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Nate Whipple

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Individual Gains:
A Personal History of Learning, Writing, and Teaching

by

Nate Whipple

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of
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Individual Gains:

A Personal History of Learning, Writing, and Teaching

Introduction

This essay began as an attempt to understand my students. When I chose to write about the students in my writing classes, I was immersed in research for my thesis. The topic of my thesis at the time was higher education and reform in the United States. In general, voices from my research asserted, students in higher education are increasingly apathetic, lazy, negligent, and as a result are underachieving at a higher rate than ever before.

As I read account after account of the crisis of higher education, I began seeing my own students being described in these grim reports of undergraduate student life at American universities. I began to notice more of the faults in their writing, more of their in-class distractedness, more of their apathetic tones. But I was not always convinced. During class discussion and one-on-one conferences, my students showed me time and again that they were not, in fact, lazy, apathetic, or devoid of opinion as I had been convinced they were. As I struggled to work through my own writing and to learn how to understand and teach my students, I watched them struggle to write and understand themselves.

But it was also obvious to me that the inherent problems in American higher education are rooted not only in the behavior of students, but in the behavior of their instructors and institutions as well. I had read about these causes but, thinking I had not had enough experience within the establishment of higher education, had not connected
my abstract notions of the university to the concrete particulars of my own life. The blatantly obvious truth is that I am and instructor and I do teach at a university. Having spent nearly 100% of my adult life in university life, it was relatively easy to overlook this fact. If I wanted to understand my students and how I teach them, I realized that I needed to write my own experience of education and university life.

Creative nonfiction is really the only genre that I could have used to present my understanding of these issues. Having been immersed in college life for the past six years, I have adopted the academic approach to learning and education. Sir Ken Robinson asserts that the inherent thrust of higher education seems to be to turn out college professors. In writing in the mode of the lyric “I,” I have come to understand that I have unwittingly adopted a mindset has allowed me to misunderstand my students and my role as instructor within this self-perpetuating university system.

Being a student in an American university, however, presented my consideration with some interesting peculiarities. The development and evolution of the American research university, more than any other in the world, was dominated by science. This development had profound effects on the education of its students and I felt these vividly. Using the lyric “I,” I was able to incorporate both primary and secondary sources.

The braided form of the essay allowed me to track changes and developments in my own understanding of myself, my own learning, and my teaching philosophy. The strand of the essay concerned with my own writing and learning progresses backward into my academic career. The research strand progresses thematically, opening up ideas about teaching, learning, writing, and psychology that are addressed (implicitly or explicitly) in the other strands. These idea are connected with my own experience as a
student (past) as well as how I approach my students now (present). This form is the only one that allowed me to incorporate my understanding of my own learning, which is essential to understanding myself as a student and instructor.

I have referred to my students by a plurality of names—undergrads, experts, pupils, novices, kids, bundles of habit-making machinery—but only recently have I begun refer to them as people. These words and definitions that I confer on my students mean nothing without context. The names I have given my students, as with all names we give all things, have been shaped primarily by my perceptions of them. Although the demographics of my classes have not changed in two years, the names I have given my students have shifted and varied. However, they do not reflect changes in my students but in myself and my understanding of them.

As my sit before me this Tuesday afternoon, I would call them distracted. The clock on the wall reads 12:02, but it’s held that position since the first day of class. It’s 12:23. Three minutes ago my students began writing in response to a four-question prompt. For some of my students the writing has already expired. They stare blankly at the questions before them, faces protected by scowls and ruffled brows. The projector hums, my prompt begging them to put their pen to the page.

I scan the room and my gaze falls on one male student in the second row. He stares ahead, mouth open, eyes focused on the open space before him. For a moment, it seems, he hangs in a rapt space between knowing and not knowing, waiting for the instant when he can hold on to his thinking and say what he wants to say. For most of my
students, thinking is not the problem—it’s putting thought on the page. It might be that in this lecture hall they’re more used to writing down others’ thoughts than their own.

Some students look less concerned with their inaction, idly exposed without reservation or pretense. They swivel in their seats, toy with their writing utensils, and ferret about in their knapsacks, as if they might find thoughts buried beneath their textbooks and binders, as if the only thoughts that matter here were those dictated and revealed to them by their instructors. But I’m not revealing anything, and I’ll wait for them to write.

For some, apathy comes naturally and inaction requires no effort at all. With feet outstretched, heads resting on forearms, lulled by the hiss of the air vent overhead, these students abandon airs of engagement and, simply, relax. As I watch my class write, I wonder how the students I meet with in my office and run into on campus are the same ones I see sitting in front of me. It’s as if the environment—the room, the place, the context—changes. In the office, they are attentive, composed: they engage. On campus, they are thoughtful, affable: they care. Maybe I haven’t given them a reason to yet.

My 12:00 PM section of English 2010 meets in a large lecture hall where my students look down on me from raised rows of stadium-style seating. I should point out, however, that my assessment of size is probably tainted; I went to a small liberal arts college where classes were capped at twenty-five and averaged around fifteen, so this class of twenty-six is the biggest I’ve ever been in. It helps, then, that from the floor of the hall, I can see everything. If this were an arena and I a player, I might not notice the countless movements, shifts, and nodding heads before me.
In reality, this hall looks more like a theatre, but I’m not the one on stage. My students are the actors and I’m always watching them. I see every cell phone beneath the table, every whisper to a neighbor, and every pair of rolling eyes. I don’t hold it against them, though. I wait. When I’ve got their full attention, I continue. Much to their embarrassment, I am very patient. I smile and laugh diplomatically. I ask them a question they’ve heard many times before: “Do you all think I can’t see you?”

From the front of the class I follow their eyes, and I think I can see what my students are thinking. They glance at each other. They peek to see who’s still writing, to see who’s written more than them, to see if they’ve written enough—as if their thinking could be measured. An irritated glance is relayed round the room. I watch one student balance a pen on his notebook. He catches me, awkwardly, and peers at me.

I am forcing them to write, and they’re doing what (whether they know it or not) they’ve been taught to do—dislike writing. This is not to say that, if I asked them, my students would say they would say they did. I find their aversion, their disdain, is passive. They have been convinced they can’t write, so they don’t. They’ve been bent not to ask questions, so they don’t. I will spend the semester trying to teach them to ask questions and challenge assumptions; to write to discover what they know and believe; to show them that they do, in fact, have something to say. But before I can do this, I will have to stop assuming that I know what they’re thinking and try and discover it myself.

At home I sit at my desk, elbow propped, shoulders leaning forward over my computer in an awkward, unconscious hunch, trying to discover what I think. I rest my head against
the wall knowing that my desk, poorly planned and constructed, cannot support the extra weight.

