UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Practicing Composition in the Age of Distraction

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Linda Brodkey, Chair

Contemporary students face a challenging predicament as they attempt to study amidst constant technological distractions. Writing a coherent essay is more difficult than ever when the very tool that young people use to compose, the computer, is also a source of considerable distractions in the form of instantaneous entertainment and immediate social connection. Habitual in-class writing based on the model of *deliberate practice* provides students with an opportunity to write in a focused environment. Students that become engaged in this practice learn the value of *self-regulation* and experience the way in which a regular writing routine can improve their ability to communicate through writing.

Introduction

In the short time between typing the title above and beginning this first sentence, my mobile phone chimed to signal an incoming text message. I smiled at my phone ironically; this is, after all, a discussion about the academic consequences of distraction. Although I ignored the temptations of web surfing when typing this draft, although I turned off the radio and secluded myself in a corner of the house, I did not abandon my phone. And when it signaled a connection, I answered. Immediate communication. Immediate distraction.

In the summer of 2009 I had a unique opportunity to observe the distracting force of communication technology. For a few warm months I held a position as a faculty member at a boarding school in western Massachusetts. During the day I taught and coached. In the evening I was a "Dorm Parent" to 30 tenth-grade girls. I was not a participant-observer in the traditional sense because I was required to enforce rules, provide tutoring, and act as an advisor. It was, however, difficult to miss the attachment my young dorm-mates had to their Internet, entertainment, and communication devices.

The summer program was mostly composed of elite, academically inclined students from across the United States and around the world. In my dorm all of the girls had mobile phones; all of them had computers with Internet capability, or access to one; nearly all of them owned portable mp3 audio-players. When the girls congregated in the evening, these technological tools were central to their activities. They choreographed dances with music from their iPods, laughed together at

YouTube videos, and "talked" with their friends back home using computer based instant messenger programs.

The students in the summer program were enrolled in challenging courses. Several were packing yearlong math classes into just six short weeks. All of the students attended class for nearly five hours a day, six days a week, in addition to extracurricular requirements. Most teachers were assigning at least three hours of homework a night. In order to provide some academic supervision in the evenings, all dormitories required students to participate in two hours of silent study. Students could work in their rooms, as long as their doors were open and they were able to remain focused. There was also a study room on the ground floor where students could work in a more structured environment and receive guidance from teachers. I supervised study hall about twice a week, but because I lived in the dorm, I was almost always present.

During the first week of the summer program, most girls were intent on getting their homework done during the two-hour study period. However, as they made friendships and grew more comfortable in their classes, their concentration began to waiver during study hall. In the second week, when I walked by their rooms I saw students hastily close their laptop screens, end their phone calls, giggle, and return to their books. By the end of the summer, I would sometimes check on rooms where girls were so engrossed in editing digital photos of their new friends, listening to music on their headphones, and simultaneously responding to text messages, that my presence at their door went unnoticed. I wondered at these girls. With hours of

homework to do, they were whiling away two precious, obligation-free hours of their evenings.

The result of such distracted behavior was predictable. One of the study hall multitaskers in my dormitory was also enrolled in my geometry course. I knew she did not spend her evenings doing homework and I watched as she became less involved with the course material. It was not long before her grades began to slip and her eyes failed to stay open in class.

The study-hall scenario was at once ridiculous and expected. Although it seemed obvious that students should "unplug" in order to focus on learning, the value of doing so was obviously not clear to them. Young people are attached to their electronic devices and expect instant connections to their family and friends. They may have never been in a position that challenged that expectation. In his book *The Young and The Digital*, S. Craig Watkins explains the "always on" relationship between youth and communication technology. He writes,

> Asking young people to disconnect even momentarily from the vast swirl of content and comrades they engage throughout the day generates anxiety, discomfort, and cultural alienation. Today, when you ask students to turn off their computers, mobile phones, and iPods, you are asking them to turn off their lives. (185)

My students from last summer are part of a generation that grew up with personal computers and mobile phone technology; some may have literally never experienced a time in their lives when they were digitally disconnected. Turning off phones to limit interruptions during study hall would probably not occur to them.

If they do not consciously "unplug," contemporary students are unable to remove themselves from social activities, even when they are in their room alone, door locked. I am reminded of Virginia Woolf's plea for "a room of one's own," the environment that allowed a woman to exercise "intellectual freedom" (2148). Woolf emphasized the indispensable value of a secluded environment for creative thought because "the lock on the door means the power to think for oneself" (Woolf 2147). Thinking for oneself, arriving at individual conclusions, is an activity rarely sought in this era of constant companionship. The benefits are numerous – loneliness can even be kept at bay – but it also means that young people are no longer shielded from the social pressures and the difficulties of adolescence by locking their door; communications reach them through the very device on which they work: their computer screen.

It's naïve to imagine that contemporary students will choose to write on something other than their computers. This tool provides access to profound Internet research capabilities, but it is important to remember that it also provides profound distraction. The computer allows students constant connection to their social world and entertainment. Games, advertisements, social networks, stories, encyclopedias, exhibits and videos are all available when the inclination presents itself. It is *so easy* to go online and find something fascinating within seconds and academic thoughts are just as easy to abandon. This is hardly a fair situation for beginning writers, for whom the task of drafting a coherent piece of writing is difficult enough.

As our flighty, technologically absorbed behaviors began to develop over the past decade, researchers studying Expert Performance were simultaneously involved in understanding the focus required to reach expertise. There is now substantial research that suggests the best way to achieve excellence is through *deliberate practice*. *Deliberate practice* is defined as an activity done to improve a specific aspect of performance and it requires "full concentration" as well as a "distraction free environment" (Plant 98). This form of practice is not rehearsal, but rather a goal-oriented effort aimed at improving a single, specific ability. The idea has been applied to sport, music, business, and academia, among other things, and shown significant results. A recent piece of research in the field of educational psychology stresses the fact that "expert performers habitually practice at regularly scheduled times" and that their engagement in this kind of practice differs from "the unplanned and spontaneous engagement in more enjoyable and effortless activities, such as leisure activities with friends" (Plant 101). In other words, *deliberate practice* requires an individual to consciously remove themselves from the distractions of daily life and focus on the task at hand. In order to participate in the *deliberate practice* of writing, students require a space that allows them to "turn off their [social] lives" and experience Woolf's "intellectual freedom" (Watkins 185; Woolf 2148). The proponents of the *deliberate practice* theory call this "access to necessary training resources" (Plant 98).

