Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

-------------------------------- 1,360 words---------------------------------

Learning to Write: Wisdom from Emerging Scholars

Building Writing Skills

Good writing is not an innate skill. Building writing skills is a multifaceted process that requires practice and dedication and goes beyond learning correct grammar and punctuation. It includes giving and receiving meaningful constructive criticism, finding time to write, and overcoming obstacles that may prevent you from writing effectively (for example, writer's block and voice issues).

Give and Receive Constructive Criticism

Writing is an iterative process requiring many drafts, reviews, and revisions. Allowing yourself to fully engage in giving and receiving constructive feedback can strengthen your writing (Nielsen & Rocco, 2002). Formal and informal peer reviews are a collaborative process (Reither & Vipond, 1989) in which writers receive constructive criticism from their peers. The intent of constructive criticism is to illuminate unclear areas, provide alternative viewpoints, and offer suggestions for improvement. Being critiqued, however, can be intimidating because writing is such a personal activity (Nackoney et al., 2007; Nielsen & Rocco, 2002). Despite the anguish that some writers experience through peer review, a group of doctoral students taking a scholarly writing class cited constructive criticism "as the most influential element in helping them to understand the scholarly writing process and [produce] a scholarly product" (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000, p. 48).

When providing constructive criticism, students often focus on technical issues such as grammar and punctuation flaws (Rocco, Parsons, Bernier, & Batist, 2003). Although this feedback is helpful, peer review should also provide a thoughtful critique of content and offer insightful examples. The goal should be to help the author improve. Some people are more skilled at providing feedback than others. Therefore, when you are receiving constructive criticism, remember that the reviewer's comments are not meant to be a personal attack. Also, just because the reviewer offers feedback does not mean you must act on it. Critically reflect on the reviewer's comments and incorporate feedback into your writing as you see fit. However, if criticism is from conference or journal reviewers, be sure to explain in the letter to the editor why you did not incorporate suggestions if you chose not to. Also, remember that if more than one person offers similar criticism, chances are that something in the manuscript is unclear and needs to be revised.

Establishing your own peer group to review each other's manuscripts is a good way to improve feedback skills. As a master's student, one of us and two of her peers began an informal writing group for reviewing each other's research papers, becoming more proficient with this process. She continues this process today even though all three are in different fields at different universities.

Find Time to Write

In an ideal world, we would prefer to have large blocks of time to work on projects. However, this is not always possible. We therefore have to look for pockets of time to write. You can be structured or unstructured with your time. Sometimes the most opportune times are the easiest to overlook, such as using commuting time to write, read, take notes, and edit manuscripts. Some people find small pockets of time ineffective for productive writing and use them for relaxing and processing thoughts.

Creating a broad or narrow plan for completing writing projects is also an effective tool to stay motivated and focused. Sometimes, however, creating and perfecting the plan can inhibit your actual progress. In other words, you can become so fixated on the plan that you fail to write. Even the best plan cannot always resolve competing priorities. So if writing is a priority, something you may find helpful is scheduling writing time as you would schedule other appointments and meetings and then honoring your commitment to write.

Manage Writer's Block

An Internet search of educational Web sites using the keywords "writer's block" produced over fifty-two thousand entries. All writers at one time or another become blocked. Over half of all doctoral candidates end up ABD (all but dissertation) largely because of writer's block (Flaherty, 2004).

Preparing a scholarly manuscript is somewhat like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. A few pieces might easily snap into place. However, when your manuscript does not take shape quickly, you may become overwhelmed, frustrated, and blocked. The more you try, the more difficult it becomes, creating confusion, anxiety, and self-doubt.

It is a good idea at that point to set a troublesome project aside. Relaxing or changing direction sometimes allows you to gain perspective on that manuscript. Unexpectedly, another piece might snap into place, and you resume writing. More blocked moments may occur in the weeks that come, but with patience and persistence, you complete the manuscript. As for those extra pieces, they provide the stimulus for another manuscript.

Sometimes writer's block occurs because we are burned out or have read too much and experience information overload. Another common cause of writer's block is the inner critic (Boice, 1993). Each of us has an inner critic ready to criticize every word or sentence. If we give in, a block is likely to follow. Other common causes of writer's block are low self-confidence (Roberts, 2004), fear of failure or rejection (Boice, 1993), and perfectionism (Boice, 1993; Roberts, 2004).

Mind mapping (Germov, 2000) and freewriting (Elbow, 1998; Wahlstrom, 2006) are helpful for eliminating writer's block because they allow you to write in a nonjudgmental, natural way. Elbow and Wahlstrom both recommended freewriting in fifteen-minute slots to overcome writer's block. It does not matter what you write; what matters is that you are writing. This daily exercise often results in breakthroughs and movement toward finishing the manuscript.

Another helpful technique is talking through your ideas aloud. Conversing with others can help overcome your feeling of being incapable of thinking of anything meaningful to write. A recorder can be used to capture your thoughts in a manner similar to freewriting. This material can then be incorporated into the manuscript.

Writer's block also occurs when we are stressed and tired and when our goals or expectations are unrealistic (Boice, 1993; Roberts, 2004). You might intend to spend two or three hours at night writing, but after a ten-hour workday, this may be unrealistic. It is important to nourish your mind and body through sleep, exercise, and healthy eating. Write when you are most alert and can think clearly. One of us writes more clearly first thing in the morning and programs half an hour to write before heading to the office.

Express Your Scholarly Voice

Students often mimic academic writers rather than express their own voices (Rocco et al., 2003). Voice refers to the way we reveal ourselves to others when we write (Richards & Miller, 2005). Difficulties expressing one's voice are evident in manuscripts where the author has used direct quotes excessively or has excessively paraphrased others' work (Rankin, 2001; Roberts, 2004) without critically reflecting on content or developing a solid argument that will add something new to the knowledge base.

As emerging scholars, we might fall victim to the impostor phenomenon. Originally used to describe feelings of inadequacy in high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978), this phenomenon also describes the fear of failure that many emerging scholars wrestle with that can sabotage their success. The inner critic that contributes to writer's block can incapacitate us to the point where we convince ourselves that we are not worthy, experienced, or knowledgeable enough to participate in scholarly conversations. If we give in, we might find ourselves sitting on the sidelines, watching and listening, but not fully engaging with other scholars (Nackoney et al., 2007). Becoming scholars, however, requires that we exorcise the graduate student within each of us, "the self-assured yet hesitant, assertive yet deferential and conflicted self that emerges whenever we find ourselves paying less attention to what we're saying than to how it will be received" (Rankin, 2001, p. 61). As emerging scholars, we must trust ourselves and believe that we are capable and worthy of participating in scholarly conversations (Richards & Miller, 2005; Rocco et al., 2003).

Being scholars means approaching everything with curiosity, continuously questioning what we read, making new connections, and looking for gaps in the knowledge base. If what has already been written and published could never be challenged, eventually the scholarly flame would be extinguished.

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