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Learning to be a Writer, Again: Lessons from the Oregon Writing Project Summer  
Workshop

Learning to be a Writer, Again:  
Lessons from the Oregon Writing Project Summer Workshop

All of the instructors I know recognize the fact that writing is important for academic and work-place communication; and it is essential for learning and thinking. Yet the planning of writing projects elicits an inner voice that whines, much like my 4 -year old, “Do I have to?” The foreboding voice of doom warns us of hours of grading, deciphering poor sentences, reading papers that reflect no interest or enthusiasm, and worrying about plagiarism. Yet, I teach one writing intensive course and several others in which I require extensive amounts of writing. Why do I torture myself so? Because I know it is important and I know that every year I find a new way to make my inner voice more complacent.

Working toward quieting that inner voice was what attracted me to a workshop sponsored by both Eastern Oregon University’s Summer Teaching Institute for College Faculty and the Oregon Writing Project. I have been through several workshops centered on writing across the curriculum and tools for writing intensive courses but this OWP workshop would be like no other, combining demonstration and discussion of best teaching practices, student writing tips, faculty writing assignments. The Oregon Writing Project, as an extension of the National Writing Project, works with teachers to improve the teaching of writing in classrooms ([www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org)). The Summer Institute at EOU was described to me as a “working community of scholars invested in the practical and scholarly aspects of teaching. Because we are thinkers and writers ourselves, the Institute will also function as a site for producing and sharing

our own writing with fellows in the institute.” Who could reject such an offer; plus a small summer stipend?

Eight faculty, from a wide range of disciplines and personal experiences, shared not just ideas and techniques for teaching writing (based on John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*) but our own writing. We wrote and we wrote and we wrote, until we remembered what it was like to be able to write as one felt, to be enthusiastic about writing, to be able to choose a format or a genre that best fit our ideas; or to challenge ourselves with a new format. Then we shared and shared and shared, forcing ourselves to complete that most personal step of reading our writing aloud - not to make presentations (we did that too) but to read word for word a creative effort. To remember what words sound like not just what they look like. And then to be on the receiving end of comments, not the line-by-line comments you get from journal editors, but comments in which content and feeling were prevalent. Comments that reflected all those techniques of grading without editing that I have long vowed to try but have implemented less than successfully.

In this paper, I share my experiences with this group in tackling a widespread but entwined set of issues including: writing as learning, making better student writers . . . not better student papers, and that ultimate issue At the best teachers of writing are writers themselves. Finally, I will reflect on how successfully I have carried through with my plans for changing writing assignments, grading practices and my overall perspective on writing. This paper reflects a journey through many dangerous waters from which a cadre of college faculty and I emerged refreshed, not drowned.

We joined the workshop not knowing who else would be involved. A few weeks before the program began, the group was revealed to include eight faculty on the EOU campus (it had been open to community college faculty in the region, as well). And eight more varied disciplines and faculty you could not have planned: theater, mathematics, computer science/multimedia, english/writing (one instructor specializing in English-as-a-Second Language), a lawyer turned gender studies professor, and me, an agricultural economist. We met for 22 weeks from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. We followed a fairly regimented schedule that began with 30 minutes (yes, 30 minutes) of personal/reflective writing, followed by several teaching presentations, discussion of Bean's book, and on selected days the sharing our papers. All totaled we each produced:

1. a personal notebook of reflective writing;
2. a 5-minute Experimental Teaching Presentation, a short in-class activity which we had never done before, accompanied by a précis;
3. a 15-20 minute Teaching Showcase, a longer teaching activity which we had used with success, accompanied by a précis;
4. summaries for two assigned chapters of the Bean book, read aloud ("shared");
5. an introductory piece entitled "A Teaching Autobiography," shared;
6. two other pieces which became a "Two-Piece Suite", one topic addressed through two different writing genres/perspectives, each was then shared; and
7. a scribe's summary of the previous day's activities, shared. This was the "Cinderella" job - we each signed up for two days of what we thought would be note-taking drudgery,

only to find that this activity sparked the greatest showcase of our creativity; everything from poems and dictionaries to playbills and plays.