For a writing student, the required training environment is a "room of one's own," a room where distractions are limited and students are granted the blessed freedom to "think for oneself" (Woolf 2147). In support of this, I propose that

teachers offer up their classrooms and aid their students in the *deliberate practice* of writing. English teachers would indeed be offering up their classrooms because the time used for in-class writing activities cut into the time normally reserved for traditional literature discussions. However, the loss of discussion time does not necessarily equate to a loss of intellectual questioning and understanding. There are ways to take advantage of the inherent connection between reading and writing for the benefit of both subjects.

If we are going to take the teaching of writing seriously, students must be given this opportunity to practice writing; it is not necessarily happening at home or in the dorm room. It is also not necessarily obvious to young people that such focused study is beneficial. Students must be exposed to a writing practice that is meaningful and consistent. By bringing writing into the classroom, students may begin to appreciate author William Saroyan's advise. He said:

> How do you write? You write, man, you write, that's how and you do it the way the old English walnut tree puts forth leaf and fruit every year in the thousands… If you practice an art faithfully, it will make you wise, and most writers can use a little wising up. (210)

Composition is valuable for self-understanding and crucial for the effective communication of ideas. Based on my limited teaching experience, as well as research from Education and Composition, I advocate that students be asked to participate in habitual writing during class time using the techniques of *deliberate practice*. In-class writing provides students with a model for a distraction-free learning and elevates the significance of Composition for young people.

Part I: Distraction

In "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf, Woolf responded to the genuine challenge faced by intellectually inclined females: the inability to survive as scholars due to lack of material provision. "Intellectual freedom," she wrote, "depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor" (Woolf 2148). She explained that women without a room of their own or funds to sustain them, women like Jane Austen, wrote in the common sitting room at the mercy of social activities. She wrote that Austen "was glad that a hinge creaked, so she might hide her manuscript before anyone came in" (Woolf 2127). Without other means, women were required to be surreptitious about their writing and yield to the distractions of society and housework. Contemporary students are protected, to some degree, from the worries faced by Austen and Woolf. Most have access to academic materials and are encouraged to write. Yet in some way students are still facing Jane Austen's circumstances; they are writing in the common sitting room. Their computer screen is their social center. Unlike Woolf, most students are accepting of their situation.

Young people enjoy the abundance of media available. They find it exciting, entertaining, and consuming. S. Craig Watkins, a researcher concerned with the relationship between media and behavior, reports on the affinity young people have for digital technology. He writes,

> Young people are media rich. They own music players, computers, mobile phones, TVs, and game consoles. Young people's media

> environment is like a kid who wakes up one day and finds himself in a candy store. Surrounded by so many tasty options, what does he do? Naturally, he devours as much of it as he can, any way he can. And that is essentially what we are seeing young people do with media. Immersed in a world of media, they use as much of it as they can, any way that they can. Innovative as ever, the one sure way for young people to use all of the media and technology they own is to use it simultaneously. One study, for example, found that American youth report spending about six hours a day with media. If you include the simultaneous use of media, that figure grows to about eight hours a day. (Watkins 162)

When students are in front of a computer, faced with the choice of surfing the Internet or completing homework, it is likely that even those with the best intentions will find themselves shifting back and forth between indulgence and diligence. The most prevalent form of simultaneous media use for students is almost certainly the act of combining computer-based homework and Internet-based entertainment. Journalist and author Maggie Jackson reports that "nearly a third of fourteen- to twenty-one-year-olds juggle five to eight media while doing homework" (18).

What seems to be happening is a profound shift in the way "we experience space" (Watkins 190). The delineation between the library and the movie theatre, or the desk and the coffee house has been removed. YouTube videos are being watched over the library's wireless Internet connection and flirtatious conversations are happening via text messages in between math problems. Young people expect the instantaneous satisfaction of such connections. The natural result of the capability for anytime-anywhere entertainment is a great deal of distraction no matter the setting. Watkins argues that the most "common challenge" is adjusting to a situation in which

the boundary between leisure and non-leisure space has been entirely erased by the fact that an individual's location no longer restrains their behavior (190).

For adolescents, the disappearance of behavior-specific space is particularly important. Their often-precarious social lives creep into every moment of their day. Mark Bauerlein, an English professor interested in American culture, finds that a "profound social effect has settled in" as a result of communication technology (133). He explains that increased contact via mobile phones and instant messaging has changed the social space of adolescents. He reports,

> Cliques used to form in the schoolyard or on the bus, and when students came home they communicated with one another only through a landline restricted by their parents. Social life pretty much stopped at the front door. With the latest gadgets in their own rooms and in the libraries, however, peer-to-peer contact never ends. (Bauerlein 133-4).

And this kind of peer-to-peer contact is not the kind that can be ignored. *Everyone* knows how easy it is to send a text message, and it is expected that friends will have their mobile phone with them at all times; an ignored or delayed response can be, and often is, understood as a lack of interest, a slight. The stakes are high. Watkins found that adolescents are in a "constant state of alert," concerned they might, at any time, be "missing something" (190). The result is a need to have unbroken access to their different forms of communication: texts, e-mail, facebook posts, and instant messages. When writing, the aim is that sustained concentration, critical thinking, and creativity come together in a single act. However, this combination is difficult to arrange if contemporary students must always write in the presence of the social sphere, must always compose in the common sitting room.

