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Student Writing and Non-traditional Writing Media and Environments

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Project Title: Student Writing and Non-traditional Writing Media and Environments

Research Question:
What happens in students' descriptions of their generative writing when the physical materials of or the environment for writing are de-familiarized?

Method & Data Studied:
Writing exercises in *English 460: Multi-Genre Creative Writing* and *English 101: Writing and Critical Inquiry* asked students to participate in two material/environmental disruptions. The first exercise consisted of writing with non-dominant hands (brain hemisphere switch) through typing (English 460) or handwriting (English 101). In English 460, the environment was altered from the classroom norm of silence by playing atonal music during the writing exercise. The second exercise offered non-standard paper with the option of using non-standard writing utensil (visual/spatial switch). Students in English 460 wrote on individual rolls of adding machine tape. Students in English 101 wrote on 18x24-inch drawing paper. Students in both classes were offered crayons as an optional part of this exercise. Students in each class were asked to rate each exercise, and the effects of both exercises together, as "extremely helpful," "somewhat helpful" or "not helpful" in contributing to their creativity and their sense of the quality of the writing the exercises elicited. Written evaluations were anonymous and asked students to describe their experiences with each exercise as well as their evaluations of the resulting writing. Oral classroom discussions about the exercises as well as observations during the exercises were noted.

Key Findings:
In each class, 22% of students found the exercises "extremely helpful." In English 460, 72% of students, and in English 101, 61% of students found the exercises "somewhat helpful." Exercises were rated "not helpful" by 13% of English 101 students and by none of the English 460 students. In each class, one student (correlating to between 4% and 5% of the classes) rated the exercises as neutral. Students' descriptions of their experiences and the resulting writing reflected variations in both academic levels (senior English 460 students and freshman English 101 students) and writing genres (creative writing and academic prose) represented in each course. English 460 students most often described disruptions of their established writing processes in terms of subject shifts, vocabulary and syntax, rhythm and pace. English 101 students most frequently described alterations of rhythm and pace, access to new ideas, and the addition of fun to the curriculum. Three students in each class used the word "frustrating" to describe some part of their experiences.

Implications for Further Study:
Student evaluations in two quite different writing classes in the English Department revealed overlap as well as responses unique to each genre and class population. More study of similar writing exercises in other English courses, including courses that are not part of a writing curriculum, as well as study of student writing outside the discipline of English would add information to the usefulness of material disruptions in achieving student and instructor learning goals. Adding a component to the study of *professors'* evaluations of finished writing both before and after the exercises would be useful for understanding the effects of the exercises, especially if the writings were evaluated in a "blind" reading without revealing which work was generated by students' usual processes and which writing was generated with disruptions.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:
Two salient implications resulted from the responses in each class. In English 460, half the students said exercises disrupted their processes, leading them away from imitating model texts and from writing to teacher expectations. This leads to **student-centered writing**. Students found tonal shifts, changes in rhythm, and freedom to explore new subjects for writing, expanding their experiences with both form and content of their creative work, facilitating **access to new material**. In English 101, about a third of the students rated the quality of their writing as better than they usually produce in classroom writing situations because exercises allowed for **slowing down for quality of content**. Breaks from classroom routine through "fun" activities helped create an atmosphere of attention that allowed students to link **change and learning**.