All in all we wrote a LOT and worked pretty darn hard to accomplish everything. And personally I had not “shared” so much since preschool show and tell.

Quite honestly, my immediate thought was - what the heck is a précis? Followed by - I have to read my writing aloud to these people - to actors, poets and essayists? Beyond that I thought, well this is going to be a lot of work; it might be fun; and is my writing going to hold up to the standards of this group?

My fears were not completely allayed but I came to grips with them, as I suspect the others did as well. My favorite part of the workshop was writing without interruption or pressure every morning. Just having that first cup of coffee and settling into my own thoughts was a pleasure I thought only came to “Bohemians” and the Steven Kings of the world. It was difficult at first, I was unsure of where to let my thoughts take me. But as the workshop progressed I used that time for many things. I might play with an idea for one of my essays or another paper I was working on. I might write some notes on an activity to try in class. Some days the best I could do was to list 5 reasons why my kids did not need a trampoline or to make a grocery list. But it was my time to reflect, create, list - whatever. That blank page of my journal became a welcome repository of many thoughts.

My least liked activity was having to “become” a bird of paradise for the theater instructor’s Teaching Showcase activity. I came to know and enjoy this woman, who was 90

pounds of theatrical energy. Her short lecture on drama and the use of masks was very interesting. I even enjoyed her explanation of how performers “shu” the mask before wearing it. That is to listen to its physical qualities and what it asks of you. But when I had to shu that bird of paradise mask I became a shrinking violet. Yet, afterwards as we discussed our experiences, I was confronted with parallels between shuing a mask and staring at that blank page upon which you are to write a paper. Taking on a topic requires the same reflection as shuing a mask.

In between these experiences, I came to appreciate the teaching skills and secrets of these colleagues and friends. I learned to share my writing with minimal embarrassment or fear. I also found the breadth of topics refreshing. It brought back that feeling of curiosity. Remember when you were interested in everything and couldn't decide what to be when you grew up? That's an important feeling to keep. One day we heard readings concerning the English-as-a-Second-Language student's experience, another marriage and contract law, and yet another mathematics and the Klein Bottle. (A one-sided surface having no inside or outside.) The greatest result was leaving the group with the feeling of being a “writer” - in the creative/artistic sense, not the “published” sense. I am a writer. I will try and write everyday. I enjoy writing and I want my students to feel this way about writing too.

There are bits and pieces from this workshop that I tried to use in my courses this year and pieces that I plan on using. I have used reflective writing, the Two-Piece Suite, and I have also tried to use several ideas extracted from Bean's philosophy on how best to comment on student papers.

Within the workshop we discussed at length the idea that students are under a lot of pressure when writing; there are a plethora of guidelines, deadlines and topics. The idea of writing for fun has been lost for most students, especially those outside of the english/writing discipline. Perhaps this is one reason why many students seem to have such difficulty producing a paper that reflects logic and intellect, as well as their own critical or reflective thinking. They just don't have enough time to reflect before they write. I tried to address this in my junior-level Natural Resource Economics class, a class in which I already use several forms of writing. This class in particular had shown me how uncomfortable students are with writing. Every year they balk at a science fiction piece I ask them to write. They want guidelines, rules, "what's supposed to be in it" – they can't deal with "this should be fun for you." So, I decided to set-aside 10 minutes at the beginning of class for reflective writing. I did not always give them any specific topic. My only goal was to get students to write on a regular basis, hoping that it would reduce anxiety and stimulate thought. I didn't have any expectations of directly measuring its success, although I hoped it would be reflected in better papers throughout the course.