Journalist and author Maggie Jackson considers the history of the word "distracted." It "hails from the Latin for 'pull asunder,'" she writes, "an etymology that inspired an unfortunately now obsolete sense of the word. From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, distraction alternatively meant a rending into parts, a scattering, a dispersion" (Jackson 260). As distractions arise, attention is scattered, dispersed, and for students this means that academic work suffers. Jackson draws a connection between the frequency of media use among young people and poor critical thinking skills demonstrated by American fifteen-year-olds on an international exam (18). "Nearly 60 percent of fifteen-year-olds in our country," she reports, "score at or below the most *basic* level of problem solving" (Jackson 18). If students are unable to pay attention, if their thoughts cannot coalesce, it is obvious that they will find it difficult to perform thoughtful analysis, much less produce a coherent piece of writing. A distracted lifestyle can also be frustrating and unfulfilling, further hindering academic ability. Because of the ease with which young people move between work and pleasure online, Jackson believes that young people will fail to experience "the hard fought pleasures of plunging deeply into a thought, a conversation, a state of being" (19).

When I was teaching at the boarding school in the summer of 2009, one of the best parts of my day was coaching soccer. It was the one time of the day when students and teachers walked into a space designated for a single activity. Everything else was forgotten and there was a focus on the physical: the game, the ball, the body. It was obvious that we were getting better at something; it could be felt in our sore

muscles after the whistle sounded. It felt good to participate in this kind of single-minded activity. It felt free.

In a column for the *New York Times*, author Peggy Orenstein writes about the freedom associated with participating in focused occupation. She connects this feeling to the computer application called "Freedom," which "blocks your Internet access for up to eight hours at a stretch" in order to prevent distraction when working on the screen (Orenstein). Because computers have changed from workstations to combination workstation-entertainment-centers, our ability for self-control seems to have been pulled asunder. Simply preventing the temptation of Internet access provides Orenstein, and presumably many others, with, a great sense of liberation. She writes, "I am still surprised by the relief that floods me whenever I bind myself from going online, when I have no option but to ignore the incessant tweets and e-mail messages and videos and news links and even legitimate research" (Orenstein). The feeling of relief is likely associated with the potential for accomplishment we associate with a distraction-free environment. When I step on the soccer field, I expect I will work hard for the next two hours. When I sit down in front of a computer, as good as my intentions may be, I expect to "take breaks" surfing the web.

Maggie Jackson provides some startling information about the way contemporary Americans "work" in front of a computer screen. Reporting on the typical office worker, she says, "More than half typically have to juggle too many tasks simultaneously and/or are so often interrupted that they find it difficult to get work done. One yearlong study found that workers not only switch tasks every three

minutes during their workday but that nearly half the time they interrupt themselves" (Jackson 17). The reason for such juggling and so many interruptions has to do with a willingness to multitask, or (attempt to) operate several applications at once. Watkins explains that most young people "do not think twice about engaging multiple screens (e.g., the television, computer, mobile phone), multiple windows on their computers (e.g., AIM, iTunes, MySpace), multiple tasks (e.g., checking their Facebook news feed while doing homework), or multiple conversations at the same time" (Watkins 163). Although the idea of doing two things at once, and thus saving time, is very appealing, multitasking is not always productive.

Linda Stone, a technology consultant and former Apple researcher, has another word for the "lapses of attention" that are attached to multitasking; she calls it Continuous Partial Attention or CPA (Watkins 168). Psychiatrist Edward Hallowell even described a new condition associated with multitasking: "Attention Deficit Trait" with symptoms that mirror those of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) (Rosen 106). Research concerning the mind's ability to pay attention to more than one task at a time shows the expected result, that "multitasking may not only slow down the completion of tasks, but may also impair our performance" (Watkins 165). A clear example of the danger of multitasking takes place every day on the road when individuals attempt to drive and use their mobile phone at the same time. Although not as crucial as preventing deadly accidents, preventing multitasking in the academic world is becoming a major concern (Watkins 169).

Continuous Partial Attention and multitasking behaviors inhibit students when they use a word processor. The act of writing on a computer screen is complicated by the fact that "using one media almost always means interacting with another media too" (164). The all-in-one capability of personal computers is at once incredibly valuable and incredibly troubling. Research that used to require a cross-country flight and a special-collections pass can now be done in fifteen minutes. That is astounding. However, it is problematic that such a powerful research tool is the same machine used for writing. College students interviewed by Watkins "readily acknowledge that the Internet is a major source of distraction while trying to study" (Watkins 188). Multitasking and a lack of self-discipline when using the technological resources prevent the computer from being the ideal academic accessory. As Mark Bauerlein explains, "For most rising users, screen time doesn't graduate them into high knowledge/skill states. It superpowers their social impulses, but it blocks intellectual gains" (Bauerlein 139). Studies dating from the early 1990s through 2006 demonstrate that individuals do not often read online text in the traditional way, but scan different words on the page and piece together an understanding (Bauerlein 143). Linear reading is abandoned and users rarely focus on a single site (Bauerlein 143, 145). Teenagers demonstrate a rapidity when web browsing that actually hinders their ability to complete "ordinary tasks online" (Bauerlein 146). Many students cannot move past the distraction facilitated by multiple-window Internet searches. Their concentration is dispersed even while intending to use the resource for academic purposes.

The skills that students require for academic success, patience and literacy in particular, are very difficult to develop when so much time is spent in front of the screen (Bauerlein 147). Teenagers must rely on external intervention to make them aware of the value of focused study. It is important to know that attention can be taught, can be learned. It is crucial that we do so. In *Distracted*, Maggie Jackson showcases the value of cultivated attention. In a "tech-saturated world," the ability to control our attention is key to "fostering the reflective thinking skills and deep engagement in learning that are so needed" (Jackson 25, 230). She emphasizes again and again the connection between paying attention and improved learning. A student who willingly takes on the job of improving their attention, who practices self-control, can benefit in numerous ways. She explains,

> Minute by minute, self-control blossoms into broader forms of focus and persistence called "engagement" that fuel both academic achievement and depth of thought. Students who study longer and get more deeply involved in their courses, and their reading and writing, report making greater gains in critical thinking and intellectual development in college, numerous studies show. This is both common sense and somehow surprising. Surely, the kids who take detailed notes and speak up in class, live in the library, and devour the list of 'additional readings' naturally learn more, but they also wind up becoming better *thinkers*. (Jackson 233)

The ability to think in a complicated way is crucial for Composition. As Linda Flower and John Hayes stress in their Composition research, a good deal of writing well is dependent on an author's "willingness to explore and reformulate" their rhetorical problem by considering audience and goals (476). A good deal of writing well is the ability to think, deeply and with great attention to detail. The ability to pay attention takes a real commitment. Maggie Jackson considers the advice of fifteenth century

monk, Gascoigne: "Paying attention takes effort, Gascoigne cautions, and becomes habit only through long, patient cultivation of the mind" (261). This commitment to attentive improvement is fundamental to *deliberate practice*.