If I were interested in definitions and proper speech, I might not call my desk a desk. It has no legs. It has no drawers. It cannot move. If pressed for clarity, I would probably label my desk more of a “permanent table.”

Desk is derived from the Italian *desco*, meaning “table, butcher’s block,” so that bit seems appropriate, but the word permanent should not in this instance carry with it any connotation of durability. For this butcher’s block, substance mirrors quality, and formation follows function. The desk came into being last month during a weekend teeming with the anxiety of looming deadlines: papers to return, revisions to hand back, revisions to hand in, an essay to finish for my writing workshop, and the date of my thesis proposal defense next month—all resting imminently in the back of my mind.

Rather than worry, pace, and think about what had to be done, I made a desk.

The writing surface, furnished from a small tabletop purchased at a thrift store for $3.50, hangs in the corner. Black crates stacked against the wall below house books and papers, while wooden buttresses, the remains of an old black bookcase our neighbor left in the foyer, flank the front. Tucked in the recess on the far end of my room ensconced below a pair of single-pane windows opposite a crawl-space closet, my desk dangles atop milk crates and patchwork plywood. It does not sit; it emerges, suspended from the wall, an artifact of my distraction.

It’s now the third week of November. My thesis proposal is due in less than a week, and although it’s been pointed out to me several times by several different readers, but as I sit at my desk mulling over my work, I realize that my proposal still lacks a
clear statement of what *exactly* I’ll be arguing in my thesis. This lack—of direction, of purpose, of organization—I would like to tell myself, is not for lack of trying. I’ve thought extensively about my topic, the 3-foot stack of books next to my desk are the tangible proof that I’ve done plenty of research. I’ve filled page after page with notes, thoughts, and quotes, yet my readers are right: the proposal staring at me from below my face, the text I have poured hours of unstructured time into, the piece of writing—of me—grasping for truth on the pages before me, isn’t working. So I do what I have always done. I get up and walk away. After all, I can’t write here at this desk; it’s too small.

So I move to the kitchen table. I write at the kitchen table because it’s the only surface in the house large enough for me to work, for me to spread out my papers, my thoughts, and my words on to the page. This wouldn’t be problem if I didn’t need some much room to work, if I didn’t I need space to sprawl. As I look pour over the physical space of the kitchen table to stretch my thoughts over books, notes, and pages, again, I think of my students. Where do they do their writing? What sort of space do they need to work? Is it possible to craft an essay with twenty-five people in the room? Does anyone else in my class struggle to write on the computer? Why *can’t* I write on my computer? I brainstorm and begin to scribble down some notes.

On the computer I am no longer writing what I think but what I thought. In my mind this shift in tense is matched with a shift in audience and a sense of finality that I cannot overcome. Practically speaking, what this means is that I can’t finish a sentence on the computer before I go on to the next one. Every sentence must be perfectly clear, not only to me, but to my reader. I replace; I reorder; I regulate. In short, I don’t get much done. But that’s because I’m not writing, I’m word processing.
Instead I write on the backs of recycled papers: scrapped lesson plans, old readings and assignment sheets, botched handouts—anything without lines. The risk of cliché here is inevitable, so I must address it. It’s not that I feel trapped or held back by some Foucauldian oppression of college-ruled paper. My restrictions are self-imposed. When I write on lined paper, I keep myself from moving on the page. I could jump lines, I could draw pictures, but the space between my thoughts and words must be clean.

When I write on blank white, I allow myself to jump, draw, skip, and to sketch my own lines. In this way the script reflects the landscape of my mind. Arrows, dashes, and bullets attempt to carry thoughts to their logical conclusions and establish a hierarchy of ideas. Stars and asterisks jump across the page, filling gaps in thought across the white space. On paper, I write for myself. Only after I have written through scraps am I able to piece together an organized, logical piece of writing. Without this process, my thoughts hang in a vacuum of uncertainty, a shadowy mass of ideas too abstract, too amorphous, too disconnected to decipher. I have to understand what I think before anyone else can.

But the kitchen is also distracting. If there are dirty dishes in the sink, I can’t think, and if I can’t think, I can’t write. So I do a lot of dishes. I don’t mind; I like doing dishes. I have poor circulation in my hands, so they get cold when I type, and I have most of my better thoughts when my hands are in hot water. I glide the sordid scrubber over dirty cups and plates. Rinse, scrub, rinse. I am lulled by the thoughtless repetition.

As I watch the water pour over the dishes, collect, and whirl down the drain, I think about my thesis. Until now—until this moment—I have thought about the structure of my thesis in terms only linear. But as I rest the clean dishes haphazardly on the dry rack (when I do dishes and think about my thesis, I’m never fully focused on either at the
same time), I stop and notice the order of my placements, and I am presented with an image of my thinking.

The dishes, it seems, have been subconsciously arranged, not by size or by the order in which I put them there, but by their shape, their form. In my mind, the taxonomy I see before me is the key to the organization of my thesis—the organization I need is contextual, not sequential. Coming to this realization, I am immediately drawn to thoughts of my students. I can make progress at the sink, but that’s only because I’m always thinking about ideas. Where do they write? What do they do to find structure? Where do they put together the pieces of their thoughts? When do they discover what they have to say? Do they think they have anything to say? I wonder if my students see the work they do in class as a natural extension of their life or a remote process forced on them by their instructor.

Eventually, when I have exhausted all of my distractions, I will return to my desk. I will try and piece together the muddled thoughts strewn illogically and illegibly across the white pages—the freedom I afford myself with this medium, I will later realize, is as liberating as I would like to think. And as I sit at my desk not writing, I realize that I, like many of the students I teach, am still trying to figure out—after 6 years of studying English—my own writing process. I still struggle to believe that I have anything to say, and I’m always distracted.

William James has kept my attention for four years. Given the seemingly constant fluctuation of my intellectual and academic interests (to which the development of this thesis can attest), James’ grip on my curiosity is no small feat. I was introduced to him
during my sophomore year of college in a course on philosophical psychology, the class in which I was first introduced to the questions, disputes, and antagonisms of modern philosophy and psychology. The avowed aim of the course was to help each student be able to answer one question: what is the nature of a human being? The structure of the course led students through the various answers to this question that have been provided by modern psychologists and philosophers beginning with materialism and ending with epiphenomenalism. Though I could provide little more than a rudimentary summation of these different schools of thought now, I can remember clearly my first reactions to the thought of James.

