September 2015

Why Don’t We Write?

Jeremiah A. Beatham  
Cedarville University, jbeatham@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol2/iss1/26

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English, Literature, and Modern Languages at DigitalCommons@Cedarville. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Idea of an Essay by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.
Instructor’s Notes

“Why Don’t We Write?” is an example of a Problem-Solution essay. At the end of the required semester of composition, the instructor asked Jeremiah and his classmates to identify problems in composition theory and pedagogy. Students were able to participate in the ongoing academic discourses about composition and composition theories in order to write papers that were academically relevant to the field of composition studies. In the first part of the paper, Jeremiah identifies a serious problem that besets many composition students—the lack of motivation students have in composition classes. Jeremiah identifies who can solve the problem and then uses deductive arguments to explain how the solution he suggests will solve the student-problem of lack of motivation in a composition course. Examine how Jeremiah integrates scholarly articles about composition theory and his own voice to identify the problem and then to move beyond complaining in order to solve the problem.

Writers’ Biography

Jeremiah Beatham is a second-year Industrial Design major from Mexico-- just a regular guy who isn’t used to writing things that stick out to people. He’s just as shocked as you are that he’s in this book, because typically he likes to make things with this hands or spend time outside, hopefully with good friends and family.

Why Don’t We Write?

Scritch, scratch, scuff, scuff. The sounds are of a pencil laying down graphite as fast as the young man can think until he pauses, erases, re-writes, brushes the rubber wisps off the page, and reads over his work. He sets his mechanical pencil down on the bed next to him, leans against the poster-collage of a wall, and sorts through the lines in the Moleskine, reciting his poem out loud,
composed in the excitement and thrill of a girl he’s been dating. She’s something special, so he’s been writing all evening, trying to capture his feelings for her. He’s motivated, to say the least. Another writer stations himself on the opposite side of the room, typing away at his cold, gray desk. Clackety-clack, tap-tap-tap. The sounds of this composition are much slower, and the author does not take time in poring over his work, trying to capture the slightest detail. Rather, this student stays up late because he has put off his writing assignment until the day before it was due. Why? Because he is not motivated. In fact, he’s neglected this assignment for weeks, and knows that once he turns the paper in, all he is going to get is purple pen marks for his labor. Not red lip marks like his fellow writer.

The biggest problem with Composition classes is the lack of motivation for students. The problem starts when students are given assignments that don’t relate directly to them. The tedious writing practice may call to an English major, or a writing-intensive major, but to the average student, there is nothing exciting in writing an essay, about something that does not interest them. As Lucille Parkinson McCarthy summarized, in her article “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum,” students write best on topics that they find relevant and exciting (245). A problem is created because the papers that student write do not relate to them, meaning students do not have any motivation to learn more about the topic that they are discussing.

The problem of motivation augments with the grading process. Students formulate paragraph after paragraph, only to hand it to the teacher, who then straps the piece to his Procrustean table to be hacked down to size. No student wants to turn in an essay that they know is going to be graded and handed back with no real application. Not only do student write papers that are graded and archived, but they are forced to write paper after paper, each one only standing for hours of work that will be covered in purple and then hidden forever. Students are not motivated to write for the sake of writing, but for the sake of producing something that the teacher wants. In the case of Dave Garrison, each work that he produced was simply what he thought the teacher wanted, and dedicated only as much time to each paper as he thought the teacher would like (McCarthy 244). Students realize that they are simply carrying out the task of producing paper after paper, and are not
motivated to invest in each one.

Writing teachers have the key to solving this problem. Because the problem of motivation dictates how much a student works on their paper, fixing this problem will reflect well on the teacher’s effectiveness, as well as the student’s grades. Teachers can do many things to motivate students—if teachers help students find a topic that they are interested in, allow and mandate that students revise their papers repeatedly, and finally, if teachers give papers a purpose, then students will be motivated.