As educators, we have the opportunity to give our students a chance to pay attention and free themselves from distractions that surround their academic life. School is one of the most important places in the lives of young people and they ought to have access to an environment where they are able to pay attention, to themselves and to their work. As Watkins concludes,

> It is clear that [young people] are looking for a place of refuge from the deluge of content accessible through their computers. They are also looking for a place to simply stop, disconnect, and think. Hallowell maintains that 'if you don't allow yourself to stop and think, you're not getting the best of your brain. What our brain is best equipped to do is think, to analyze, to dissect and create. And if you're simply responding to bits of stimulation, you won't ever go deep.' Many students, I believe, would agree. (Watkins 189)

Students can benefit from experiences that ask them to think seriously and focus their attention. Specifically, student writing might improve if educators make them aware of the distractions they face and adopt the model provided by *deliberate practice* and *self-regulation*, discussed in the following section. It ought to be acknowledged that young people may not value the opportunity to "go deep," having never been separated from the constant stimulation of a technology-rich lifestyle. It may be difficult to convince them of the benefits if they do not consider themselves in a debilitated position, but rather an enlightened one. It is important then that educators fashion an environment in which students experience the rewards of focused learning: increased productivity and greater understanding.

Part II: *Deliberate Practice* and *Self-Regulation*

Contemporary schooling is very different from the early forms of western education. It is highly influenced by the industrial revolution which introduced a mindset of mass-instruction to classrooms (Amirault and Branson 75). The goal was to create "competent industry workers," which the system did well, but as a result schooling neglected "the development of expertise in any one particular area" (Amirault and Branson 76). Recently, educational psychologists and cognitive scientists began researching the ability of students to achieve expert performance. They found that models of education dating from before the industrial age, including ideas of apprenticeship and modeling, were more effective learning strategies for promoting field-specific improvement. The two most important theories to emerge from this research are labeled *deliberate practice* and *self-regulation*. When used in combination, these two aspects of learning provide powerful ideas for the teaching of writing.

Deliberate practice is usually defined by researchers of expert performance as related to the act of sustained, focused, dedicated training aimed at improving a single feature of a student's craft. The most helpful definition I found was written by Barry Zimmerman and Anastasia Kisantas. They define *deliberate practice* as "individualized training activities designed by a coach or teacher (or in some cases chosen by the students themselves) to improve specific aspects of an individual's performance through repetition and successive refinement" (242). *Deliberate practice*

is not the idea that "practice makes perfect" or that repetition of a task will be beneficial. Instead, *deliberate practice* is "designed specifically to improve performance" (Colvin). It requires an attentive coach, teacher, or mentor who is able to suggest activities that further the student's abilities and then require the student to repeat the activity until the coach is able to advance them beyond their present level of competence (Colvin).

Educational psychologist K. Anders Ericsson first proposed a training method based on *deliberate practice*. His idea differed from the accepted belief of repetitive rehearsal in that "time and/or practice alone could not produce the highest level of human performance" (Amirault and Branson 83). He began to publish papers on *deliberate practice* in the 1990s, which helped to establish the field of Expert Performance. His name still appears on the majority of papers published on the topic and he was the primary editor for the first handbook on expertise, published in 2006. The field analyses the training routines of experts in order to provide a better understanding of the learning process in terms of cognition and preparation.

In the educational field, the study of Expert Performance can improve the strategies and quality of our teaching. Ericsson says as much in the introduction to the 2006 handbook:

> By examining how the prospective expert performers attained [basic] levels of achievement, we should be able to develop practice environments and foster learning methods that help people to attain the fundamental representations of the tasks and the self-regulatory skills that were necessary for the prospective experts to advance their learning to the higher levels. ("Introduction" 3)

The achievement strategies used by accomplished individuals can be repurposed as methods for students to emulate. By adopting proven techniques and creating advantageous scenarios, individuals can more rapidly acquire the knowledge and abilities needed for a particular arena (Ericsson, "Influence of Experience" 690).

For example, consider the study of Calculus. In the thirteenth century, it was expected to take between 30 and 40 years to master equivalent material through the best known method of study at the time: isolated learning (Ericsson, "Influence of Experience" 690). Of course it is now expected that high school students and college freshman will become competent in the subject in a year or two. Instructional methods have obviously improved over the years: textbooks are available now; contemporary teachers use well established techniques when presenting the material; modern students are guided in which problems to practice each day and how long to spend reviewing them. The subject has changed very little, but an understanding of how to improve student learning is a direct result of understanding why tutoring worked better than isolated study, why continual reinforcement was better than arbitrary advancement. Math, in fact, has been taught using *deliberate practice* for quite some time. Students "practice tasks that are within reach of the individual's current level of ability" while maintaining "effortful exertion to improve performance" and receiving "feedback that provides knowledge of results" (Kellogg 396). As far as the study of mathematics is concerned, there is a clear, obvious procedure to follow based on the notion of *deliberate practice*. The study and improvement of writing is certainly less quantifiable when compared to the correct or incorrect answers in

Calculus, but the learning strategy represented by *deliberate practice* can still be helpful for teaching the craft.

