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Anonymity and Authenticity: Writing in College Classrooms

By Stephen Fried

In a free country...you have the right to be anonymous.”

— John Whitehead, author of *A Government of Wolves*¹

“I tried to get my students to write about 9/11,” a new teacher tells us at a workshop, “and some of them just wouldn’t, and got angry about being asked.” Another says the same thing happened in her classroom. The topic remains emotionally charged here on Staten Island, where many firefighters, police officers, and emergency responders live in close-knit communities, alongside families whose members work in the financial center. Neighborhoods, even individual blocks, suffered devastating losses. Yet every fall, near the anniversary, my students write about their experiences on that day, and no one has ever objected or felt anything but relief and inspiration. The difference is—in my class—we write our accounts anonymously, and I collect and read them to the class. It’s an approach that I believe can enhance student participation in almost any kind of college classroom, also improve student writing, and provide specific benefits to classroom culture.

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Anonymously is not the only way we write but every semester it becomes everyone's favorite. Through anonymity, students cast aside concerns about how their writing will make them look in favor of being heard, and of hearing what others have to say. They use the language in which people think, from which emerges durable images and figures, and revealing errors and insights. Some prompts for these exercises might begin from course material I provide: "What is the subtext of this

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advertisement?" or "What is the crucial 'turning point' in this essay?" Student responses might diverge into unexpected insights such as "This ad assumes all home buyers are white," or make connections between texts as in "Orwell's sudden awareness of the condemned man's humanity [in "A Hanging"] is like coming up out of Plato's cave." Invitations to more general responses such as "How is class going for you?" or "What would

you like to know about the other students?" often ignite discussion, as does "High school is like jail and college is like the Army," or suggest a new avenue for class response, such as "What's the closest you've ever come to being killed?"

This is not what I've typically seen called "class discussion" in my student and teaching life, where the teacher introduces a topic or question, then urges and waits (and waits) for students' verbal response. That more traditional approach is flawed in inception, execution, and sustainability. It begins with a "prompt" that assumes students' knowledge and involvement in the topic, then proceeds in a way that reinforces impulsive assertiveness over reflective expression, and too often sets out along a determined course toward a preconceived goal. When I used to teach texts via "discussion," only a persistent few who were good talkers and performers spoke, mostly to me, occasionally to each other. Most students, my first anonymous course surveys revealed, took the moment as license to let their minds wander, or think judgmentally about the talkers. Fewer than

