose a solution. This exercise moves students from rote learning to application, thereby strengthening concept comprehension and abstract reasoning.

Microtheme Example

**HIST 101: WORLD CIVILIZATlONS**

**PURPOSE**  
To prepare for class discussion and to practice writing skills

**FORMAT**  
The micro theme essay is to be typed single-spaced on an index card 5x8 in size (the largest standard size index card). Make sure your answer is five to eight sentences in length.

**KNOWLEDGE**  
You will need to read Plutarch’s *Life of Pericles* in order to complete this assignment.

For the first microtheme answer one of the following questions; however you should answer all of the questions in your notes so that you will be prepared for the class discussion. Be sure to note page references from your Penguin Classics edition of Plutarch in answering these questions.

1. What was Plutarch’s purpose in writing this life of Pericles? (Find specific passages and note the page numbers.)

2. Find an example of Plutarch’s upperclass attitude (an attitude which was the curse of the later Greek intellectuals).

3. Which had the most influence in shaping Pericles’ ideas? How did Pericles strengthen the democracy at Athens (make the government more democratic in practice)?

4. Compare the political-economic programs of Cimon and Pericles. (Can you make any comparisons to American politics in 1984?)

5. What was the Delian League? (To answer this question consult the text Strayer or go to the Library and consult the Oxford Classical Dictionary.)

6. What was Pericles’ most dazzling achievement? Why was it controversial?

7. In the account of Pericles’ siege of Samos (pp. 192-195), find evidence that Plutarch’s primary sources were in disagreement.

8. Tell us something about Aspasia.

9. According to Plutarch, what were the causes of the Peloponnesian Wars?

How does it apply to the definition of student-centered? How does this activity help students engage the knowledge of the course but also help create something? What are the cons of this? What does it look like in a math/science class OR humanity class?

***Group 7***

he simple exercise below is designed to improve the written responses to exam questions. Perhaps because of the widespread use of multiple choice exams, many students lack the simple skill of answering the question that is asked.

**PROCEDURE**  
The students will be given the sheet that follows and be asked to evaluate the answers. (Their sheet would not include my comments as below.) After 10 minutes the sheets could be collected and rated or an overhead could be used to criticize as a group each of the 6 answers.

**QUESTION**  
How did the skull and pelvis of fossil "Lucy" revolutionize our thinking about human evolution?

**EVALUATE THE FOLLOWING ANSWERS:**

1. Pelvis can show if the organism is four legged or two legged. The skull showed the size of the brain.

(Comments are true but fail to address the question.)

2. The skull was smaller and the pelvis was tipped so that upright walking was possible.

(This answer is also true and provides more information but still does not address the question of how "Lucy" reversed our thinking.)

3. It showed that Lucy walked erect millions of years before we thought it was possible.

(What does "it" refer to? I assume the pelvis. Therefore the skull portion of the question is ignored.)

4. Because they were so close to what the human skull looked like from that period of time.

(In addition to not answering the question, this statement is incredibly inaccurate! The answer suggests that Homo sapiens and "Lucy" Australopithecus afarensis co-existed.)

5. Lucy walked upright and yet she had a small brain which contradicted the thinking that the large brain came before walking man.

(very satisfactory)

6. Before Lucy it was common belief that a large brain led to tool use and then upright bipedalism. "Lucy" showed that in fact bipedalism occurred before brain expansion.

(very satisfactory)

How does this Writing-to-Learn apply to the definition of student-centered? How does this activity help students engage the knowledge of the course but also help create something? What are the cons of this? What does it look like in a math/science class OR humanity class?

***Group 8***

**Writing Assignment #6. Due In Two Parts, November 18 and November 25.**

http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/images/letter_y.gifou will have a final exam question on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Assignment #6 is designed to enhance your understanding of this novel in collaboration with a classmate. The assignment follows:

1. Reflect on your reading of *Heart of Darkness* and then write a 200-300 note (legible handwriting is okay) to a classmate in which you describe some aspect of the novel that you are having trouble understanding--a specific area you are having difficulty interpreting or fully comprehending. You should make distinctions where you can--that is, describe what you do understand and what you don’t understand. You should refer to one or more particular passages in the novel where you are experiencing difficulty. Don’t just say "I don’t understand the passage beginning on line ten of page 227." Provide a context for what you don’t understand--so your reader can see your difficulties and thereby give you some assistance. I hope this exercise will help you clarify your thinking about Conrad’s novel as well as describe a particular problem(s) to a classmate that you really want to know more about. This brief writing is due Wednesday, November 18 in two copies— one for your classmate and one for me.