As far as Composition is concerned, a focus on a student's writing environment is likely the best way to introduce *deliberate practice*. As Ericsson noted in the introduction to the Expert Performance handbook, deliberate practice is a choice of method as well as environment ("Introduction" 3). The reason surroundings are so influential has to do with the level of concentration required for *deliberate practice*. The training requires intense focus on specific improvement, which can only be done when distractions are either physically removed or somehow blocked by the student themselves. Ericsson says it is this feature that separates *deliberate practice* from "both mindless, routine performance and playful engagement" ("Influence of Experience" 692). Because focused practice is so attention-intensive, it can only be maintained for relatively short periods of time. Expert performers tend to practice at such a serious level for only an hour at a time before taking a rest, and, in general, limit themselves to five hours of such activity a day (Ericsson, "Influence of Experience" 699).

Ronald Kellogg examined the *deliberate practice* of expert authors and found that they composed in secluded settings with planned time for intensive writing. He noted that unlike students who tend to engage in "binge writing," "successful writers often schedule only a few hours per day for composing, and avoid binges that lead to exhaustion" (396-97). The strain of serious practice requires limits, schedules, and a certain form of self-discipline. To achieve at this level, *self-regulation* is needed to

avoid the "generally counterproductive" behaviors of discouragement or blocking that can set in when students aspire to progress at high rates.

Barry Zimmerman defines *self-regulation* as "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994)" ("Achieving Academic Excellence" 85). *Self-regulation* can be thought of in terms of the discipline needed to achieve goals in any arena, be it academia, athletics, or an individual's personal life. A person competent at *self-regulation* can both set attainable goals and manage their time in a way that allows them to work toward their goal in an appropriate way. *Self-regulation* is an obvious part of *deliberate practice*; the ability to practice in a dedicated way requires the discipline inherent to *self-regulation*.

For writers, *self-regulation* is crucial. As Ronald Kellogg found in his study of successful writers, even the act of moving words from the brain to the page demands a level of concentration that can only be sustained for brief periods (392, 397). The result is that writers tend to construct their surroundings and their schedule to serve their need for *deliberate practice*. Kellogg goes into detail about the ways in which various authors "self-regulate their emotions and behavior to stay on task and complete their work" (395). Writers accomplish this by "losing themselves in their work, engineering their work environment, adhering to a work schedule, and practicing motivational rituals" (Kellogg 395). Such specific self-discipline is a trait that would certainly be valuable for students beginning to write in a serious way. It is

my proposal that *self-regulation* and *dedicated practice* be adapted into the methods for teaching Composition.

One of the most exciting ideas emerging from studies of *self-regulation* is that the actions taken by a highly self-regulated individual can be examined, taught, and emulated by others. The best way to teach *self-regulation* is through classroom modeling. Zimmerman explains that in the past it was "suggested that children's self-regulatory control emerges primarily from social learning experiences," which may very well be the case, but now there is "some experimental evidence that interventions that mirror the same pattern [of self-regulatory control] are especially effective" ("Achieving Academic Excellence" 106). The best way to teach such strategies turns out to be through "imitative experiences" that "rely heavily on modeling" (Zimmerman, "Achieving Academic Excellence" 99). As Zimmerman clarifies, "students who watch an expert model perform are hypothesized to have a more detailed concept of the skill in question and its potential benefits than those who must rely on self-discovery" ("Achieving Academic Excellence" 101). In the high school classroom, if teachers are able to understand and model expert practices in this way, it is possible for them to pass on the gift of regulatory skill.

Zimmerman and Kitsantas argue that writing students, in particular, benefit from the reinforcement of *deliberate practice* and *self-regulation*. It is very difficult for an individual student to gain "self-regulatory control of writing" without guidance because the elements which make up the craft of writing, including elements such as "goal setting, self-monitoring, and self reactions," are so subtle, (241). As difficult as

it may be to develop into a competent writer, students do benefit from the technique proposed by Ericsson's ideas. It has been demonstrated that *deliberate practice* and *self-regulation* are directly connected to improvement in university writing courses (Zimmerman, "Achieving Academic Excellence" 98). In school, students ought to be guided in the necessary tools for *self-regulation* so that they might apply the strategies to their lives and to work that extends beyond class hours.

An obvious and important aspect of *self-regulation* that can be demonstrated in the classroom is the engineering of a suitable writing environment. As stated earlier, *deliberate practice* is dependent on a student's ability to maintain a high level of concentration. To some degree, a student's propensity for maintaining focus is internal. Zimmerman explains that students who are constantly distracted by their surroundings, or students who believe they can study effectively in highly distracting situations, such as in front of a TV, often do poorly in school ("Achieving Academic Excellence" 89). It is also easy to recognize that external distractions can be regulated to some extent. By creating and demonstrating an "effective setting for learning," teachers can model an environment in which *deliberate practice* takes place, even if the student does not internally regulate it at this point. Of course the hope is that students will recognize the benefits of environmental regulation and develop a certain degree of *self-regulation* in this regard.

Knowing that students operate in a world of endless technological and social distractions, providing them with a model for improved concentration is a worthwhile endeavor. Without experiencing the benefits of regulation first hand, it is unlikely that

students will reach the conclusion that they ought to plan their time for writing in a protected setting. It is even more unlikely that they will turn off their mobile phones or use a word processor disconnected from the Internet. Young writers ought to be made aware of the fact that their academic work is likely to improve if they use the concepts provided by *deliberate practice* and *self-regulation*. The best way to encourage these behaviors is to bring them into the classroom. Zimmerman and Kitsantas emphasize that "students need social guidance during the initial levels of learning complex skills to prepare them to engage in optimally effective self-directed practice" (248). By modeling the skill of environmental regulation at school through in-class writing, students stand a much better chance of improving their ability as writers and also learning to use *deliberate practice* techniques in their academic efforts.