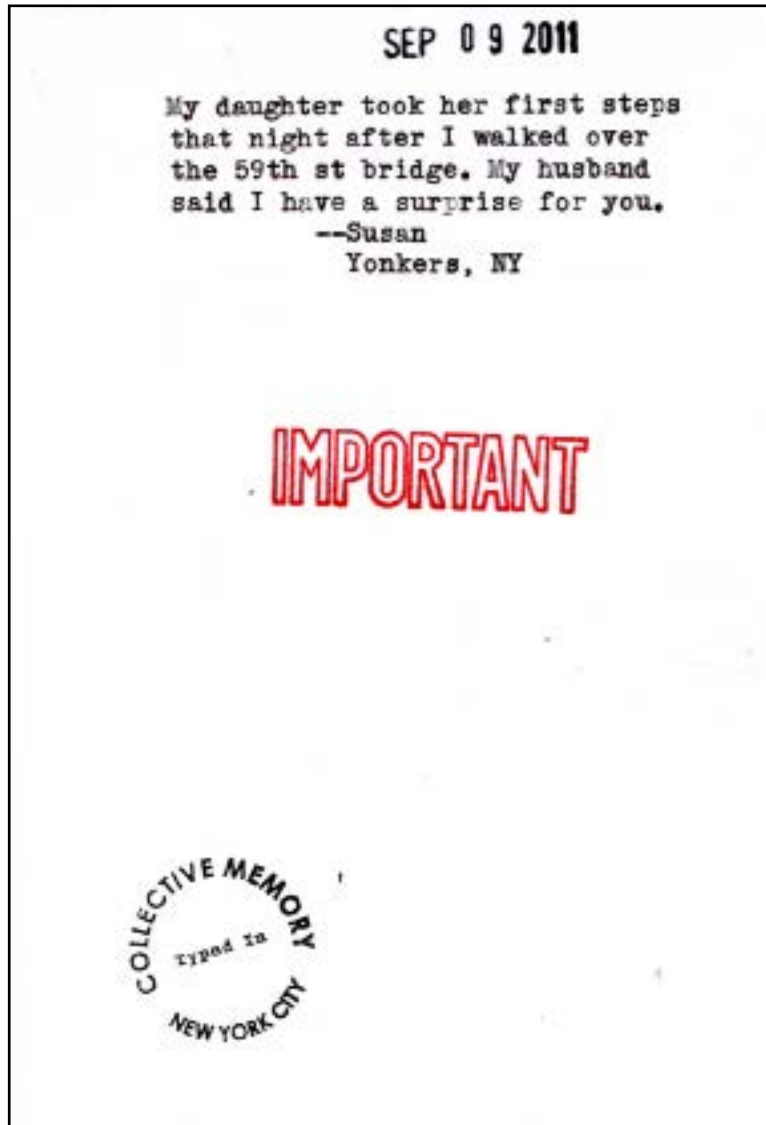
two-thirds were even remotely engaged, and rarely did they contemplate the text, though occasionally they entertained ideas on the topic, which they declined to express. When there was a "successful" discussion, it was rare that everyone talked, or even all those who wanted to, due merely to constraints of time, memory and discursiveness. Since I've turned to activities based on anonymous response, not only has it changed how students engage with me and each other, but also how their writing develops.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Every term, I have our printing service cut a 250-stack of canary card stock into 1,000 rectangles (5-1/2" x 4-1/4"). As students enter class, each picks up a few cards from a stack by the door. "Discussion" begins with a prompt to which each student writes on their cards a brief, occasionally timed, anonymous response. Prompts can range from compliance monitoring ("How did Orwell's essay end?") to instructor evaluation ("What's hardest for you to grasp about our first lesson on MLA works cited entries?") to skills and style exercises ("Simplify the sentence, 'It came to me in my mind as a thought that the quantity of my happiness quotient was not elevated as highly as previously.'" to issues raised by a student or professional text ("What are the strongest and weakest things about this essay?") I also include open-ended topics suggested by students—favorites have included "How did you break up with your last boyfriend/girlfriend?" "Talk about your experience with and feelings about police officers," and "What's the best advertisement you've seen lately?"

Once the basic process takes hold, each class moves in its own direction. Short-term results include the virtual absence of "dead air." The long run sees a welcome change in writing style and content. Students' writing develops increased concreteness of details in examples and succinctness of language in argument, specific virtues from which, for many developing

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“Collective Memory” is an interactive public performance by Sheryl Oring, an art professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which posed the question: “What would you like the world to remember about 9/11?” For this project, a pool of ten typists, each dressed in black ‘60s-era office attire, set up a public typing pool in New York City’s Bryant Park on the 10th anniversary of September 11. Passersby were invited to share their thoughts and the typists recorded their words verbatim on cards like the one published here. For more, see www.sheryloring.org/collective-memory.

writers, quantitative, word-count assignments too often lead away.