My greatest disappointment in completing this activity was in my own inability to make the ten minutes a necessity. If I felt we were behind, it was the first thing to go. It's an experience similar to waiting for a student, any student, to respond to a question in class - how long can you stand the silence? The students' initial reaction was not unlike my own feeling just three months previous. They were resistant and confused by the command to "just write," and a few insisted on doing homework during this time, as opposed to reflective writing. I think I can eliminate

some of these problems by, at least initially, offering a topic or by suggesting they work on an upcoming class paper to focus their writing. I tried a topic on several occasions and it seemed to assist students in focusing and provide segue into topics for the day. The exercise also settled the class and when the time was up it was much easier for us to plunge right into the day's activities. The students also remarked on the benefits of this focusing effect. However, some students were leery of my objective in doing this exercise. One student felt that I must have been doing this because I didn't have enough material to fill the entire hour. I had discussed my motives in class for this exercise, but to assure students, I will include it in the syllabus next year.

The second activity I used was the Two-Piece Suite in a small Readings course. Each fall I offer a Readings in Natural Resources course. For the past two years we have read and discussed Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*. This year, I asked students to keep a running journal of ideas as they read the book and then complete two writings, each addressing a single aspect of the book in different forms. As a group we discussed how they could meet the requirements and made suggestions. Both writings were submitted as drafts initially, for all or nothing credit, and then both revised versions were submitted together at the end of class. The results I got were very gratifying for my first attempt. It was difficult to give them the confidence to venture into unknown genres of writing, so the writings are not greatly diverse. Also, I really wanted them to share their writings in class, but we simply didn't have time. So we produced a "book" in which we included everyone's writing. They decided to make the submissions anonymous. I suspect



this was primarily due to fear of peer evaluations. I would have preferred they take credit for their pieces.

Their writings were very reflective and creative, and an appropriate outcome for this course. They offered me poetry, obituaries, essays from both human and dog perspectives, among others. I certainly could not grade these with the aptitude and insight of an english/writing instructor. But I did offer them general comments from the perspective of a reader, such as content and flow. The students I worked with did not fit any profile that would have given me clues about their creative ability. We both learned that given the opportunity, agriculture students are amazingly creative, poetic, and reflective; and they can enjoy writing. Next year I plan to put the readings together for distribution again, but I will also make time for them to share their works in class.

In addition to these activity-based changes, I also tried to incorporate some ideas from Bean's *Engaging Ideas*. Our OWP group was very interested in how to write effective comments on student papers (Chapter 14 of *Engaging Ideas*). Early on in our workshop we had visited with the director of our student-writing center and discussed how to engage students to improve their papers. One member of the group presented what become known as the "Rosemary Sandwich"; this is a format of writing comments on student papers that had been suggested by a respected colleague - Rosemary. The sandwich consisted of greeting the student and saying something positive about the paper (Mike: I really like your topic selection); followed by a list of what's wrong with the paper (However, you did this, this and this wrong); topped off with an

encouraging pat on the back (I look forward to reading the final version). Little did we know that we would find support for this kind of comment among the experts, with the bitterness of the sandwich filling removed. Our writing center staff coach their tutors to use a similar sandwich approach. Bean recommends that end comments on drafts be a form of personal correspondence that follows the scheme of *strengths-major problems-recommendation*. In all my writing courses I try to either require, or strongly encourage, revisions and I try to use this more personal and congenial method of commenting on papers. Revisions have been very popular in my courses that do not require revisions, since I have tried this comment method.

But I don't think the comments would work as well without being partnered with another aspect of Bean's work, that of the teacher serving two roles: coach and judge (Chapter 13). This approach appeals to me, as it did to our group in general. The role of coach is a much more friendly role that engages students to revise, rethink and invest in their writing. This role also reduces the task of editing, which I think we all struggle to suppress. Bean and others suggest that we generalize the editorial errors in our end comments, relate how they make the paper less effective, and let the students know they are responsible for finding and fixing grammatical errors. I found that placing this responsibility on the student's shoulders encourages peer proofreading and the use of the writing center. When revised papers are submitted the teacher's role changes to judge, at which time the "law" or grading criteria (Chapter 15) takes over. My grading criteria reflect the importance of their responsibility. But of course I often sneak an edit in here or there.

