

## Notebook – February 2012

### From the Director

Debra Lohe, Ph.D.

Laurel Richardson describes writing as a “method of inquiry,” a “way of finding out” something, not simply the vehicle with which we communicate something we’ve already figured out. An extended passage is worth quoting: “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, however . . . not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined.” [1]

According to Richardson, then, writing is for *learning*, it is the very act of learning, not simply its product. In this issue, we take as our theme Writing to Learn, which has been our programming theme all year in the Center. And it sounds really nice, *writing to learn . . .*

. . . But the reality is that most of our students – and a few of our colleagues – see writing as something else: writing to get a grade, to get in (to college or to a job), to get by, to get tenure, to get respect . . . .

In this issue, our contributors provide all sorts of strategies for getting students writing – and for using writing as a way to *think*, not simply to *tell* what they think. They encourage us to engage students in all “patterns of knowing,” to provide them opportunities to experience writing as a form of connection, to others and to themselves. They ask us to imagine writing to learn as also an opportunity to learn to write, to create opportunities for students to write collaboratively, to offer feedback on writing in more personal ways. They beg us to assign writing as a creative act, an act of creation – during which we are creating a voice, an identity, a scholar, a self. As you read, I invite you to consider your own assumptions about writing – *Do you experience it as a mode of discovery? Joyful? Personal? Mindful?* – and to imagine new ways of structuring your students’ experiences with writing, as well.

[1] Richardson, Laurel. “Writing: A Method of Inquiry.” The Handbook of Qualitative Research 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln. Sage, 2000. 923-948.

Center News: In January, we welcomed Michaella Hammond as our new Assistant Director for Instructional Design. We are delighted to add her expertise with online teaching and her great enthusiasm for the mindful integration of technology into teaching.

**Voice Lessons: Personalizing the Writing Process**

Michaella Hammond, M.F.A. Center for Teaching Excellence

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Columnists

**Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who Is the Fairest of Them All?**

Benjamin de Foy, Ph.D. Earth and Atmospheric Sciences

Go back in time one thousand years and ask somebody what they looked like. They will look at you bemused: How should I know? Ask the people around me! What was true for physical appearance before mirrors was just as true for personality before the age of diaries (1). But now we have mirrors and diaries, we have introspection, and we feel very sure that we are experts about our own selves. Improving upon ourselves is done with our writing. Just as a basketball player improves his game with a good coach, a writer improves by receiving criticism.

Ideally, professors toil over student papers providing insightful feedback. Equally ideally, students then pore over the comments to improve if not this essay, then the next. When we rewrite we learn to write: which also means doing several iterations of grading. Sounds like death by a thousand small paragraphs, right?

A bit of crowd-sourcing can come in handy for this situation. Have every student essay be critiqued by 5 peers, using both comments and numerical grades. The students then revise their draft and re-submit for a second peer evaluation. They also evaluate the comments they receive with a numerical grade and have the opportunity of responding to





*20? If you could pass on wisdom to a college-age student, what would you want to teach about life?*

The assignment is to write a two-part paper, first summarizing the interview, then reflecting on and evaluating the proposed wisdom. My experience is that almost all of the students take the assignment seriously. In many cases, this is an occasion for an adult-adult conversation across generations, opening up a dialogue that allows the student to consider one's life from a different perspective. Many students discover unexpected connections between the content of the interview and the course readings about the pursuit of an excellent life.

**Writing to Learn – In Praise of Point**