After everyone has had time to write, I collect the cards and read them aloud. I don’t have students read their own or each other’s because my delivery ensures uniform clarity, maintains a neutral and non-judgmental tone, deciphers near-illegibilities, and reinforces students’ sense they write with the full freedom of anonymity. Sometimes I set aside ones I’ll come back to for clarification, or divide them into piles of similar responses, or according to some other organizational principle. An instruction I give at the outset is “Trust your first thoughts and don’t censor.” I’ve never received a racist or ethnically biased response, though a few sexist and homo/trans/queer-phobic ones have prompted productive mini-lessons. Should such happen, I’ve decided I’d state that, though I respect students’ free speech, I also exercise my own as to what I won’t read aloud. Fortunately, the extreme incivility that the distant anonymity of the Internet can foster does not manifest within the collaborative proximity and supportive culture of the classroom. I especially try to respect humor and to neutrally deliver lines, including explicit language and forays into hip-hop lyrics, which provide particular entertainment when I deliver them.

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EXERCISES ON A THEME

Our class focuses on the theme of rhetoric, with specific attention paid to product and service advertisements. We also explore political, religious and lifestyle propaganda, including military recruitment commercials, and ambiguous ideological ploys like the European Union’s retracted “Enlacement” video on YouTube.² One benefit of this theme is that it leads naturally to controversial issues for student research, such as militarism, smoking, abortion and, via the current spate of advertising by for-profit colleges and the increasing adoption of for-profit models

by public institutions, to the close-to-home subject of student debt. Another benefit is that, because Internet searches for information about advertisements lead mostly to more advertising, students' quickly shift their inquiries to our university's databases and to print journals, where they find critical alternatives to the default receptive approach to this taken-for-granted material.

To introduce our theme and the survey card method, I often begin with the following exercise: I tell the class, "The U.S. was attacked on September 11, 2001. Of the 19 hijackers who participated in the attack, 15 were citizens of and had passports from one single country. What country was that? Feel free to guess if you don't know." Everyone writes the one or two words necessary, and then I read the responses. Unless there are veterans in the class, it's rare anyone knows.³ As I read, I stack the cards

I write "You can't get more cavity-fighting flouride than with Crest," and ask everyone to write on a card: first, what this statement's author wants readers to think, and then what it really says.

separately by country and then record each country's frequency on the board. Thus far the overwhelmingly prevalent response is Iraq. Once we've got the right answer, if there's no other discussion I point out that certain news outlets worked extensively to portray a nonexistent connection between the attacks and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In a first semester freshman English, I might also briefly read from Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner's "Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11–Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric."⁴ Then, in the second-term course, which emphasizes research methods, I might assign critical reading and fact-checking on the entire text.

For the next exercise, I say, "This one isn't about what you know already but about what you can understand through careful reading and thinking." I write on the board "You can't get more cavity-fighting flouride than with Crest," and ask everyone to write two statements on a card: first, what this statement's author wants readers to think and then, what it really says. This simple statement serves to illustrate the "excluded

middle" whereby "can't get more" means "get exactly the same amount," so that the ad means all toothpastes have fluoride content equal to or less than the regulatory maximum. Our discussion also opens the area of text *versus* subtext, which becomes central to our study of advertising.

While the specific exercises may vary to suit each teacher's course themes and goals, the benefits of anonymity to student writing will be consistent. Initially, it bypasses persona, the construct one wishes others to perceive, and circumvents students' anxiety around fear of failure, given that simply to answer is to succeed. Anonymity also curbs impulses to self-censorship: students neither feel compelled to present themselves in a preconceived way, nor restrain themselves from expressing strong feelings, even cynical and profane ones, that raise the attention of the group and spur discussion. Tangential and topic-unrelated responses, which bespeak frustration with anything from the idea under discussion to the entire educational system, provide real-time indices of attention and engagement. Crucially, working this way stimulates interest in others' writing and in others' reaction to one's own, both freely observed, without embarrassment or preconception.

