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# Using Reflective and Meta Writing Practices in English 101

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# Using Reflective and Meta Writing Practices in English 101

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## Initial Observation Portfolio Design

At the 2017 Backward By Design retreat I chose to revise and refine a low-stakes writing assignment called the Observation Portfolio I designed for my English 101 course. The English 101 curriculum provides students with the opportunity to complete several rhetorically situated projects related to a topic/question of their choice. I initially created the Observation Portfolio as a complement to these higher-stakes projects and it was meant to (1) replace several smaller in-class assignments, thereby providing more cohesion to the course and (2) to act as an alternative method of taking attendance in which students must be more than just physically present in the room in order to be considered “present”. The observation portfolio is a meta-writing assignment in which students were asked to think through the writing they were doing on their larger projects.

This kind of low-stakes project is only useful to a course if it supports, reinforces, and helps to accomplish course objectives; in other words, it is important that students understand how low-stakes portfolio writing relates to the course as a whole and so it was necessary to integrate the Observation Portfolio entries into the course in such a way that students didn’t view it as “busy work”.

I identified the following objectives as being pertinent to the work we do in English 101:

- I. Students are connecting course concepts and material to their own life (and other courses).
- II. Students are examining personal assumptions that influence their responses and actions.
- III. Students are reflecting critically about their readings and experiences.
- IV. Students will become better writers and clearer thinkers.

I then went through the entirety of my ten week lesson plan and incorporated prompts that were related to the activities in the lesson plan and the overall objectives that I have for the course. I also wanted to incorporate the ideas that “reflection is active” and that “writing is thinking”. Active reflection requires the writer to examine their prior beliefs and assumptions and the effect that these will have on their research.

## Further Integration of the Observation Portfolio Using Threshold Concepts and Writing As Thinking

After the first quarter using this assignment (Spring 2017) I was pleased with the initial student responses, however I felt that the assignment could be made more useful if it was further integrated into the ENG 101 curriculum. The Backward By Design retreat was primarily focused on threshold concepts, which I found useful when thinking about ENG 101, as students often have difficulty understanding and applying the course concepts in other classes. The two concepts the course centers on are “writing looks and works differently in different places” and “writing is a meaning making activity”. With the Observation Portfolio I am trying to help students to understand both of these concepts as well as introduce the concept of “writing as thinking”.

It can be tempting for students to view writing as what happens after thinking. By approaching writing as a transfer of a finished product from their head to the page, students leave themselves little

room for the evolution of ideas. Alternatively, by viewing writing as thinking, the process of drafting and revising becomes more useful and (hopefully) more enjoyable as they are able to do more analysis, observation, and evolution of their ideas.

Additionally, although many students see writing as a talent that they are either naturally “good” or “bad” at, writing is actually a skill which they can become more proficient with as they practice. In order to grow as a writer it's important to think about why they're doing what they're doing. In other words: they should have intention behind the choices they make in their writing and attempting to articulate that intention can help them see where their strengths and weaknesses are.

Using writing as a mode of thinking is also a good way for you to think through the concepts that we be work with throughout the quarter (or even in their other classes). If they find something confusing, troubling, or complex, writing out their thoughts can help them to clarify and assess these areas. In the Observation Portfolio they have the opportunity to engage with the material we cover in class and even ideas they might encounter outside of class in an informal way, giving them the opportunity to think through ideas and concepts before turning in a final draft of their major projects. Between the Observation Portfolio and the (multiple) drafts and revisions they write, they will be able to more fully develop and evolve their ideas so that they become more complex, nuanced, and interesting.

The rubric for the assignment is simple:

- Each entry should have your name and the date in the top right corner.
- Entries will be graded on “completeness” which means that there is no specific word count, but they should show thoughtfulness and an attempt to grapple with the prompt; if the prompt is a “freewrite”, they should show an attempt to think through the project or reading that we are working with that day.
- Entries will not be graded on form (spelling, punctuation, grammar) and they do not need to be written in “academic language”; this also means that entries can speak to your personal feelings about a project or topic being discussed in class.
- Entries should show evidence of both creative and critical thinking.
- Doodling is acceptable and encouraged in entries.
- There is no particular kind of paper that you need for entries, however they must be done on paper, not emailed to me (unless I specify otherwise).
- Entries will generally be read only by me (your instructor). If a particular entry is to be shared with the class, I will let you know at the beginning of the prompt.

By further integrating the assignment into the lesson plans as well as viewing it as a way for students to think through threshold concepts of English 101 in ways that might allow them to more easily transfer skills to other courses, four types of prompts emerged:

- I. Question asking/Identifying areas of struggle
- II. Identifying personal writing practices

- III. Identifying course skills/concepts and how they see them operating in other courses/the world
- IV. Identifying how their topics of investigation evolved throughout the quarter as they made meaning out of source work

### Student Response to the Observation Portfolio & Future Modifications

Students have responded to the Observation Portfolio (in its most recent iteration) by saying:

- "These entries made me reflect honestly on my writing & what I had to improve on. It helps me focus more on what I need to do to better my writing & thought process."
- "It has changed the way I look at my writing process. I learned that there are so many other important parts other than a rough draft and final . . . my writing process is now more spread out and more thorough."
- "I liked doing these journals because they allowed me to put my thinking into writing. Having to put on paper why I thought things were important or why I needed to get certain things looked at made me realize things before delving into my drafts."
- "I feel like evaluating my thinking every class helped make me more aware of where I was struggling."
- "Writing these entries has allowed me to reflect more on what I'm writing & the purpose for which I'm writing these papers."

Another important benefit that has emerged, related to threshold concepts, is understanding my own teaching practices and where I am falling short or helping students. By giving students the opportunity to meta-think about their writing and the course, thereby giving them room to identify areas of struggle, I am able to see not only where individual students need further attention but where the class as a whole is struggling to understand course threshold concepts. This allows me to then adjust curriculum and lesson planning for the course accordingly.

In the future I plan to continue to modify based on course curriculum and student response. Students in my Winter 2018 course suggested that it might be useful to allow some entries to be "free writes" rather than prompted writing, which is something that might be useful at certain stages of writing their major course projects. Additionally, and this is true of any assignment, some students have responded that the assignment is very useful whereas others have articulated frustration with the assignment. There seems to be some correlation between a student's comfort level and ability with writing and how they view the assignment; those students who consider themselves to be very good writers seem to be more resistant to the Observation Portfolio prompts, whereas students who are less comfortable or who consider themselves not to be very good writers appreciate the prompts more. I think that it bears further consideration and study into why some students find it more useful than others, and what modifications could be made to the assignment to make it more useful to those students who find it to be frustrating.