With the opening of the first psychological research lab in the United States at Harvard and the publication of his landmark text *Principles of Psychology*, James helped to establish psychology as a distinct scientific discipline. But despite his academic and intellectual achievements, he remained a sober, candid, and down-to-earth writer, teacher, and intellectual personality. One critic asserts that *Principles* is a truly American masterpiece, one that should be read by anyone who wishes to call themselves educated.

Masterpiece would seem a curious distinction for a psychology textbook, but it is not the content that earns *Principles* its distinction but its presentation (although the breadth and depth with which James explores the enterprise of psychology and his ability to place his work and thought within the context of all Western thought from Plato to Charles Sanders Peirce are truly amazing). James was a masterful writer whose ideas, words and temperament spoke with as much intimacy as force. His deep understanding of the human mind helped him write most clearly and provide for his reader with a digestible presentation of complicated ideas.
And this is what I liked most about James when I first encountered him in philosophical psychology. More than any thinker I read in the class, James made complicated, nuanced ideas easier to digest and apply to my own life and thinking. When I read the psychology of James, it was as if my ideas, my thoughts, my experience mattered. He drew on them with examples and thought experiments; they weren’t unrelated ideas in a treatise on the brain. When he showed me he understood my experience, I could agree with what James had to say. His work rang true with my sense of logical intuition, his range of considerations was exhaustive, and he presented the sequence of his reasoning with a power of expression unparalleled by others we read.

Simply put, James was most engaging for me as a student and reader because he had a fundamental appreciation for his audience. He didn’t waste my time with abstractions but rendered abstract thoughts in the concrete particulars of our shared human experience. He drew examples from literature, fine arts, philosophy, history, and everyday life. He bridged the gap between scientists who claimed possession of the only truth and humanists who pretended to despise what they took no trouble to understand. When compared with others, I could tell that James’ writing was what academic writing should be.

As one of the most sought after minds of his time, James was asked in 1892 by the Harvard Corporation to give a few public lectures on psychology to the Cambridge teachers. In the 1899 publication of those lectures, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, James expresses the sentiment that enabled him to write captivating prose and engage his own students: the goal of teachers should be to
“reproduce sympathetically in their imagination, the mental life of their pupil as the sort of active unity which he himself feels it to be.”

As James points out, he approached considerations of teaching and student life from the perspective that “there is no point of view absolutely public and universal.” Between teachers and students “private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over.” These perceptions play out in assumptions. Staring at a classroom of unknown individuals, fighting assumptions has been a constant struggle for me as an instructor. I assume my students know what they’re doing. I assume my students understand what I’m teaching. I assume my students think they have something worth writing about.

But James asserts that most unfortunate reality, however, is not the gap between the teaching and the taught, but that the teachers who look for these gaps “from the outside never know where” to look. The practical consequence of James’ pedagogical philosophy is thus “the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality.” I must understand my students as individuals thinkers before I can teach them about anything.

I stand before my 12:00 PM class at the start of another seventy-five minute period. Seventy five minutes is a long time to spend in a classroom, no matter how engaging the subject or presentation and I remember being more than ready to leave my favorite classes by the end of the period, and although I’m sure ENGL 2010 is none of my students’ favorite class, I still expect their full attention for the whole period.

“All right,” I say from the front of the room. I stand behind the large rectangular table serves as my desk and scan the room for missing faces. After almost two months
together, it only takes me a few seconds to recognize who’s not there. “All right,” I say again. I’m not entirely sure why I have chosen this word to signal the beginning of the period or to communicate to my students that it’s time to put away cell phones, stop talking, and give me their attention, but as I move toward the door I get more specific.

“Time to get started,” I declare as I bend to unjam the propped door and scan the empty hallway before the door closes behind me. A semester ago I probably would’ve left this door open until after I’d taken attendance—a vain effort to accommodate stragglers that produced more tardiness than it prevented. I found it difficult to hold my students accountable for their lateness when I could not control my own. I have since found that closed doors do more for student and teacher punctuality than open ones. In some ways, I’m beginning to understand my students and myself better. They respond better when I hold them to a higher standard, and in order to hold them to a higher standard, I have to hold myself to a higher standard. In order to understand them better as students, I have to understand my teaching better. In order to teach better, I have to understand them better.

As I wait for them to quiet, I search the class for eye contact, for the reassurance that they’re ready to put their student hats on. Some of my students—Amy, Craig, Alvin—sit, intent as always, eyes fixed, waiting instruction or direction. “All right,” I drone a third time, head on a swivel, smiling as I draw out the first syllable of the non-instructive exclamation. After fifteen years in classrooms like this one, I am sure they must know what “alright” means.

A few more heads pop up—Nicole, Adam, Cody. In the front row Zack stares down his notebook, doodling and continuing his conversation with Gregg, unaware that
his neighbor is doing his best to ignore him. Zack, I am convinced, is the archetype of an ADHD student. Gregg catches my glance, smiles, and fastens his eyes to face as I look to his right. Zack, who on some days could carry class discussion without any help from his peers, notices he’s now alone in this conversation. A born leader if only he could harness his limitless energy, Zack looks up and follows suit. Over the next eight weeks Gregg will help me help Zack help himself, reading his work outside of class and ignoring his chatter within.

On the other end of the front row sit Kelsey, Matt, and Sam. Smart kids. On either side of Kelsey, an all-state scholar-athlete in high school, sit Matt and Sam, two young men only months my junior. Matt, an intelligent, well-rounded and naturally gifted writer who’s just returned home from a Mormon mission, and who, like Kelsey, is at USU on scholarship, sits on her left. On her right sits Sam, an agile young mind more enthusiastic about learning, his intellectual curiosity more engaged than most that I have met in my time as a graduate instructor, sits on her right.

This is the second time I have had Sam in my class. In the fall of his freshman year, he was enrolled in the first writing course I taught at USU. Recently returned from a mission in South America, Sam overflowed with positive energy, the excitement of returning to a classroom of peers seeped from his pores. Sitting always upright in his wooden desk, Sam was aware of himself, of the energy he brought to class, of the effect he had on the group dynamic, of his ability to revive a dead discussion with his animated wit and humor. Despite the occasional tangent, Sam always added something to the conversation.
As I watch Sam now, he leans forward over his desk (a position I prefer to the
loose position he sometimes relaxes into with head resting on the table behind him, feet
outstretched), doodles in his notebook (scribbles that bleed their way onto this quizzes
and writing exercises), and talks loudly to Kelsey, and I wonder if Sam was less
distracting in our first class together or if I am more distractible now. But now when I
look at Sam and smile, I see an individual with a history, and I am filled with a desire to
help better understand his thinking through writing.