In effect, each anonymous exercise has students participate in and consider the outcome of a survey, a process that becomes more formal as they proceed toward term-end research projects. These projects require students to select and present a video advertisement, and then administer to the class a survey of their own design in which an independent variable, often gender, is examined relative to some measure of response to the advertisement. Finally, they incorporate their results and discussion into a research paper that also presents the production background and analyzes the visual and verbal rhetoric of the chosen ad. For the surveys, they cite themselves as sources of what current MLA practice regards as an "interview."⁵

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The direct, concise style fostered by these problem-solving also provides a gateway to scholarly writing and avoids the redundancy and inflation that too often fill responses to “word count” assignments, which are readily perceived as holes to be filled, as is so well-defined by Richard Lanham and elaborated upon by Nils Clausson:

The default style of most inexperienced student writers is what Lanham in *Revising Prose* calls the School Style, a style “compounded in equal parts, of deference to a teacher of supposedly traditional tastes, at despair of filling up the required number of pages before tomorrow morning, and of the mindlessness born of knowing that what you write may not be read with attention.” In the neutral rather than honorific sense of the word style, the School Style is, then, very much a style, with recognizable defining features that students are unaware of since they do not see it as a style at all, just as they do not see their own accents as accents. The student prose style is overwhelmingly declarative; that is, it makes assertions unaffected by a consideration of any specific audience to which it might be directed.... only the teacher as grader or examiner. Now if students are ever going to acquire writing styles other than the deplorable School Style, then they need to study the styles of a wide range of prose, for only then will they perceive a style as a style.⁶

Students begin our anonymous enterprise in full equality: the paper is blank and so are they, as authors, with rights not only of free speech but invisibility, and no need to fear what might be revealed or, as one student described it, “naked in disguise.” How a writer looks and acts and whatever judgments might accrue to those characteristics don’t matter. As terms progress, recognition of one’s own and others’ styles grows. Students come to understand writers’ disembodied voices in terms of character and of the ways writing can create the voices that best reach out to others. Each class’s story is told as it is invented, at once heard and incorporated into each character’s arc.

ACTIVITIES AND EVALUATIONS

Here are some additional card activities I’ve found work well, but still form only a bare beginning for what we teachers might devise: applica-

tions to enrich our instruction and our students’ writing lives.

Fix/simplify this sentence. For work on skills and style I have students correct and clarify short samples of student writing, “without altering the original writer’s intentions” and we examine the results. In a variation, student groups work competitively on the same sample and place their results on the board for further, round-robin correction.

Who did the reading assignment? To evaluate compliance with and comprehension of reading assignments, I give a low-stakes, anonymous quiz that might ask, for example, “How did each of the two texts we read for homework end?” or “What is each author’s main point?” so that I get a sense how many read the homework and understood it in depth. The results have, on occasion, been real eye-openers. I let students know from the start that, while they’re not expected to understand everything they read perfectly, they’re assumed to have fully read each assigned text. While I abhor any kind of group sanctions based on such results, low compliance figures can lead to signed quizzes, followed up by requirements for handed-in annotation tasks or take-home tests for those not doing the work.

How’s it going? I poll students at the end of a lesson, though not at the end of a class, to uncover questions, anxieties and uncertainties, and find out what was clear and what requires further elaboration.

Where do we stand? And where to now? In addition to starting discussions, if an inquiry discussion stalls in static repetition or contention, we all write on the issue.

Paraphrase this. If I ask the class a question about, say, a matter of textual analysis or interpretation, the aggregate answer is always better than anything that would come up in open verbal discussion, and often better expressed than I could have done it myself.

Group research. For research practice, students work in groups

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using their laptops or phones to access online information—sometimes on separate, related tasks, other times all on the same task—and each group produces a single “presentation card” that I read to the class. Later in the term, I add a documentation element, where MLA citations and works cited entries are produced for sources, using skills developed from classwork and also online citation services like *KnightCite*.⁷ One favorite exercise calls for research on product ingredients via consumer and

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technical sites. Typically, I present Unilever's suggestive “How Dirty Boys Get Clean” campaign for Axe Shower Gel⁷ and then ask groups to research the ingredients.⁸ Many are known or suspected carcinogens, with others widely recognized as allergens.

