

Dear Faculty: Or. . . Writing Letters to Learn

by Judy Hunter

Dear Faculty Members,

In a January workshop I attended on Writing Across the Curriculum, Toby Fulwiler of the University of Vermont gave a compelling presentation on using letters in his teaching. In his classes, students write letters to other students, students write to teachers, and teachers write to students, all to promote writing as a means of learning. According to Fulwiler, letters are "journals with an audience." This audience makes a difference, as he demonstrated forcefully to those attending the workshop.

Fulwiler had his audience of 180 composition teachers do a letter-writing exercise. Each of us chose a partner we did not know and, in six minutes, without speaking to one another, wrote a letter to that partner, telling him or her how we had reacted to the presentations the day before. About five minutes into this six-minute period, Mr. Fulwiler asked us to add a P.S. telling the other person something intimate about ourselves (Fulwiler says he uses the term "personal" rather than "intimate" when he makes the assignment to students). After the six minutes we exchanged letters, still in silence, and wrote another letter responding to the first letter. Finally, again without speaking, we had six more minutes in which to write another response.

After completing this exercise (and finally able to talk and laugh again), we discussed what this exercise reveals about the benefits of writing letters. Some noted that, while conversation is cheap, sometimes requiring little thought, letters are valued, eagerly anticipated works to which the writer devotes at least some thought. Letters allow us to sustain two strands of conversation simultaneously. Letters focus us more clearly on the task; we spend less time on pleasantries. Letters allow everyone, including those hesitant to speak in front of a large group, to explore ideas in a precise, focused, and reflective way. Because letters have an audience, letter-writers have to clarify their thoughts. In a situation such as the one Fulwiler set up, the P.S. telling something intimate helps the reader and the writer to become acquainted with each other's personality. For all these reasons, Fulwiler often uses such exchanges as a way to begin a discussion in a class, to focus the class on a topic or question, or to acquaint people in a class with one another.

Fulwiler uses letters in many other situations, including faculty seminars on teaching writing. In such a seminar, he may use three different prompts for three short letter-writing assignments. For example, first he may ask "What is your biggest problem with writing?"; second, "What problems do your students have?"; and, third, "What are the differences between your problems and those of your students?" Or he may ask faculty to write a letter explaining the heuristics of their discipline and to analyze in another the strategies of learning that will lead students to understand and apply these heuristics.

To demonstrate one way of using letters in addition to more formal papers and presentations, he reproduced for us examples of the letters he required his students to write throughout a semester

in a graduate seminar in education. He wrote the syllabus in the form of a letter to students; in it he modeled the tone (serious but light) and length (1-2 pages single spaced) he expects. In this first letter he asked them to discuss their reasons for taking the class and their goals for it. Then each week each student wrote the professor a letter reflecting on the class discussion or the readings or the student's educational goals. Each week the professors read all of the letters and then wrote one letter back to the class, often quoting from some or all of the students' letters for that week and sometimes, but not always, posing a question to which he asked them to respond.

Fulwiler sees three advantages to using such letters in a class. First, he and his students can experiment with different voices and styles. Second, students become responsible for learning; he requires each student, at one time during the semester, to make copies of his/her letter for the whole class to read and discuss in class. Third, writing letters provides students a record of learning: Fulwiler requires each student to present a portfolio which includes at least thirteen letters, plus a reflection on the student's learning throughout the semester. The assignment allows students to think about their goals at the beginning of the course, to relate what they learn to those goals throughout the semester, and to explore ideas that they have no time to discuss in class. In fact, Fulwiler believes that the letters provide the equivalent of an additional hour of class time each week.

Does this method take up more teacher time than the grading of short essays? Fulwiler claims not. It takes him a couple of hours each weekend to read the letters (the class which he used as an example had twelve students) and to write his response. But he regards the time as well-used; certainly he believes it is important to give students a way to reflect on what they are learning.

If you have other ideas about ways to allow students to learn through writing, please feel free to write a letter to the Writing Forum.

Sincerely,
Judy
(Box W-6 or HUNTERJ@grinnell.edu)

P.S. Please write back. You know how disappointing it is to write a letter and get no reply.