The first step, choosing a relatable topic, is perhaps the easiest to accomplish. While some students in creative writing classes may be able to choose a subject, a writing class usually confines the students to a single idea, and forces each student to write on the same topic. This election means that whether or not the student is interested in igneous rocks, they must write about them. The solution for this is to give the students the task of writing about their own majors, hobbies, or something that means a lot to them. In an article “Learning ‘Schooled Literacy’: The Literate Life Histories of Mainstream Student Readers and Writers,” Rick Evans summarizes the story of how one particular student, Kelly, began her writing career with a craft, in which she made a plate for her parents, as a gift (320). Her affection for her parents motivated her to make the plate, and do the writing. Evans goes on to explain how Kelly was later forced to do writing, when she was forced to write letters to her grandmother (302). The writing was not motivated, because the girl did not want to write to her grandmother. Teachers must allow students to write on whatever topic interests them most—probably something in their major, or their favorite classes or activities. The focus on something that interests the student will motivate them to write about it.

Some may suggest that the best way to allow people to write freely would be to teach a creative-writing style. This approach misses the importance of being relevant, however, as the creativity in writing classes does not actually allow for a variety of topic, but requires students to write in a poetic, story-like format. This format, while being easy to read and write, does not have many applications that are relevant to students. In my own life, having taken two creative writing classes, I gained nothing from these classes for writing—they were merely an outlet to express my creativity. The
writing I did in that class was not revised, outside of minor grammar and spelling, because it was raw creativity—exactly what the teacher wanted. The stories and poems, once written, found their way into my mother’s stash of memorabilia from my childhood, and have yet to be read again. Having creative writing classes would not allow for students to be motivated then, because they only express a very narrow part of their lives, and with no final motivation.

The second part of the solution that teachers can implement is restricting the work to one paper. While this sounds rather foolish and rash, the outcome would be much better-processed papers. In her article “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” Nancy Sommers discusses the differences between writers in schools and those who have practiced writing for a long time. Those who had practiced revised their essays much more, deleting and re-arranging pages and paragraphs, in contrast to the student writers who would revise sentences or words (382-385). The comparison makes the distinction that the experienced writers are motivated to revise their work more because they have rethought it from different angles, given the paper time, and have established their thoughts on the topic. The advantage of having one paper for the composition course would be that students could continually revise their single essay all semester. Having one topic, one essay, and several deadlines to turn in revisions, all while being taught how to revise thoroughly would allow students to write to the best of their ability, dedicating time to one paper, and motivating them to have a nearly “perfect” essay in the end. The motivation would allow the student to understand the ideas that they have, as well as further their interests in the topic of choice.

Some teachers take the opposite approach to writing courses, requiring students to write several papers to get the maximum practice possible. This approach while pressuring students to put out many papers, ultimately would not work in motivating the students, as the students would not spend much time with each paper, only revising slightly before they were forced to turn in the next paper. The large load would also seem insurmountable, and would discourage students from writing, rather than motivating them to try to perfect their work.

Finally, the third part of the solution would be the purpose of the paper. I will define the purpose as who will see the paper, and
what will be done with the paper after the student has written and edited it. Teachers read many papers each year, but none of these papers make it beyond the audience of the teacher. For instance, a teacher will grade this paper and hand it back to the author, who will then stuff it in his homework folder. No one sees the paper beyond the teacher, student, and perhaps a writing mentor. If the paper were not only graded, but also published for other students and experts in the area of the topic to read, students would be motivated. Dave Garrison wrote several papers, tailoring each one to the specific desires of the teacher he was writing for. The difference in teachers determined his writing style, and motivated how and what he wrote. He only said what he thought the teacher wanted to hear (McCarthy 243). Students should have their essays graded, then published before an audience of peers and those interested in the subject being discussed, because it would allow the students to write more openly and thoroughly about their topic, being motivated with the goal of contributing to an audience and an academic discussion. Garrison continues to explain how writing is a community-motivated idea and a social function (234-235). Publishing papers would allow students to express their ideas and research from their perspective to a group that can understand and relate to the topic. The community motivates students, as they are contributing with their writing, not monologue-ing for a teacher.

Scritch, clackety-scratch, scuff-tap, scuff-click tap tap. The sounds are of a pair of writers, on both sides of the room, writing furiously as they compose a work, poem or paper, which they feel expresses themselves and relates to them. A piece that they have put time and effort into, and know will mean something once they are done writing. And while both may not get red lip marks for their work, neither will incur the dreaded purple pen marks.

Works Cited
McCarthy, Lucille Parkinson. “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum.” Research