Part III: In-Class Writing as Practice and Learning

A Review of In-Class Writing: Freewriting

The topic of in-class writing is not often mentioned in the literature on Composition. At least not in those terms. As a tool, it was frequently employed by Composition specialists Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, but evidently in-class writing was not novel enough to receive particular attention. However, when long-time educator Nancie Atwell brought the idea of dedicated writing workshops to the grade levels, she earned national awards. Still, in-class writing has not become a major portion of the Composition field. Part of this, I think, has to do with the fact that writing instructors feel they ought to *teach* when they are in the classroom and that issuing in-class writing exercises cheats both their profession and their students. When Professor James Britton was leading English-teacher education courses, he noticed that his student teachers often "felt somehow that they were not measuring up to traditional standards of behavior: there were things *they knew* that children ought to know and surely it was up to them to *tell them*" (155). Learning to stand back as a teacher and encourage self-discovery can seem wrong to an instructor when they could easily provide a student with the answer (Britton 157). The other reason in-class writing is often overlooked has to do with the expectations of contemporary English instruction. At the high school level, schooling often focuses on the amount of knowledge retained (to be demonstrated on tests), rather than the ability to produce a unique example of learned understanding. As Donald Graves explains,

"Unfortunately, with time an ever-decreasing commodity in the school day, writing has been pushed to one side in favor of reading and those subjects that can be easily tested by a computer" (58). Whatever the reason, in-class writing is rarely discussed in Composition Studies today. However, it is worthwhile to reexamine the place of writing workshops in the classroom; they stand to provide the practice and experience young writers desperately need. The idea had merit before the distracting force of always-on electronic communication, and it is even more valuable now. I argue for the use of in-class writing as a primary component in improving student composition.

Unlike in-class writing, the "experience of writing" is a well known sub-section of the Composition field. The two topics are closely related. Simply allow what is called "private writing" or "informal writing" or the "experience of writing" to move from private writing groups into the classroom and the result is writing which takes place in class. The essential – habitual writing – becomes bound to the required – class attendance. Athletic coaches figured out a long time ago that organizing specific practice time was beneficial for their athletes; practice takes place under their supervision and by their direction. Teams that practice more are more successful. Effective training in writing is not so different from time spent on the practice field. Secondary schools must consider this kind of *deliberate practice* when intending to improve student writing. Students must be provided with experience, challenge, and excitement. A powerful way to ensure, and indeed to promote such an endeavor, is to dedicate class time to the scratching of pen against paper.

One kind of writing previously used in-class is freewriting. Writers and Composition scholars such as Donald Murray and Peter Elbow use forms of freewriting to aid in the process of discovery when writing. I am not discussing the kind of "Freewriting" that is associated with incoherent, meditative scribbles. What I mean by freewriting is low-stakes, but concentrated informal writing. It is habitual and intentional. Joy Marsella and Thomas Hilgers define freewriting in the following way:

> Freewriting is a generic term that is attached to any number of activities, including nonstop writing in which writers follow ideas wherever they lead them; freewriting preformed as a timed exercise; focused freewriting; and any one of these combines in a series of systematic operations that act as a heuristic. (Marsella and Hilgers 105)

Freewriting, then, is a kind of learning, practiced as an experimental foray in the hopes of finding insights, goals, or themes. As Murray points out, this activity often leads to students writing "what they did not expect to write" and discovering something about their message or their style that is helpful to their project ("Writing as Process" 19). For students, freewriting can redirect their motives when composing. Instead of writing for a grade and guided by strict limitations, students may write in their own style and focus on their own content. Students are able to "follow the plan in [their] head without being constantly derailed" by the demands of grammar, style, and teacher approval (Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine xvii). For this reason, freewriting has been used to counteract the pressures applied by more typical school writing assignments.

High-stakes writing is the expected and accepted form of school composition, but as Elbow notes, this often results in writing that is completed under duress. In the worst case scenario, high stakes school writing becomes a punishment for student and teacher alike (Elbow, "The War" 294). It is easy to imagine the student writer operating within the panopticon theorist Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*. Students usually have their writing examined for faults by the reigning system of surveillance: by teachers, parents, and themselves, but it is difficult to think of how a student might operate outside that sphere.

Informal writing can act as a release from surveillance, as permission to experiment without the burden of evaluation. Of course both high and low stakes scenarios have their place in education, and in writing. As Elbow qualifies, "Many breakthroughs in our relation to writing occur when we learn to have a whole spectrum of writing – from high stakes to low stakes" ("The War" 294). Discovery of meaning, however, is more likely to result from habitual, informal composition. Low-stakes writing creates a relative safe space in which students may pursue their own objectives – a far more meaningful pursuit than most high-stakes requirements.

If writing is not being evaluated, students are free to write for the purpose of exploration and questioning topics. When writing high-stakes, final-draft oriented prose, students push for an end goal, for closure, and find little meaning within the writing process itself (Hammond 72). Lynn Hammond suggests using focused freewriting for the purpose of inspiring thought. She explains that this kind of exercise helps her students move "through all the necessary thinking stages" as they

"engage in genuine exploration" (Hammond 72). In her in-class exercises, students are given the opportunity and the safety to use writing for their own learning. As Donald Murray says, habitual, daily writing means "playing with ideas, letting a piece of writing grow and ripen until it is ready to be written. It is intellectual play, self-indulgent, introspective, and immensely satisfying" ("One Writer's Secrets" 161). Low-stakes freewriting creates a situation in which students can both practice writing in a deliberate way and fashion meaning from their composition.

Freewriting for a short time every day also gives students legitimate writing experience. Donald Murray is a strong proponent of the idea that an individual learns to write by writing and not through any other combination of writing related activities. His reasoning is based in common sense and seems rather obvious upon reflection. He says,

> Can we teach writing?
> Yes, but we can't teach writing before our students write. Our students do not learn to write, then write. Few students can listen to a lecture on writing or read a textbook on writing and understand the lessons they may need to learn. We are asking them to imagine, understand, and interpret an experience they have not yet had. (*Write to Learn* xi)

Allowing students a low-stakes experience in habitual writing gives them an understanding of what writing is like in a way that is different from demanding a proof of their knowledge for evaluative purposes. This is so important because "we can give our students a successful experience in the writing process. We can let them discover how writing finds its own meaning" (Murray, "Writing as Process" 25-6).

