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Caroline Watson

*Cedarville University*, [cwatson272@cedarville.edu](mailto:cwatson272@cedarville.edu)

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# Social Integration in Writing

*Caroline Watson*

*Caroline Watson is a sophomore accounting major from West Liberty, OH. She enjoys reading, spending time with her family, and anything that allows her to show her competitive spirit. She never considered herself a writer, but through the composition class she learned how to write well, and noticed that writing requires critique and involvement from outside sources.*

Freshman students fill the classroom, wondering what to expect from this class. The professor hands them a sheet of paper.

“This,” he explains, “is your first writing assignment.”

Immediately, students sigh, remembering past writing experiences and failures. They remember the frustration and loneliness that accompany writing and the incredible drain it has on a students’ time. No student in this class looks forward to writing assignments of any kind.

Students dread such writing assignments for many reasons. Many think that writing wastes time. Others believe that they do not write well and thus do not want to learn. Still others know they are good a writing and do not see why they should put in the effort to become better writers. The current education system contains many flaws when it comes to writing instruction, but educators and students often overlook one of the main problems: professors take the social aspect out of writing.

Professional writers often see writing as a solitary occupation. William Zinsser in his book *On Writing Well* contends that writing is a difficult and lonely occupation (3). Zinsser believes that the writer must concentrate on his writing and to do this the writer should lay aside all distractions, which often means complete seclusion. While they never admit it, students accept the idea that writing is a private activity with not outside participation. Many believe that only the teacher and the student are involved in the writing process. I am of two minds about Zinsser’s claim that writing is an individual activity. On the one hand, I agree that the writer must seclude himself or herself to accomplish anything. On the other hand, I believe Zinsser

overlooks the social aspect of writing. When professors take the social aspect of writing out of the writing process, students struggle to understand the material which leads to ineffective writing.

While many professors do not realize it, writing is supposed to be social. I do not want anyone to misunderstand, I do not mean that friends should surround the writer while he or she is writing. The writer would find it difficult to accomplish anything in this situation. Instead, I am speaking of social encouragement and critique in writing. Lucille Parkinson in her research study “A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing across the Curriculum,” she followed the college writing career of Dave. She observed his writing in three different classes: English Composition, Poetry, and Chemistry (236). She noticed that Dave performed fairly well in the writing assignments for both English Composition and Chemistry. However, in his poetry class, Dave almost failed the writing assignment. The difference, Parkinson found, was that in both Composition and Chemistry, the professor allowed Dave to discuss the material and the paper with his classmates and even to have an individual session with his professor. But the poetry professor, forbade any of his students collaborating or critiquing each other’s papers (243). Because the professor did not allow Dave and his fellow students to discuss and critique they did not understand the material. This lack of socialization in writing impairs students and fosters poor writing.

Historically, professional writers recognize the necessity of social writing. Famous and successful writers form clubs, gather together at writing conferences, or converse one on one about their latest work. One of the most famous social writing clubs was called the Inklings. David Downing in his article, “Who were the Inklings?” explains that the Inklings were a group of about a dozen British men, who were also aspiring writers. They wanted to have weekly meetings so that they could listen to each other’s work, critique it, and then offer encouragement the writer. Two of the Inklings’ prominent members were C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien (par. 2). Both of these men are well known for their creative writing and some of that credit goes to the Inklings for their social support. Without this group, Tolkien and Lewis would not have had the criticism to make their work better, nor the encouragement to continue writing. These successful writers placed great value on discussion, but somehow the current

education system has lost this mindset. These writers knew that it is imperative to have social critique and encouragement.

Many professors do not recognize this need for social interaction within writing. Furthermore, educators do not see the lack of such interaction as an issue. Without realizing it, these teachers take the social aspect out of writing. Many see writing as something that must be done alone. Because of this philosophy, most professors believe that students would become better writers if they just spent more time working on the wording, ideas, and structure of the paper through individual thought. But according to the article “Efficient Ways to Improve Student Writing,” published by the University of Wisconsin, “Students need to talk about papers in progress so that they can formulate their thoughts, generate ideas, and focus their topics,” (par. 9). There is a time for writing alone, but having social support from either peers or professionals aid the student or even the aspiring writer to refine his or her ideas and understand the material that much better. Aubrey Gillette in her essay “Advanced Students’ Individualism in Public High Schools,” observes that the current school system approaches education like a factory. She contends that educators want to create a certain type of student, one who can answer all of the questions and gain that certain test grade, but these same teachers, she argues, are not interested in preparing average students for society (5). This “factory” mindset takes social interaction out of every subject, but especially in writing. Most teachers and professors miss this problem of lacking social interaction in writing, but this problem can only be solved by these same educators.