I cannot remember writing anything in either of the two courses I took with Dr. Amy
Schwartz. I took two classes with the fifty-something-year-old associate professor of
anthropology in the spring of my junior year. Dr. Schwartz had shoulder length salt-and-
pepper hair and bangs that rested on her forehead above her eyebrows, wore a lot of
wool—mostly alpaca—and liked being comfortable; her teaching apparel usually
consisted of a knit sweaters, hemp pants (she told us), and gray woolen Birkenstock
clogs.

Ancient Civilizations met in a large room with 25 individual J-shaped tables and
chairs and, at the front, a whiteboard and a projector. As a graduate instructor I have been
stuck with some pretty awful classrooms—no natural light, barely enough room for the
long, heavy tables that seat three and fill the room, flanked like phalanxes against me.
Dreary, cold places with no benefit of technology. But Dr. Schwartz classrooms were
never anything less than state of the art.

Though she was teaching ancient civilizations, Dr. Schwartz was big on
technology. PowerPoint seemed to be the only method of presentation she had learned. I
have come to view technology as a luxury whose sole purpose is to enliven class. Dr. Schwartz, on the other hand, used technology to take the life out of civilizations already long dead. With the help of technology she was able to bury these bustling cultures and metropolises further into obscurity, alienating us from these ancient peoples not only through time but also through interest. This technology that could have kept them alive, but misused it led to their full eradication from my consciousness.

Attendance in Ancient Civilizations wasn’t “necessarily” mandatory, the only thing I can remember Dr. Schwartz actually saying in the three months I was enrolled in the course. Although I made a serious effort to attend (and in a 3:00 PM class, there really aren’t many excuses not to attend), her instructional style actually challenged me not to show up.

In-class time consisted entirely of lecture, and lecture consisted entirely of Dr. Schwartz standing in front of class, peeking down over the reading glasses perched on her nose and held in place a beaded strap that kept them from falling entirely off her face, at her laptop and reading out loud the PowerPoint presentation, which consisted almost entirely of words, words, and more words, with the exception of an occasional picture, projected on the wall behind her. Perpetually fixed in that declarative space of her twin presentations—one fixed on her eyes and the other fixed on the wall behind her—I wonder how Dr. Schwartz would teach in the dreary confines of ENGR 204 where I taught my first class or in the cramped quarters of RBW 214 where I teach now. The spacious, technologically enhanced rooms of Dr. Schwartz’s courses were never crowded.
Occasionally Dr. Schwartz broke from lectures to interject with her own commentary. I say “her own” because listening to the lectures I found it hard to believe that these presentations could be here own. She read with a monotonous disinterest that suggested that she actually resented whatever remote mind had created these awful catalogues of facts and information she was being forced to recite.

Dr. Schwartz’s enlivening commentary saved her from the droning inevitability of the ancient presentations. An archaeologist by training, she revealed anecdotes of her excavation trips to the Middle East, Mesoamerica, and Scotland—to the Fayum Depression of Egypt, to the Toltec totems of Tula, to the Turin Hill forts of Angus. These accounts, though interesting enough, were never are interesting as her site visits as an anthropologist. Inspired by an article in the Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society, Dr. Schwartz traveled as a graduate student to the Aran Islands, a three-island chain off the west coast of Galway where Gaelic is still the predominant spoken language and the culture has remained relatively unchanged since their settlement in the mid 17th century.

When Dr. Schwartz spoke of her pilgrimage to the Irish isles, her figure changed. When she recounted memories of her time in the geographically and culturally secluded islands, she smiled, the corners of her mouth forcing their way up toward the straight gray bangs that cropped her face. Expression drawn to the ceiling tiles, mouth agape, she recalled for us the shivering sensation of Irish air, carried west atop the unusually savage waters and weather of Galway Bay. Air, she explained, that climbed over massive boulders that rose to 85 feet above water, cast by giant rogue waves—waves that broke on the island of Inishmore, she pointed out, finger raised feverishly before us, only once
every century. Air that scaled the three hundred and thirty foot island cliffs (bluffs that would tower even over the largest rogue—95 feet from crest to trough—of the coast of Scotland in 2000, a fact I discovered in my own after-class research). Air that picked up the wet scent of seaweed—which the first Arans mixed with sand to create fertile soil and cultivate potatoes, vegetables, and grazing grass for cattle and sheep and which Dr. Schwartz described, with hand cupped over her face, as having a distinctly fetid fetor—and stung with a bitter hot chill that prompted the fabrication of the Aran sweater—a cultural artifact extensively promoted by Pádraig Ó Síocháin, a Dublin author and lawyer, who came to the islands to learn Gaelic and became inextricably linked to the Aran handknitters. The same air that descended on Dr. Schwartz at the Iron Age forts where she stood not with shovel, pick, and brush, but with pen, paper, and the faculty of her sense only.

It’s no surprise that this is the memory of Dr. Schwartz’s class that stands out in my mind. It stands out as one of the rare occasions that she broke from her previous pedagogical habits to invite her students into her life, her own mind, her own experience—ultimately, how she had come to fall in love with her field. If she had understood how much this experience had meant to me and my understanding, she could have reached me (and my peers) more often. As it was, I rarely felt respected, cared for, or understood. I wasn’t engaged, and, from my seat in the back row, Dr. Schwartz didn’t seem to notice or care.

It’s no surprise, then, that I can’t remember one thing I read or wrote for Dr. Schwartz’s Ancient Civilizations class. To be fair, this is true of many of the courses I took as an undergraduate outside the English and philosophy departments (and even there
my recollections are hazy). What I do remember about the classes I took was how I felt about them: the contexts in which I learned and the reactions I had to the material, the presentation of that material, and the presenter of that material. These subjective aspects affected whether or not I liked the course, whether or not I was engaged, and whether or not I was challenged. Dr. Schwartz challenged me, but in all of the wrong ways.

James’ profound respect for individuality was the most important aspect of his philosophical legacy. At its core, his philosophy was both individualistic and pluralistic. Because there is a plurality of individual human beings, James believed, there must necessarily be a plurality of individual perspectives—a fact I often take for granted in my own teaching. Each individual learner brings their own experience, their own philosophy, their own worldview to the learning experience. Recent educational theories like differentiated learning and constructivist pedagogy speak to the philosophy of learning James developed over one hundred years ago: one model of learning cannot account for how each individual must think in order to attain knowledge.

