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Further Thoughts on Better Writing

By Terry Pollman, University of Nevada at Las Vegas

As writing teachers, we frequently witness the mystery of how writing and re-writing clarifies thinking. We teach our students to let the writing process show them the gaps in their reasoning. As students edit, they learn that paring away the superfluous allows us to see the line and structure of the argument. When a section or a sentence "won't write," it is often because we are trying to ignore a flaw in our understanding. Form is related to content. The attempt to simplify our message teaches us what is it we have to say.

During the writing process we read and interpret text. Modern literary scholars have argued that the process of interpreting a text is more than discovering the author's intention; it is an act of negotiating meaning. The particularized reader brings a context to the text and it is through the dialogue between reader and text that meaning emerges. Composition theorists have noted that the writing process replicates this negotiation but adds another layer. The author as writer creates text. The author as reader negotiates the text's meaning. The author as writer revises based on the new meaning discovered by the author as reader. And so the circle continues with the author learning during every step of the process

There is an illustrative saying among scholars that I first heard as a law student from my professor and mentor, Dean Toni Massaro. Sometimes when I asked Dean Massaro's opinion on a topic, she would answer, "You know what they say--I don't know what I think about that, because I haven't written about it yet."

The panelists at the section meeting on "Better Writing, Better Thinking" remind us of the pedagogical importance of law schools requiring significant writing training. Dean Judith Wegner spoke of the goal of law school training as transforming epistemology, or transforming our individual theories of what it means to know. If our experience tells us we know something in a different way after we've written about it, then writing offers an important way to accomplish this task. In other words, learning to write as a lawyer is another way to learn to think as a lawyer. Professor Mary Beth Beazley talked of intervening in the writing process. The "private memo" she described shows us one way to make the negotiation between author and text into a three-way conversation between author, text and teacher. The "self-graded draft" makes explicit the lessons students can learn from their own texts. Dean Kent Syverud reminded us that "making thinking explicit is something better done through writing than orally." Finally, both Dean Wegner and Dean Syverud helped us to remember that through our attention to learning theory, we are gaining powerful allies to deal with the external problems of status or traditions that sometimes interfere with using writing to learn. Dean Syverud told us the problems are all surmountable if we keep the will to surmount them.

The discussion brought to mind a cartoon I recently shared with one of my writing classes. During the Watergate Scandals of the early 1970s, investigative reporters asked about President Richard Nixon, "What did he know and when did he know it?" The press revived the question last year in regard to whether agencies in the United States government had knowledge that might have prevented, or lessened the tragedies of September 11th. Last May, while the question was filling the news, *The New Yorker* magazine published a cartoon that depicted skeptical parents discussing a proud graduate who stands before them in cap and gown, diploma in hand. The caption reads, "*What does he know, and how long will he know it?"*

The panel discussion on Writing as Thinking at the AALS meeting in January reminds us that the questions of what law graduates know, and how they know it, and thus, how long they will know it is profoundly influenced by teaching better writing for better thinking.

* * *

The cartoon is printed in *The New Yorker*, 84 (May 27, 2002).

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