This problem of social interaction in the writing arena is serious to educators. When professors neglect this imperative step in the writing process, there are both blatant and subtle consequences. A student will struggle to understand the material if his or her professor refuses to allow him or her to discuss writing assignments with classmates or anyone else. Dave from Lucille Parkinson’s study is a perfect example. In his chemistry and composition classes, Dave spoke with his fellow students about the writing assignments. In his poetry class, Dave’s professor required him to write a paper in which he analyzed a poem. However, because the professor did not allow him to appeal to his peers for help, Dave misunderstood the poem, and received a corresponding grade. The professor rationalized that

if the students discussed the poems amongst themselves, they would rely on members of the group and not do any work themselves (257). When a student does not understand the material, he or she does not learn. This defeats the most important goal for a teacher. In addition, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein in their book *They Say, I Say*, indicate that when one writes well, he or she enters the greater academic conversation (xvii). Educators should be preparing their students to enter this conversation, but instead students graduate every year, unprepared and without understanding the mystery of writing. If professors do not prepare students and the students do not learn, then these professors have failed in their primary mission.

Educators also experience other consequences which are much subtler. Students who do not learn in a class, develop negative views about that particular teacher. Theresa Guillory in her essay, "From Incompetence and Isolation to Confidence," explains that when students are dissatisfied, this attitude manifests itself on course evaluation forms. In addition, when a professor receives a poor evaluation, Guillory contends that other professors will also evaluate that professor poorly. This low evaluation could lead to the professor's dismissal from the educational institution (3). All educators want to keep their positions. I contend that by ignoring this problem professors unknowingly endanger their livelihood. Every professor and teacher should be aware of this problem.

When approaching this situation, there are many potential solutions. First, some might say that that educators should require students to participate in class discussions. With this solution, professors force students into social interaction, of a sort, which, many contend satisfies the need. Still others may contend that the professor should allow his students to work on their papers together. In Parkinson's study, Dave's professor did not allow him to discuss his paper with anyone in his class. If professors reversed this regulation, some argue that the problem could be fixed. These two solutions, while plausible at first, will not work in practical education.

Both of these potential solutions contain basic flaws. The first solution helps one group but isolates another group, thus making the problem worse. Those who do not think well on the spot will struggle and feel uncomfortable. If students are thrown into an academic discussion about which they have not thought, these students will have to exert much effort to participate and gain any

advantage from such a system. While this solution would help some students greatly, such as those who are more extroverted, those who require contemplation and deep thought before speaking, those who are more introverted, will learn little. The second solution is also ineffective. Besides the fact that some students will lack motivation to collaborate on writing assignments, other students will continue to work together even though they are forbidden from sharing information. Dave, from Lucille Parkinson's study, confessed that he talked about his poetry paper with his girlfriend, against the expressed desire of his professor (257). While these solutions will not, there is a solution that is simple and can easily remedy the problem. This lack of social interaction within writing can be corrected by fostering classroom discussion, encouraging the critique of trained individuals, and implementing peer criticism.

Students lose social interaction because professors do not permit the students to discuss class material. While I do not think professors should require discussion, I believe that professors should stimulate and encourage such discussion. The professor must not force discussion, but should instead give students an opportunity to offer their opinions. Social writing also allows the professor to correct inaccurate assumptions students make about the material. Many professors perceive education as solely a transfer of knowledge. While some excel at encouraging students to share their opinions and to learn through discussion, most professors approach education as lecture-based. However, for most students, a class in which taking notes alone is not an effective learning style. If a student can listen to the information, take notes, and discuss the thoughts posed by the professor, he or she remembers much more clearly and can use the gained knowledge. Discussion within the classroom, which is encouraged by the educator, will accomplish the goal of every professor: for the students to learn. For students like Dave, discussion aids in comprehension. In Dave's poetry class, the professor could have discussed the poems with his students and permitted them to review the poetry amongst themselves. If he had, the students would have written much better because they understood the material. Classroom discussion would resolve the problem of lost social interaction with respect to writing.