The pluralistic nature of James’s philosophy was rooted in a fundamental respect for the individuality of human beings, their individual intellects, and their ability to create a unified worldview and speaks realistically of the plurality of individuals and perspectives we experience that shape human experience. James approached knowledge and truth in a radically different way than his contemporaries. In a time when philosophy was viewed as a method to discover truth, James’s pluralistic philosophy posited that philosophies of truth are created rather than discovered, and that each individual thinker must erect a personal philosophy by incorporating all available, relevant evidence for
truth in a logically consistent worldview. James’s pragmatism is creatively rooted in the responsibility of individuals.

In abandoning the prominent philosophical model of his time, the correspondence theory of truth, James actually presented the first constructivist model of learning. This model (in the same way as his overall worldview) esteems the ideals of individualism and pluralism above all else. These ideals are essential to the function of a good classroom (a pluralism of individual learners) and have been revered by contemporary constructivist learning theorists, but it seems that educators in every level of American education seem to be less concerned with helping students construct a worldview and more concerned with simply filling their brains with knowledge.

Epistemology is derived from the Greek *episteme*, ‘knowledge’ or ‘science,’ and *logos*, ‘knowledge’ or ‘information.’ The Greek components suggest a second order concern with knowledge about knowledge; and this area of philosophy is, indeed, sometimes called “theory of knowledge.” For James, however, there was no one epistemology—no one theory of learning that could account for the learning process or each individual—but as many epistemologies as there were people. He did not believe in knowledge with a capital K, no collective unconscious of communal intelligence floating amorphously above the minds of a given society or civilization. The only knowledge: knowledge in the mind of an individual thinker. The only knowledge in the mind of an individual thinker: the knowledge that thinker individually learned and remembered. For the constructivist James, the student does not tap into a collective body of knowledge but creates a system of knowledge and logical thinking.
Few of my students, however, prescribe to the constructivist theory of learning. As a graduate instructor I have had to spend the beginning of each semester convincing students that what they know and think actually matters. By the time they reach ENGL 2010, my students have been convinced that knowledge comes from somewhere else, from outside, from on high. Many have been argued (never explicitly) into believing they play little part in the development of their own thinking, in the construction of their own knowledge. The reasons that support this claim: knowledge (at least the kind you get in college) is fundamentally different from the stuff you know in everyday life, the stuff the philosopher calls “common sense;” how this knowledge is (and should be) communicated is distinct from everyday modes of discourse; unless you’re going to be a member of the “academic” community, a member of the intellectual elite, you need not bother understanding “college” knowledge. When I ask my students to write for ten minutes on how their university instructors have engaged them as students, they provide ample evidence they have been issued for these claims.

**My students sit writing:** it’s 3:08 PM. Heads down, eyes on the page, they frantically scrawl their scurrying pens along the page. Lance, who seems otherwise inactive in my class most of the time, is awake, fully alert. Lance works 40 hours a week. He pays for his own school. He is looking into buying a house and has just received $2000 for taking part in an investing seminar through his bank/broker. Later he will tell me he has learned more about writing and school in this class than any other.

For this class, my second 2010 class of the day, I have scrapped the opening writing prompt, which was meant to help them understand how they read for class. When
students struggled to understand and answer the question, it was clear that I had not
developed questions that would help them understand much of anything, so I take this
failure as an opportunity for revision. I’m less afraid now to change and shift plans as I
respond to their needs. Getting to know my students individually is helping me lead them
as a group. Consisting of only one question, this prompt will also be used as informal
research: In your time at university, how have your professors engaged you as a student/failed to engage you as a student?

After spending an hour before class in the cramped quarters of my shared fourth
floor office under the buzz of fluorescent lights trying to convince Ashlee, who now sits
in the front row, bent over her desk staring down into the notebook in front of her and
writing quickly, that she does, in fact, have something to say, I want to know more about
her, her peers, and how see themselves. Ashlee’s having trouble writing the research
proposal (the assignment that I hope will frame the persuasive research paper, the six-to-
eight-page paper my students will work on for the next two months). This is because, like
many of my students, Ashlee would just like to know what I want her to write. She
struggles to understand why I would want to know what she knows about her topic,
perceptions of gender equality in sports. When I get to class, I am jumbled, tense.

But as I sit, awash in light from the six-foot windows that line the wall to my left,
I feel the tension sink out of my body into my chair. The anxiety that built inside me as I
sat with Ashlee, worried that each of my students was in the same position as she, is
quietly dispelled by the sound of their pens on paper. It’s 3:03 and they will write for
another seven minutes before I have to ask them to stop. From the front of the class, I
reflect on their writing. And I write:
Seated here at the front of the room, it’s funny to think about how the environment of the classroom can affect on the students’ attitude and work. This is the second section of ENGL 2010 I have taught at 3:00 PM, and compared with my other sections I’ve been least effective in teaching these classes. Last semester I taught section 018 in Engineering Labs room 204, a room engineered to disengage my students. The walls in this bleak room were bare, the grayish blue paint a color you might find on the walls of an office building lobby where a lamp might sit atop an end table between a leather love-seat and an elevator. Like the loveseat and lamp, the layout of that engineering classroom must have been an afterthought to the designer. The only natural light crept in through the rectangular block of double-paned glass in the door at the rear of the room. The window, with a wire mesh encased by two panes that would prevent the glass from shattering and falling to pieces during an earthquake or if anyone were to try and throw a brick through the six by thirty-six inch opening, provided little light.

The main sources of light in that classroom were the fluorescent lights. These energy-conserving lumens save the environment one lamp at a time, but I wonder if they bring about a more profound human death in classrooms that feel more like laboratories than places for learning. It seems that what planning did go into the design of that room focused primarily on the classroom’s technological infrastructure. A “smart” classroom, as such technologically advanced rooms have been deemed in my department, ENGR 204 came with what, on first sight, appeared to be what could have been the control board for a small aircraft. The control board was housed in the vented (so the machine could breathe?) cupboard beneath the island at the front of the room. The island, which accommodated the computer monitor, backlit LED control panel, and document camera
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(the only truly useful piece of equipment in the entire set up), left little room for the outdated materials (papers, white board markers, and transparencies) I actually used to teach. Some of this technology may have proven useful if I hadn’t already developed lesson plans for my first class, which met in a small, bright, dumb room across campus. That room, devoid of any technological resources, was built in the height of the Cold War (when the overhead projector was still innovative and design considerations yielded things like P.A. systems and fall out shelters). The men who designed that classroom would have been pleased with the tables in ENGR 204, which could have provided plenty of cover for crouching students.