If, as teachers, we are able to present writing in a way that is both enjoyable and meaningful for students, as well as provide time for such writing experience to

occur, it seems that the results can only be positive. At the very least, more writing will occur in school, raising the chances that it might continue outside of school as well. Even if all a student's writing is done in class, the time devoted to a given work will be so much more beneficial than the typical essay assignment which is generated in two hours the night before the deadline while the cell phone and Internet beckon for attention.

The benefits of freewriting have been obvious in my writing courses. In my class instruction I encourage exploration through writing and students seem to appreciate the opportunity. I almost always set aside ten minutes for focused freewriting at the beginning of each class and sometimes conclude the day with a few minutes of reflective writing. My intention is to have students take new perspectives or formulate new questions (and sometimes answer them). I ask students to think about their writing and the texts we are reading. Usually I follow the freewriting exercise with five minutes of non-obligatory discussion. At the end of the term last fall, I asked my students for their thoughts on this exercise. Perhaps they were simply trying to please me, but I received generally positive responses. The general consensus was, even if the focused freewriting did not lead to any certain milestones in self-understanding, it was nevertheless an enjoyable way to begin class. Many students relished the "break" that freewriting provided in the normal chaos of their day and they mentioned that this time for writing allowed them to reflect on their ideas more easily. One student wrote, "In-class writing time gives me a chance to think further and sometimes develop new and better ideas. Also, because it is often quiet in

the classroom, I can think better than I could outside of class." Other students did use the in-class writing time for the purpose of discovery, as Donald Murray so often promotes. A student who was a reluctant in-class writer shared the value of the freewriting opportunity for that reason:

> At first, I must admit that I didn't really take the in-class writing very seriously, but as the course went on I did find it useful, especially for [the final assignment]. I recall that I was just writing whatever came to my mind and that's what hit me. I guess just writing whatever comes to mind really actually helped. I guess my last journal entry may seem the most scattered, but it was actually quite insightful.

And many students appreciated the low-stakes aspect of the exercise. It is clear from the following student-remark that removing pressure and surveillance from the writing process aided this student the writing-for-discovery objective:

> I used the time to write down all my ideas – I liked how we were allowed the freedom to write whatever we wanted so I didn't feel pressured to write something specific. I think that allowed me to write down all my ideas and later I could pick out what was actually relevant. What we wrote about in class/ the discussions we had about it after really helped me brainstorm ideas about my writing.

The safety of low-stakes, in-class writing is a valuable opportunity that students can use to improve their academic prose. It is important to note that this kind of writing is unlikely to happen outside of the classroom; providing students with the chance to write in class is increasingly important.

There are certain considerations to take into account when directing in-class writing. Curriculums will vary as much as instructional practices; as such, no definite prescription for in-class writing is given here. A focused freewriting prompt may have a very different purpose in one course than in another. For example, a prompt may be

used to generate a class discussion about the course literature. The following prompt was used in my writing course this winter as part of a lesson regarding the definition of genius:

> After reading "The Genius Factory," what is Plotz's main claim for the chapter? How does Plotz's idea of genius differ from the one proposed by Hermann Muller? By Robert Graham? (WCWP 10B 14-Jan-10)

In the discussion following this kind of prompt, students have access to their written thoughts, which often results in a more in-depth and productive class meeting. On the other hand, prompts might ask students to think about their own writing projects such as this example from the same course:

> For assignment 1C you made an argument for the definition of genius in a particular field. An argument like this has implications on the field and the people involved. Take 10 minutes to write about any implications you can think of and why they matter. This should answer the "so what" question for your paper and could serve as potential conclusion material. (WCWP 10B 26-Jan-10)

Responses to this prompt are not particularly beneficial for whole-class discussion, but they do provide the writer with a rare opportunity for reflection and a chance to improve their paper. Although these two in-class writing exercises serve different purposes, they are both dependent on the idea that reflective writing aids self-understanding. When using in-class writing, instructors have to take into consideration their objectives and be aware of the reasoning behind the prompt.

The following questions highlight some of the issues that must be kept in mind:

How will students use the in-class writing?

How much will the in-class writing be geared toward a final project?

How guided and reviewed will the in-class writing be?

Each of these questions generates a range of responses. The first question, regarding the use of in-class writing, suggests a continuum bounded on one end by group-discussion oriented writing that is focused on the course literature and on the other end by writing intended to provide students with time to think about their individual class projects. The second question, about the application of in-class writing, implies a scale with writing-for-discovery on one end and on the other, the act of composing a final draft. Students can write to find meaning, but also work under pressure in an effort to accomplish something specific. The third question considers the potential restrictions placed on students as they write in class. In-class writing prompts might range from unrestricted freewriting exercises to asking students to emulate a piece of text. In the middle of these two extremes lies focused freewriting, where students are given a prompt, but have relative freedom in their response. Obviously instructors will differ in their course objectives, but consideration of these issues can help shape a practical model for incorporating writing into the curriculum.

The Case for In-Class Writing

High school students live cluttered lives, which include multiple obligations, multiple school subjects, and multiple relationships. Asking students to go home (perhaps at 5pm after sports/music/theater activities), eat dinner, turn off their phone,

TV, and computer and put in an hour of attentive writing, an hour of *dedicated practice*, is unrealistic. Years ago, Composition specialist Janet Emig considered the demands placed on students. She wrote,

> During the same seven days we are asking our students to be journeymen writers, others are simultaneously asking them to be journeymen geometricians, zoologists, physicists, classicists, not to mention right halfbacks, debaters, glee-clubbers, friends, lovers, sons. From the seven days it is ominously probable that perhaps 9:32 to 11:55pm on Wednesday night is the total period of production of theme from first jottings through final draft. Under these conditions (for which I do not mean to suggest we are responsible) it is scarcely surprising that all we often receive is minimal coherence and order. ("Unconscious" 6)

I do not mean to suggest we are responsible for a student's busy schedules either, but we are responsible for teaching students how to be better writers with the time that is available. Assigning writing that we know will be done in one sitting on Wednesday night will not result in much of a learning curve. As Emig says, students need to get into a writing habit that "observes a regular schedule" ("Unconscious" 9). Finding a way to make writing a habitual part of their day is important.