I want to conclude with a few simple comments. First, I highly recommend that you seize the opportunity to be involved in your state's section of the National Writing Project. If you do not have an active NWP program, find someone to start one! I have just recently been invited to be an OWP fellow again this summer. This workshop will not separate primary, secondary and college teachers. I expect that the experience will be completely different than last year but provide me with still more lessons and enthusiasm for writing. I am a better writer because of this workshop, and I am inspired to make better writers of my students, not better student papers.

Second, remember to practice your own writing. Try to set aside a time to write, and write for yourself. I am disappointed in my inability to sustain my own everyday writing activity. I allowed myself to fall out of the habit of everyday reflective writing – but returned to it when I started this paper. Writing must be self-discovery and expression, or we - as I did- lose the joy of writing. When writing is presented simply as a task, you cannot expect yourself or others to be inspired to write.

In the spirit of the OWP, I will share with you one piece of my OWP Two-Piece Suite. This is not the kind of writing you normally see in this type of paper. But I use it to challenge you and your students to write in all forms, not just a few business or professional forms. During the workshop, I chose to write about my students, who they are, both statistically and then spiritually. I challenged myself to write a *sestina*. Sestina is a word, like *précis*, that I learned thanks to my workshop colleagues in english/writing. (By the way, a *précis* is an abstract or summary). A *sestina* is a verse form, which focuses on six words. The six words appear at the

end of each of six lines in six verses (or *sestets*), the placement of the words within each of the six sestets rotates, the last word of the last line of the first verse moves to be the last word of the first line of the second verse, the rest moving down one line; until the sestina ends with a 3 line *envoi* (closing stanza) in which all six words appear in the reverse order of the first verse. It took me weeks but I was stubborn. It was worth every excruciating minute - for the self-satisfaction and the awe on the faces of my english/writing colleagues who thought I would never abandon the inverted triangle approach to writing and life.

*Who Are You?  
A Sestina for My Students  
(my apologies to Pete, Roger, John and Keith of The Who)*

*Who are you? Boxed, packaged and brought over the bridge  
from home to university. Are you here because we are a similar self?  
Classes, friends, clubs and plans; will you adopt these as your new family?  
Have you come knowing and seeking the treasure of education  
or are you merely adrift, seeking somewhere to land  
but unable to stay if the shore should prove too soft or too hard of footing?*

*Who are you? How will we know if you keep high footing  
it back home? Retreating back across the bridge  
to safety, to the known, to a land  
of common denominators. How will you find your academic self?  
While you are at home someone else is embezzling your education.  
Take what is yours. Embrace it. Draw it into your family.*

*Who are you? Nature, animals, plants, family,  
genus, species bring us together. Business, marketing, calculate the footer  
on the ledger. Bring your interest and life to this educational  
process. Bring them to my classroom. I will travel your way if you dare to bridge  
the gap to my world. You need to see for your-self  
what others have seen and moved beyond. Speaking for farmer, for nature, for land.*

*Who are you? Wheat in the field, sapling of the land.  
Can you share with me the lessons of life from your family?  
You are deer in the forest, hawks on the wing but which self  
will control you? Strong shoulders from a youth in safe harbors with strong footings,  
you love the wind on your brow and the sun on the bridge  
of your nose. It will serve you well as you struggle through education.*

*Who are you? Oh you're going to give me an education?!  
I'll give you a map to the stars, if you give me the lay of the land.  
Show me canasta, pinochle, euchre and bridge.  
I'll show you mysteries of the market, foundations of policy, the family  
of agriculturalists, economists and those that laid down footing  
for us to follow. We'll both gain and lose a part of our-selves.*