With gray faux-granite tops resting on thick metal frames, these two-by-six foot tables were not particularly stable. Arranged in two columns of four on each side of a dividing middle aisle, the tables proved impossible to move within the confines of that small classroom, and though they did not prevent bodily harm, they did prevent my students from seeing anything but me, their adjacent neighbors, and the backs of their peers’ heads…

I look at my watch: time’s almost up. I look back over what I’ve written and I’m intrigued at where I’ve ended up. Tables as bomb shelters? Interesting stuff. I’ve written a lot about what I don’t think works in a writing classroom, but what would work? How could we better serve these students through design? In what learning environments and situations do my students take the most ownership over their work, over their knowledge? My mind returns to my thesis, to images of my desk, to writing at the sink—to times when writing and life don’t feel disconnected. I think about Dr. Schwartz and wonder how I can bring more of my love and passion to the classroom. I raise my head to the
class, put down my pen, and draw my students back to me. “All right,” I say, “pens down; let’s talk.”

“Writing is difficult in the extreme to me,” James wrote to William Torrey Harris when Harris, then the president of Harvard, asked him to compose a text on pedagogy for the Harvard professors. “And I have absolutely nothing to say about education,” he continued, “that every teacher…doesn’t already know a great deal better than I.” James struggled with faith in his ability to write, faith in his ability to teach, faith in the supernatural, faith in his family, and faith in himself.

Like James, I have always struggled with faith. These struggles stem, primarily, for a lack of faith in myself, for my inability to trust myself extends itself unwaveringly to others. Recently, my faith in myself has been tested concretely in my acts of writing. I have been avoiding writing in all forms. Writing requires honesty, which at the present moment I seem too busy to be capable of. Writing requires faith in my ability to think, to understand, and to communicate—three acts I trust little in myself. My desire to write is not in question here. I always want to write. But writing requires faith, ultimately (and only), in my ability to write.

But if I were being honest with myself, my lack of faith in my ability to write is, and has always been (so far as I have been conscious of it), unfounded. I have always been a good writer, and I have always known I can write. But most of the specific memories I can recall of my early schooling have been crowded out by composite events marked primarily by disappointment—scenes wooly and vague without any real context, like Locke’s impressions, only faint impressions of once lived experience. The concrete
memories I do possess come to me not through composite but through composition, remembered and enlivened by writing.

My composition career began in Mrs. Bars’ class, where I wrote my first series of illustrated stories. Probably too short to receive “short short” or “micro” classification, these brief narratives shared a common theme (common to each of my stories as well as those of each of my classmates): “Who I Will Be.” Each story began the same way. “When I grow up,” I wrote, “I will be a…” each verb a statement marked with the youthful determination that came to be my defining feature as a young boy.

“When I grow up,” I read aloud as Mrs. Bars held the book I wrote, illustrated, and published myself (a volume Whitman could have been proud of, a work which remains to this day my only published work) aloft for the classroom of parents in attendance at Author’s Night to see, “I want to be a cable man.” Inspired by the work of my father, who owns and manages a small plant that manufactures cable assemblies, this would not be the only piece my teachers would ask me to read aloud to my parents.

In second grade Mrs. Kendall gushed over the story I composed for the written portion of the Connecticut Mastery Test. Modeled in part, it seems, after [that story about the girl who lost her dog], the linear narrative I wrote unfolded in my search for a lost kite. I cannot recall how the kite was lost, but it doesn’t matter because this story actually began in media res. What I do remember is that after a long day of searching I resigned myself to a seat on a couch at a friend’s house where we sat watching the five o’clock news (after several years of daily exposure to the five o’clock news at daycare with Mrs. Lamont’s, I was sure this was the five o’clock news, which had come to be associated with an expanded longing for home, was the only kind there was) with his mother.
As we sat gazing at the screen, our window to the otherwise outside world, the monotonous account of the days mundane events was fractured by a breaking story. “Today,” the anchorwoman informed us, “the Mississippi River has flooded.” The jet stream that took my kite from me, it seemed, was the same one responsible for the hurricane that had (somehow) flooded the river. With little knowledge of waterways or weather systems, I chose this river, I am sure, not for the geographic location of the river or for the plausibility of the flood, but for the opportunity it afforded me to demonstrate my knowledge of its proper spelling.

In the video footage projected behind the TV newscaster, I spotted my yellow kite floating atop the froth-covered murk of the muddy water, carried downstream amidst cars, branches, and other debris. In the final sentence of the story I presented an image that, although not entirely positive, offered closure after a day of searching and gave me, at least, some internal closure. It was gone, true, but at least, “It had found me”—the inactivity of the kite’s final discovery underscored by my use of the passive verb.

In Ms. Greer’s third grade class I made my first attempt at memoir. Ms. Greer, who challenged me more than any other teacher in that time of my life, made no effort to simplify the memoir assignment for her students (when asked as a sophomore in college to write a memoir, I actually wrote about this same moment, a moment etched into my mind by the activity of writing). I was expected to render a moment with as much detail as I possibly could, and although I’m not sure she used these exact words, I know the “so what?” question was ever present in my young mind.

I wrote about the nights I spent sledding on the hill in front of my house with my father and my brother Chris, then eighteen and preparing to leave for San Antonio to
begin basic training in the Air Force. The bottom of the hill, cut off by the light of the house, was too dark to sled beneath anything but a new moon. Dad perched a halogen lamp atop the wrap-around deck on the front of our house looking over the hill. The bright-hot lamp supplied enough light for us to avoid the three giant oak trees that climbed the hill in a row and bisected the glistening lawn.

In the hazy dark of night, we slid over the lanky shadows of the towering oaks, remnants of a time when our lawn was a once hillside field. Then the land was owned by my grandmother Catherine, who died three days before I was born and rented the field to her neighbor, Mr. Brown. Brown’s cattle would graze here until my father was ready to settle his ten-by-twenty-two foot trailer atop the hill. From the top of the ridge where our house now stood, light traced our silhouettes as we skated over the frozen slope.

At the top of the hill beneath the floodlight, my brother and I rested our tired young bodies beside my father before making one last trip down and back. At five feet three inches, I noted, I stood uncharacteristically tall for my age, my shadow not entirely dwarfed beside them. Leaving our father at the top, we launched ourselves down the hill, Chris first, me following shortly after. I watched from the bottom of the light-crested slope as my eighteen-year-old brother, cut off by ten years, encased in light, and dark only to me, climbed the hill before me. In less than three years (time split between Texas, Germany, and Japan), my brother would be married and I three times an uncle.

From the present looking back, I am drawn to these writing moments because they illustrate so many of the things I try to put into practice and teach today. As a young person, I wrote for myself but also for my audience. So often in my early writing career, I realize now, pieces of writing were gifts composed for another. I wrote to be understood
because the understanding was the gift. To translate an experience, an insight was not just an abstract idea but a concrete goal. This exchange between writer and audience, giver and receiver, broke down the barrier between life and writing in a deep, profound way. This is the sort of intentional writing I want from myself and from my students now.