Rate this instructor and course. At midterm and at the end of each term, I have students assign me letter grades, comment on the best and worst things about the

class, and say whatever else they choose to say. I've found these comments of enormous value, more so than official evaluations, in modifying my instructional behavior, with improvement noted in subsequent ratings.

Piggybacked individual communications. In certain situations, I need to obtain an anonymous response from one student in particular, for example, when we write about the September 11 attacks and someone recounts a personal tragedy. To reach that student, when I solicit a response from the class on another matter, such as the clarity of a lesson, I add to the prompt: “When we wrote about the September 11 attacks, one of the class wrote about losing a family member. I won't read that account aloud without their permission, so I'd like just that person to also tell me on this card whether or not it's okay for me to share it.” As a fail-safe, or when there is more than one person's response involved, I might also ask that a detail of their account, such as the name of the person they wrote about, be included to identify them as the author. This single-response tactic can also be applied in other cases, such as when a previous survey

has had a significant but incomplete response, so that I might say, “When I asked about the previous lesson, someone wrote ‘At one point I got really confused!’ so now, on this new card, I'd like that person to tell us just what that point was and the nature of their confusion.”

My students, who live so much of their lives on the Internet, in anonymous chat rooms on Reddit or obfuscating social-media and dating sites like Instagram or Tinder, where they can't know exactly who they're talking to, feel comfortably at home in anonymity. In anonymous end-term surveys, they tell me the anonymous cards are perennial favorites. After one term's end, one of my best students ever emailed me her appraisal of the method:

Anonymity is a huge topic now and this upcoming generation values it immensely, with things such as Snapchat, Whisper, and other apps that delete messages after they're read etc. Privacy and anonymity are becoming more coveted, maybe because we feel like we're always being watched (because we are). So it makes sense that people would be more comfortable in a classroom setting if they were allowed to express themselves in the usual fashion they do.⁹

Based on student endorsements like this one, and the improvements in class participation and writing that I've seen, I believe I have the answer for that teacher whose students wouldn't write about 9/11, or my many other colleagues who ask questions and hear crickets. Try anonymity. □

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END NOTES

1. Whitehead during an interview with Bonnie Faulkner on her radio show, *Guns and Butter*, aired June 4, 2014 on WBAI Pacifica Radio. The interview is archived at <https://soundcloud.com/guns-and-butter-1/gunsandbutter301-20140604>. For the specific quote, go to 28:41.
2. The European Union’s retracted “Enlacement” video can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPYTxb03U08> (accessed August 29, 2014).
3. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers in the September 11, 2001 attacks had passports from Saudi Arabia.
4. Gershkoff and Kushner, “Shaping Public Opinion: the 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration’s Rhetoric.”
5. Noodletools “How Do I Cite a Survey I Distributed?”
6. Claussion. “Clarity, George Orwell, and the Pedagogy of Prose Style; or, How Not to Teach ‘Shooting an Elephant’,” p. 317.
7. See *KnightCite* documentation service online at <http://www.calvin.edu/library/knightcite/index.php>
8. Unilever Corporation’s “Sexy Axe Ad—How dirty boys get clean!” can be viewed on Youtube. at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPEWzUNQg1I>. Unilever Corporation’s Axe Shower Gel label: <http://posting.org/image/mr015uthp/> This is a posting of my own scan. The ingredient list is not readily available online, or other than by purchase or perusal at a retail outlet. They are, in order of amount: water, sodium laureth sulfate, cocamidopropyl betaine, fragrance, cocamide MEA, PPG-9, menthol, citric acid, sodium chloride, tetrasodium EDTA, methylchloroisothiazolinone, methylisothiazolinone, Blue 1 and Red 33. Two of the main ingredients—cocamidopropyl betaine and sodium laureth sulfate—are listed with some discussion on this webpage about shower gels: <https://suite.io/galaxia-dawn-canada/2se92sn>
9. Christine Taylor Fisher via email on September 2, 2014.