*Who are we? We are learners, ready to open our-selves.  
Inhaling the fresh air of education.  
Extending our paths, unafraid of new footing.  
Exhaling to share our experiences with the land.  
Forming new and keeping old ties to home and family.  
Always remembering to look both ways - but always crossing the bridge.*

*Seek not just safe footing, travel with me to new lands,  
We will find a self, matured and colored by an education  
built upon the strength of our families. Now, which bridge?*

# Learning to Be a Writer, Again

*Lessons from the Oregon Writing  
Project Summer Workshop*

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# National Writing Project

- The mission of the National Writing Project (NWP) is to improve the teaching of writing and improve learning in the nation's schools.
- <http://www.writingproject.org>



# *NWP* Guiding Principles

- the best teachers of teachers are themselves classroom teachers
- writing enhances learning in all areas
- the best teachers of writing are themselves writers





# Oregon Writing Project

- each summer about twenty teachers are selected as Summer Institute Fellows.
- Fellows are selected on the basis of teaching experience
- Fellows become OWP Teacher-Consultants



- In 2002 OWP and Eastern jointly sponsored a Summer Teaching Institute for College Faculty, based on the OWP best practices model, which has already become a national model, emulated by other NWP sites.



# Summer 2002 OWP/EOU



- Eight of us
  - Theatre
  - Mathematics
  - Computer science
  - Multimedia/English
  - Gender studies
  - English/writing
  - English as a Second Language
  - Ag./NR Economist



# Work, and Lots of It!

- Reflective, personal work.
- Two teaching précis.
- Two summaries of Bean's text.
- A Teaching Autobiography.
- Two-Piece Suites.
- Scribe's notes.
- "Sharing" our writing.



# My Initial Thoughts

- What the heck is a précis?
- Can my writing hold up to these creative people??



# Scribe Notes Examples

June 28, 2002

*“It was a cool and cloudy day in La Grande, like any other day, except the icicles hung in the air from the generator humming away in the guts of Loso Hall...I walked into the room with detached curiosity, wondering what Dame Witte, the high pillow, would have in store for us today. We used to d.o.o.t.s.b., but I had her doped as a dangerous dolly.” (s. ellston)*



July 1, 2002

*Well, Sandy played Hammer and warned “Watch the Dame!”  
(Though marijuana, sex, prostitutes were out of this game.)*

*The reading was Noir-ish, the humor was thick*

*But where were our checks?! Hah! It must be the “Chick”!*

*A Consumer Choice Story! Penny starts with a splash  
with M and M’s, SweeTarts and five bucks in cash.*

*We’ll pick out the format that speaks to our stuff*

*It’s profit/production – but it’s not **that** tough!*

*Calculus scares me though I hear it’s “whip cream” ...*

*(s.witte)*



# PLAYBILLS

The EOU Theater Magazine

July 12, 2002

\$2.50

## *Reviews: Off-Broadway*

### *A Final Good Bye: Teachers, Writers, and Lovers*

*We should note the ending of a truly fantastic 2 1/2 week run of the EOU Summer Teaching Institute's production of **Teachers, Writers and Lovers**. This bold play brought characters and performers of many genres and backgrounds together in amazing synchrony. We have enjoyed every performance. Each time the curtain rose, the performers brought a little something different to the stage. How they found the will to be witty, smart and intelligent every time they heard their cue is beyond us. We will truly miss this show. We hope that someone next summer brings it back with yet another all-star cast. Hats off to producer Sarah Witte for keeping the coffee brewing, and the juices flowing.*

*(p.diebel)*



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5/18/04

Student Writing in Agriculture



# The Best was .....

- The Bohemian Lifestyle
  - 30 Minutes of Writing
  - First thing
  - Quiet
  - Reflective
  - Personal
  - My choice



# The Worst was.....



- An Uncomfortable Situation
  - “shuing” the mask
  - Many of us were “shrinking violets”
  - YET - “shu” the topic/paper: what is it asking of you?