“I find my teacher boring,” writes one student in my 3:00 section, “because I have a hard time understanding what they’re teaching.” The overwhelming trend in my students’ perceptions of learning and knowledge indicates that such boredom stems not from information but from the presentation of that information, leaving many feeling alienated from their own knowledge and learning. “While it is easier to pay attention to someone who cares about what they’re teaching,” writes one student of a particularly engaging biology professor, the information can be “sometimes too obscure to the general populace to maintain an effective learning environment.”

The perceived gap in knowledge and understanding between the students’ professor and the “general populace” speaks to the commonly held belief that there is a fundamental distinction between the knowledge gained in higher education and the knowledge afforded by everyday experience. This claim is not a new one and its origins can be traced, essentially, to the foundations of all Western thought. Philosophy, in fact, was the first word to assert the distinction between refined thought, which is governed by reason, and the every day thinking we employ during 95% of our waking lives, a mode of thought customarily referred to as common sense. Pythagoras, in calling himself a philos of sophia, was asserting a preference for the timeless fruit of logic and reason—wisdom—over the transitory facts of his everyday life.
But in the accounts of my students, it is their professors’ inability to translate wisdom into everyday life that leaves them alienated (and often apathetic). Science professors in particular, it seems, have a difficult time bridging the gap between their own higher thinking and the thinking of their students. One of my students, who “tends to like the experimental sciences and learning about how things relate in life” admits to not remembering much from one life science course (taken only one year prior) “because of the way the material was presented and the lack of focus the teacher had. I do remember,” the student recalls, “she used to talk about pies and fries and food a lot. But that’s about it.” My students’ perceptions of knowledge and learning are shaped by the argument presented to them by their instructors that what they learn in the classroom is not related to their everyday experience of life. When their professors fail to provide an overarching contextual framework for the information they present, the conclusion to be drawn (one expressed often in the writing of my students) is clear: there must not be any.

The disconnect between knowledge and experience, my students point out, is underscored by the language of higher learning. In her popular essay “Dancing with Professors,” Patricia Limerick explores the effects of impenetrable academic prose on the scholarly world. When scholars write texts so dense and abstruse as to be rendered incomprehensible by their readers, the implicit argument of the text is clear. “The problem is that you are an unsophisticated and untrained reader,” Limerick writes of the exchange between writer and reader, “if you were smarter, you would understand me.”⁴ The words of my students ring true with this scenario.

“Reading Shadish, Cook, and Campbell was pure drudgery,” comments one student of the research methodology text her professor assigned in her “Introduction to
Political Research” course (a text one Amazon.com reviewer notes is particularly helpful for any doctoral student interested in developing experiments in the social and behavioral sciences). The long, “fluffed up,” and “difficult to comprehend sentences of the text,” she continues, “created a most frustrating experience” when it seemed to her that she and her peers “could have learned the topic/subject matter in a few short pages instead of chapters.”

It is not that students like this one don’t see the value of reading. This student notes that her instruction was probably “making us read the text to get used to hard reading,” but she is also acutely aware that “hard reading” shouldn’t mean “hard to understand the language” but “hard to grasp the concepts.” But when writing is “too technical,” the hurdle for frustrated students becomes the language of ideas rather than ideas themselves and rather than draw insight and understanding from their texts, many recall only that, as one student notes, “it took a long time to get through it—and that was without grasping half the concepts.” These students are left with a sense that the authors of such texts and, by extension, their professors, “need a grasp on reality.”

Limerick would argue writing prose that is out of a touch with reality is not necessarily the fault of professors. She traces the roots of bad academic prose to the fear of its authors: fear of being ostracized, of being fired, of not getting tenure. Limerick is afraid for the future of the academy (which sustains her and is now in jeopardy), a reasonable fear that lies “behind [her] campaign to save professors from themselves and to detoxify academic prose.”

Were my students to read and understand Limerick’s assessment of academic writing, they might be left wondering one thing: who’s going to save them from their
professors? Bad prose distorts language, sure, but the effects of this “puffed up” prose extend far beyond the perpetuation of bad writing and student disinterest. Bad writing, my students explain, has profoundly negative effects on their thoughts (that is, their understanding) but also on their perceptions (most importantly, of themselves). In this way, my students notice what Orwell pointed out in “Politics and the English Language”: writing “becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”

And the thoughts bad academic writing conjures up in my students’ minds are certainly foolish. “I feel like an idiot when I try to grasp the ideas,” writes one student of her experience reading academic writing, “because the authors of the articles make it sound so easy.”

I meet with Sam at 4:30 on a Monday afternoon at Hastings. I try to reserve Mondays for my own work, but when I talk to Sam after class Thursday afternoon, he’s sure he needs to me with me before his conference next Friday. When we sit down to discuss the comments I made on the first draft I returned to him Thursday with comments, he cocks his head to the side and looks at me, puzzled.

“Comments? Oh no, I guess I didn’t get to checking those over the weekend.” A pause. “And I was so busy today that I didn’t have time to get on Blackboard,” he explains. And I believe him. Sam is a busy kid. I know that in addition to his coursework Sam holds down a full time job, but later when I ask him why he so often slouches in class, he reveals that by 12:00 PM he’s already been up for eight and a half hours and worked a full day as a custodian on campus, a detail about his work I did not know.
“No worries,” I yield. “I’ve got my laptop.”

Sam looks over the three pages of comments I have appended to the end of his paper (as a rule, I try not to give students more than one typed page of comments per assignment, but I know Sam won’t be overwhelmed, and I know he needs the help) and I go into my messenger bag to retrieve the two books and three sets of photocopies I have made for him: Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, two chapters from James’ *Talks To Teachers*, and one chapter from a book by Hannah Whitall Smith, a nineteenth century expatriate Quaker, entitled “Difficulties Concerning the Will.” Sam’s persuasive research paper, tentatively titled “Positive Thinking: Positively Phony?” is his exploration (not unlike cultural critic Barbara Ehrenreich’s investigation in her recent book, *Brightsided*) of current trends in popular psychology and the predominance of positive thinking mantras. The role of action, he will argue, is persistently overlooked in these romantic new age philosophies.

