



# An English Professor's Search for Meaning

Creating Meaning in Comp 101

Sarah Rothschild, Scholarship of Excellence in Teaching

# The Issue: Superficial Essays

- Historically, my composition students have written essays that lack the depth and meaning they could otherwise have.
  - Quick topic choice
    - Jumping to the obvious
  - Quick examples
    - Trite
    - Poorly developed

# The Goal: Meaningful Work

- My goal was to help my students create essays that have more meaning, both for them and for their audience
  - For the students: Finding what they actually believe may make the work more rewarding – and might avoid the busywork feel of many required classes
  - For the audience: In-depth thought brings forth interesting, unique ideas – and an interesting, unique reading experience

Why?

I Am Old

and

I Am Selfish

# Scholarship

Metacognition

Relevance

Critical Thinking

- The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking  
Richard Paul and Linda Elder
- Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for  
College Teachers  
Claire Major, Elizabeth Barkley, Patricia Cross

# The Method

- The iterative nature of writing
- Peer reviews
- Further exercises to encourage examination
- Revision and rationale for revision
- Reflection

# For Example

- Essay 1: Personal Narrative. The story of a time that taught the student a lesson that is still relevant today.
- The peer review focused not just on the structure, grammar, etc - but focused on the questions of relevance: relevant to the author at the time? Relevant today? Relevant to others?
- Going inward to paradoxically be more relevant outward.

# Student Revision

## MetaCognition

never bullied in the first place. I wish I could fit in. I wish I could be popular. I wish I could make more friends. I wish I could have understood about the bullying situation sooner rather than later". [I added quotes here to show that there are my thoughts.] I felt I was shocked because I did not think that anyone as nice as me would ever be bullied. [I added this sentence in so that the feeling of being shocked was covered in this paper.] I reacted to the bullying by being upset, worried, scared, disappointed, and shocked. [I changed the order of the feelings because I wanted them to be in the same order as it was discussed in this paragraph.]

After I talked to my mom and understood how serious the bullying situation was on the third day, I decided to resolve the issue. [I decided to delete the sentence afterwards since the first sentence of the paragraph already talked about why I decided to resolve the issue.] I spent the rest of that night on the third day thinking about how to address the problem, but then with



# Student Response

- I wanted to try and immerse the readers into the trilingual world. I wanted to **use some words in all three languages** to try and **relate to them** or get them to see a little the world of some people who speak multiple languages.
- This assignment was quite a fun ride. **I only wish it had more time** to talk about some other fun and weird moments. **I guess that will be for another time.**

# Student Self-Reflection

Review had a harder time reading it.

8. One purpose of this essay was self-examination. Was yours meaningful to you?  
Yes, very meaningful, it has been without a doubt the best months of my life and it was great to take time and reflect why it has been the best months of my life.
9. Another purpose of this essay is to connect with your audience and inspire them to a little self-reflection. Do you think you accomplish that? Why or why not?  
Yes, in my peer reviews I saw that my essay was a bit meaningful to them and it inspired them to go out and change or keep on going with the changes that already made.
10. If you were to consider the 4 essays you wrote for this class, which one was most meaningful to you? Why? And if none were meaningful – why not?  
The self-reflective essay was the most meaningful to me because I was able to write out the last few months of this very strange year has at one point been the worst time of my life to the best time of my life within this crazy year.

# My Findings

- Students have embraced the iterative process more; their revisions are \*actually\* revised
- Students have helped each other in more meaningful ways, especially when asked to look for specifics: emotional content, analysis, specific examples/development
- The essays have been more fulfilling to read, and (at least in some instances) more fulfilling for the students to write

# If They Learned Nothing Else...

Find a topic you care deeply about and which you in your heart believe others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

- Stephen King

If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else.

- Yogi Berra

The first draft of everything is shit.

-Ernest Hemingway