# The End Result was.....

- I am a Writer
- I enjoy writing
- I will try to write every day
- I want my students to feel this way about writing
- “better student writers, not better student papers”



# Students to Writers: *Applications*

- Reflective Writing Plan
  - 10 minutes of writing time.
  - Beginning of each day of class.
- Reflective Writing Results
  - Do it! Don't let something else get in the way.
  - Explain the purpose to students.
  - Use topics until students get used to the idea.
  - Students focus.



# Students to Writers: *Applications*

- Two-Piece Suite Plan
  - Required of a *Readings* course.
  - *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold.
  - Journal + two pieces related to the book.
- Two-Piece Suite Results
  - Thoughtful writing.
  - Revised writing and used the portfolio format.
  - Need to “share” during course, as well as publish.



# Sample of Student Writing

*Natural murals are set before our eyes  
To enjoy and share and enjoy again  
The world is blessed with natural beauty  
That is remembered in this man's pen*

*Simple things surround us in January.  
The pleasures of awakened animals and thawing trees.  
Fragile creatures make the slightest noises  
As they refresh senses with all there is to see....*

*(AREc 405 student-anonymous)*



### ***Fetchin' Supper (Suite #1)***

*The creak of the bedroom door drags me from my slumber. I drearily turn my face from the warmth of the fire to see my man standing already dressed in the doorway. I catch the faint scent of birds on his clothes, and a rush of adrenaline surges through my body as I realize what this morning will bring! .....*

### ***A Morning with Bandit (Suite #2)***

*..... As I opened my bedroom door, I glanced over at the wood stove .... My dog, Bandit, was in his favorite spot, curled up against the warm bricks behind the stove. He looked at me for a second, and then ran over and jumped on me, wagging his tail frantically. The greeting seemed more emphatic than usual, and I wondered if he knew that I was going to take him hunting today....*

*(AREc 405 student- anonymous)*



# Students to Writers: *Applications*

- Writing Comments Plan
  - Known to us as the “Rosemary Sandwich”.
  - According to Bean’s text: *strengths-major problems-recommendation*.
  - Also the personal letter format.
- Writing Comments Results
  - Students read it and think.
  - More use of Writing Center.
  - Revisions are better and more frequent.





# Students to Writers: *Applications*

- “Coach” and “Judge” Plan
  - Encourage students to invest in their writing.
  - Reduce red ink editing.
  - Move editing responsibility to students.
- “Coach” and “Judge” Results
  - More Writing Center visits about editing comments.
  - Reduced focus on me to find all the errors.
  - Fewer complaints about final grades.
  - Forces me to have a good grading rubric.



# Concluding Comments

- Get involved with a NWP group!
- Make time for your own reflective writing !
- Challenge yourself to write every day – challenge your students to write every day.
- Keep the inspiration to make “better student writers, not better student papers”



# The Spirit of OWP

- *Who Are You ? A Sestina for My Students*
  - Verse form
  - 6 words
  - 6 verses + *envoi* (closing stanza)
  - 6 words rotate through the lines of the six verses
  - Envoi has all 6 words in reverse order of the first stanza



# Who Are You?

## A Sestina for My Students

(apologies to Pete, Roger, John and Keith of The Who)

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from home to university. Are you here because we are a similar self?  
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genus, species bring us together. Business, marketing, calculate the footer  
on the ledger. Bring your interest and life to this educational  
process. Bring them to my classroom. I will travel your way if you dare  
to bridge  
the gap to my world. You need to see for your-self  
what others have seen and moved beyond. Speaking for farmer, for  
nature, for land.

Who are you? Wheat in the field, sapling of the land.  
Can you share with me the lessons of life from your family?  
You are deer in the forest, hawks on the wing but which self  
will control you? Strong shoulders from a youth in safe harbors with  
strong footings,  
you love the wind on your brow and the sun on the bridge  
of your nose. It will serve you well as you struggle through education.



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family  
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