In addition to encouraging discussion, professors should implement peer evaluation as a solution to this social stagnation.

Many students dread one thing above all else: red ink. As a student, I never enjoyed receiving my papers from my teacher because I knew I would then have to decipher the comments and red markings on my paper, which would then mean revision. To the student, this paper looks like it has been murdered, with red splattered everywhere. The student is discouraged and has no idea what to fix or why that section needs correction. Because teachers rarely explain these comments and corrections, the professor's instruction is ineffective. Thus, some students fail to correct these problems and receive a corresponding grade. However, if the professor allowed the students to critique each other's papers, the students would benefit greatly, the professors would not have to spend time grading rough drafts, and the students could implement their knowledge of writing. While there are many potential problems with this system, such as students giving bad suggestions or offering fluffy comments, this system can be beneficial to all students. However, there is one prerequisite to this practice: the teacher must inform the students, in detail, how to properly write. Without this clear instruction, students will only know how to give unhelpful advice to their peers. But once they know how to identify good writing, not only can they help other students see flaws, this system also provides confidence because he or she finally understands the mystery of writing and is able to aid others. This is social writing at its best. When a student is able to articulate the essence of good writing to his or her peer, a teacher has successfully taught that student and given him or her an opportunity to apply these new found skills.

While it is helpful to receive suggestions and criticism from peers, full social integration in classroom writing involves the critique of the professor and other experienced writers. First of all, the thought of discussing papers privately with a professor terrifies students. A sense of dread comes over him or her. Students think that it will just be a half an hour session in which the professor will destroy his or her hard work. While these ideas are often unrealistic, they still cross the minds of students. However, most writing professors are willing to review a paper with the student. Just because a student had a bad experience in high school, discussing the paper does not have to be traumatizing and it can be one of the most beneficial ways for a student to understand the material, gain a firm grasp on the paper, or make needed revisions. Aysegul Bayraktar in his research

study “Nature of Interactions during Teacher-Student Writing Conferences, Revisiting the Potential Effects on Self-Efficacy Beliefs,” points out that when students discuss their writing with a teacher, those students who are more confident in their writing benefited more from the session (77). While it may be true that more advanced writing students learn more in teacher-student meetings, I believe that students step toward this skill and confidence in writing by initiating such conferences. When students are accustomed to the practice of going over papers with a professor, this very practice will make them better writers, more confident in their writing abilities, and satisfy the need for socialization in writing.

However, applying to the course administrator is not the only way to get feedback from more experienced individuals, a student can participate in peer consultations. While this may seem like the workshops I mentioned before, it is quite different. Many schools have implemented writing centers where students in all courses and fields of study can come to discuss their papers. Cedarville University has one such writing center. On their website, the administrators of the Cedarville writing center make it clear that the writing center is a place where students can get critique from peers, but those who work at the writing center will not proofread, nor write your paper. The goal of the writing center is to help students improve their writing skills through social interaction (par. 1). Those who work at the writing center are college students who have gone through intensive training, preparing them to critique and encourage aspiring writers. The administrators also clearly state that the writing center is meant to be a comfortable and relaxed environment (par. 1). If a student is set against a one-on-one consultation with his or her teacher, then the writing center is the perfect place for the student to receive experienced critique which, in the end, will help the student to learn more through social writing.

Many in society either do not recognize or ignore the lack of social interaction in writing in education as a problem. High school teachers and even college professors, the ones who can remedy this situation, are among the guiltiest. Practically everyone realizes that there is a problem when it comes to the comprehension of the material and writing about that material. These issues are

interconnected. Because students do not understand the material, they are not able to effectively write and thus do not learn anything. But the good news is that if professors apply these simple remedies to this lack of social writing, it can make a significant impact on this important issue.

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