Sam nods his head as he scrolls through the blue notes I have made on his electronic draft. He pulls the laptop screen toward him to avoid the glare from the afternoon sun coming in through the Hastings coffee shop window. “Ahhh,” he utters under his breath with a sense of awareness that cannot be feigned, “makes sense.” With each remark from Sam, I am eased into a sense of reassurance. Often after reading subsequent drafts of papers it’s hard to know whether or not my students have even considered the comments I spent the better part of my week compiling for them. To watch him react positively to my comments, to know that I am helping, is a blessing.
“Well, I wish…” he trails off, eyes still fixed on the screen, making second note of a spot in the text that has caught his attention. He pulls away. “I wish I had read this before we met today.”

We laugh. “No worries,” I reassure him.

“Actually, what I really wish is that I had read this before I worked on my draft this weekend. Most of what you’re saying here is exactly what I came to this weekend.”

“Oh?”

“Well, yeah, this weekend I finally sat down and thought about this. I was sick of worrying about it, you know?”

I nod emphatically, a grin stretching across my face, eyebrows raised. “Oh believe me, Sam. I know. Go on.”

“Well I hadn’t looked at it in a while, and when I read it I couldn’t really remember why I wrote what I wrote.

“Ahhh,” I sound with mouth closed; I want to follow Sam’s train of thought faster than he can.

“It was like I’d strayed so far from what I’d originally set out to do that I couldn’t figure out what my own point was. And I think that comes out in the writing. But like you said here,” Sam continues, points to a place in the text, shakes his finger excitedly at the screen. “It was like I’d forgotten what we talked about in our first conference—why I wanted to write about this topic in the first place, and why anyone should even care about what I’m writing about.” His excited speech slows to a halt, and I wait for him to put his enthusiasm into words. Which was? “I got lost in the writing, you know? I didn’t bring it back to my own experience.” Bingo. “That’s what I started with originally.”
“Interesting,” I say quietly. “What effect do you think that had on what you wrote?”

“Well, when I forgot about that, I didn’t really care about writing it anymore. I forgot what I was arguing because I forgot about why I was arguing and who I was arguing to. Or for? I’m not sure…Anyways, that’s why it took me so long to sit down and just think about it, but when I did it was like, man, this is so simple.”

I sit with Sam in the midst of this little victory and it feels as though James and Limerick are sitting beside me cheering me on. My time and effort to understand Sam and his writing have paid off. Like many of the students in my class, over the course of the semester, through copious research and study, he’s become an expert in the topic of his persuasive essay, but has struggled to write about it in a way that engages his audience and incorporates his own passion and experience. When I send Sam away with his next round of revisions, I am sure that his writing will improve.

I would be a much better writer if I did the things I tell my students to do. Write, I tell them, and don’t stop. Just put the pen to the page. When you write, I explain, you force yourself to follow your ideas to their logical conclusions, and you might not know what these are until you write them out.

But what does all this really mean to them, I wonder standing before the class. My confusion, I have discovered, is my own. Although I’ve said these words at least ten times over the course of five semesters, and understand what these words mean, I’ve never really believed the thoughts. Well, that’s not quite fair. I can understand and
believe something without putting it into practice. Today is the first time I’ve willed these words into action.

I’m sitting at my desk. It’s Saturday afternoon. I would rather be reading, watching a movie, doing laundry—anything but writing. But if I am ever going to understand what it is that I’m writing about and why, I must write. In completing this M.A. thesis (and every other assignment I’ve ever done), the biggest challenge for me has always been putting my pen to the page. If I had the choice (not that this choice would be conscious), I think I would remain in a perpetual state of research. The reason? Research is easy. When I research, I’m the only one involved. I don’t have to do anything but read and take notes. No one bothers me to clarify the endless pages of notes and scribblings in my research journal. When I research, I am alone, and I’ve gotten good at being alone.

When I write, on the other hand, there is always another person involved; there’s always an audience. Writing is always communication and communication is always conversation. The expressed goal of communication is contact, connection, correspondence. In Writing with Style, John Trimble writes of the novice writer: “His natural tendency as a writer is to think primarily of himself—hence to write primarily for himself.” My preoccupation runs much deeper. My natural tendency as writer, thinker, and communicator is to think primarily of myself—and therefore, to think primarily for myself. My individualistic freethinking has yielded some interesting intellectual fruit, but this fruit has failed to sustain me.

Over the past six years—four as an undergraduate and two as a graduate—I, like Trimble’s novice writer, have gotten into the habit of “concentrating so hard on generating ideas” that I “readily forget…that another human being will eventually be
trying to make sense” of what I have said. When I first read this quote, I was overrun by the resonance of the idea with my experience that I failed to fully understand it. The word readily does not mean “easily” but “willingly,” “happily,” “eagerly,” or “promptly.” In my writing and in my teaching, I often think only in terms of what I understand. I plan as if I were a student in my own class, asking myself what I could accomplish in 75 minutes. I write as if I am my own reader, asking myself what logical connections I would need to understand my own thoughts. When I readily forget my students and my reader, I am absolved of my responsibility to get out of my own head.

**My students’ outlooks, mindsets, and attitudes will change** more in these four years than any other time in their life. This fact is part psychological, part physiological. Psychology and pedagogy run side by side. The aim of applying psychology to pedagogy is for teachers to conceive and reproduce sympathetically the mental lives of students. I have to understand what my students think, for their writing is a reflection of that thinking. The first task of every teacher, asserts James, should be to understand the “native reactive tendencies,—the impulses and instincts” of their students. The role of the mind is to determine reactions to certain impressions, and the purpose of education is to shape these reactions.

I’ve spent the semester trying to put James into practice: to understand the native tendencies, impulses, and instincts of my students—how they view academic reading and writing, how they think about their own learning, and how they approach the writing process—in order to shape their reactions to what they read, what they write, and what they learn in the classroom. I have tried to demystify academic writing and break down the imaginary barriers between academic knowledge and practice and the everyday
practice of thinking and common sense. In many ways, I think I have succeeded in helping students better understand how they write, why they make rhetorical choices, and how what they write fits into the discourse of a given academic community.

And writing about my experience as a teacher and learner has brought me to a deeper understanding of my own teaching and writing. In fact, I understand now that in order to be a good teacher, I must understand my own learning experiences because they will inevitably shape how I teach and expect my students to learn. In writing about my experience as a writer and learner, I have realized that many of the discoveries I have made are tied to audience. Each time I write, I address a different audience. Each time I stand facing the class, I address a different audience. The students before me may not be the same students that sat there two weeks or—more likely—two days ago. Our experiences set us apart, but we are not in opposition. As a writer and as a teacher, I must understand my audience. I must be able to recreate their understanding—their experience—in my mind. Otherwise, I risk not seeing them but seeing through them, not talking with them, but talking past them.

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*Notes:*

i (Mineola: Dover, 1962), v.
ii *Talks*, p. 5-6.
v Ibid, p. 205