2. Take the note a classmate has given you and consider it carefully, review *Heart of Darkness* and our class discussions about it, and then respond to your classmate with a thoughtful note of explanation and exploration. Explain where you can, and where you are not sure of particular aspects yourself, explore reasonable possibilities. Again, my hope from this assignment is that you will not only help your classmate understand and gain a better critical appreciation of *Heart of Darkness*, but that in constructing your response you will learn more about the novel as well. This note should be 400-500 words long and typed. Due November 25 in two copies--one for your classmate and one for me.

If you are absent November 16, you are responsible for exchanging notes with your partner at the earliest possible time thereafter-but not later than November 20.

Dear Scott,

I’ve always thought it interesting that the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* is not the one who has the main story—rather, Marlow does. Why not have the whole story written from Marlow’s point of view, instead of having the narrator repeat all that Marlow said? The conclusion that I came to was that Conrad, in letting us view Marrow from the outside through the narrator, is giving us the opportunity to judge Marlow, just as Marlow has judged Kurtz. My question is, How should we judge Marlow? I’d specifically like to figure out what Marlow’s motive was in traveling into the heart of darkness—were his intentions noble?—and whether in remaining loyal to Kurtz he somehow corrupted himself.

In Marlow’s prelude to the tale, he says that what redeems the conquest of the earth is the idea only, an unselfish belief in the idea. This passage especially interests me now that I have a background of the Victorian sense of duty, the white man’s burden, etc. Was this why Marlow was going? I can’t really tell, because before he even departed, he realized that something was not quite right about it all. When he says that it appeared to others that he would be an emissary of light, a lower sort of apostle, he sounds sarcastic, but could that just be hindsight at work? Once on his journey, he encounters people who consider the natives to be enemies and who "hate the savages," but what does Marlow think? I think it may be telling that towards the end of the story, when Marlow describes Kurtz’s madness, Marlow says that because of his own sins, he had to go through the ordeal of looking into Kurtz’s mad soul himself.

So. Are we by to judge Marlow? If not, why not, and If so how should we judge him?

Rosemary

Dear Rosemary,

I think that Marlow was a kind of Buddha figure, a sage and wise man, but he represented the wisdom of the worldly Victorian, which is one of his major distinctions: for the most part, the Victorian characters with whom we have been made familiar have, for the most part been wholly ignorant of and often willfully disdainful of culture, knowledge, and wisdom originating outside of the European circle of enlightenment. It is, was, a creeping form of Eurocentrism that can be narrowed further to a kind of Victorian-centrism. They were not unjustified—as far as Marlow and the rest of the Victorians had any ken, theirs was the best and brightest civilization on the Earth: industry, standards of living, education, democracy, happiness (how unique) and prosperity for all could be a concern. Ah, there it is, that wonderful pan of the idealistic pie; they believed that because they were happy with their civilization/culture, that every other human being would be just as happy given the same circumstances. So I guess, in their own narrow way, they could "jolly well feel good about civilizing those bloody savages" because, from their own perceived position at the top, it would be beneficial to the abyres to be civilized by/for the "Motherly auspices of the Crown.

You know, Conrad himself was not a Victorian. . . he was a thoroughly displaced Pole, forced to speak Russian, then German, French, and finally English. He spent eight years wandering the ocean with the British merchant navy. He was not born Victorian or raised/accultured Victorian. He was the ultimate outsider to the culture. Though, bitter about his own culture (the destruction thereof), his view point and the could afford him an overview of British culture that none of it’s inhabitants could achieve.

Perhaps this is why Conrad felt that he could so easily remove himself from Marlow, in narration and spirit, because to Conrad, Marlow was a Victorian. In a way, Conrad is generous to Marlow by not attributing malice to Marlow’s own prejudices, few though they seem. Marlow is, in more ways, Conrad himself; a voyager adrift in the real world, absorbing everything in order to and make sense of himself and his own world, carrying with him his unconscious values and prejudices *without forcing them onto the people or word around him*. There is the judgment of Marlow: he carries the value/idea "Victorian" around with him, but he does not force the world to conform to his ideas. Kurtz is/was the embodiment of those ideas that Marlow holds, his own hero. Witnessing the actual implementations of those ideas and finally watching Kurtz’s decline and facing his Intended is what brought Marlow to fully question those ideas, to face their actual lack of enlightenment; to return to England and face the actual heart of the darkness.

Yours truly, Scott

Obviously, these are college ideas, but: How does this Writing-to-Learn apply to the definition of student-centered? How does this activity help students engage the knowledge of the course but also help create something? What are the cons of this? What does it look like in a math/science class OR humanity class?

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