Over twenty years ago, Nancie Atwell wrote *In The Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents*. In the book, Atwell shares her teaching agenda, reflects on her reasoning, and tells stories about what works and what does not in terms of student literacy. She is adamant that students spend school time reading and writing. She even established her own school where a workshop model takes center stage in all courses. Her reasons for this position stem from student observation and the relationship in-school learning has with out-of-school learning. One of Atwell's most important ideas is the following: "When reading doesn't happen at school, it's

unlikely to happen away from school, which means it's unlikely to happen at all" (156).

Nancie Atwell's ideas about classroom practice and adolescent learning remain important. Atwell wrote that the distractions of "jobs, first cars, first boyfriends and girlfriends" (156) prevented focused schoolwork from happening outside the classroom. Today, we must add to that list the aforementioned mobile phones, the Internet, and instant entertainment. The one way to assure students practice, deliberately practice, reading and writing is by providing a functional in-class model where students are able to experience and emulate the techniques they learn at school. Atwell recognizes that students learn by doing, an opinion supported by numerous studies in expert performance. But most students today are not actively practicing reading or writing in English class.

A 2009 report for The Educational Forum demonstrates that although "the relationship between achievement and time on task are generally positive and have been documented for decades" (Fisher 168), the high school students observed in the study spent an insignificant portion of their day actually reading or writing. Author of the report, Douglas Fisher, collected 2,475 minutes of classroom data that showed, on average, 6% of class time was spent reading and 2% writing. The writing portion translated to "1.3 minutes of writing per class per day, or about 6.5 minutes per day" and "the writing students were asked to do most commonly is summative in nature, meaning that they are asked to summarize something from class (a recording, lecture, or film) and not to critique, persuade, or inform a reader" (Fisher 172). In short, the

small amount of writing that students are asked to do is for the purpose of evaluation, hardly likely to encourage discovery through writing or promote meaningful composition. A national survey of 361 secondary school teachers supports Fisher's findings. Although the survey demonstrates that high school teachers do use varied writing activities in class, they do so infrequently, only a few times a year (Hawken, Kiuhara and Graham 151). The report's authors call this "writing without composing" (Hawken, Kiuhara and Graham 151). I am reminded of Atwell's statement about reading in school; replace "reading" with "composition" and we can say the following: When composition doesn't happen at school, it's unlikely to happen away from school, which means it's unlikely to happen at all. Composition, we know, is not happening at school.

There is simply no substitute for providing students with time to write. Donald Murray's ideas are central to this argument; he champions the need for daily, deliberate writing. He is steadfast in arguing that "we do not teach our students rules demonstrated by static models; we teach our students to write by allowing them to experience the process of writing. This is a process of discovery, of using written language to find out what they have to say" ("Writing as Process" 26). By focusing on the steps taken as we move toward a completed piece, much can be learned in terms of ability, content, and enjoyment. The message for teachers is to turn the goal of the class away from telling students "what they need to know" and instead become concerned with "what they need to experience" (Murray, "Writing as Process" 17).

As mentioned earlier, James Britton recognizes that teachers frequently *tell* their class what needs to be known. In English class, students are often provided with instructions on form, style, and theory, but Murray points out the possible detrimental effects this lecture style could have on a young writer. Writing, he argues, does not emerge from knowing form, style, or theory, but rather discoveries are made through the act of writing. It is those discoveries that spark a chain of writing related events. He warns what might happen if students don't experience the discovery process themselves:

> For example, a student might get the dangerous misconception that writers know form before they know the content, that students know what they have to say before they say it. I would not write – would not need to write – if I knew what I was going to say before I said it. ("Writing as Process" 18).

Murray's "dangerous misconception" is an important one to recognize. So often student essays arrive at their central point in the final two paragraphs. We really do "write ourselves into" an idea or argument and can only state it clearly by the time we reach the paper's conclusion. Peter Elbow says that we have to "grow and cook a message" (*Writing Without Teachers* 15). He thinks that the typical advice given to writers is backwards: it does not follow that "first you figure out your meaning, then you put it into language" (Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* 14). Instead, he explains that our writing evolves when composing and "only at the end will you know what to say or the words you want to say it with" (Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* 15). Providing students with the opportunity to write themselves into an objective well before the final draft grants them with several beneficial rewards: a better product (to

name the most obvious), an experience with the "discovery" associated with writing, and practice composing.

In a lecture given at the Oxford Literary Festival in 2003, well known author Philip Pullman (*The Golden Compass*) spoke about contemporary literary education. He discussed the way writing is often taught to schoolchildren as a to-do list that will automatically produce correct writing. Murray's "discovery" is left out of the picture, weakening both the written product and student understanding of the craft. When Pullman taught writing to young people, he did so in a way that promoted a focused effort where students were able to write until they found what was important and then they were given time to say it well. Pullman emphasizes that there is nothing more important when teaching student writing; just like Murray, he believes in the gift of time. In his speech he reported on the value of working with students in an apprentice-like way and not using writing only for means of evaluation. He said,

> And working at that writing showed the children very vividly first, that you could use language to say true things, important things; second, that what you wrote could affect other people, could move them, could make them think – it affected me; and third, that you could take time to work at your writing and learn to say things more clearly and vividly.
>
> But this can only happen when teacher and pupil – school and pupil, the system and the child – are *on the same side*, so to speak; when the relationship is more like writer and editor, or craftsman and apprentice, and when the aim is not to pass a test but to produce something of true value, no matter how long it takes. (Pullman)

In addition to the serious implication Pullman makes about the role of the writing teacher and evaluation, his words about the potential for student writing are inspiring.

In order to work with a student for this purpose and at this level, students must be given the freedom and opportunity to pursue writing that matters to them.

Obviously informal writing is not a miracle procedure that results in brilliant essays; instead it is a step, an initial and essential step, on the way to effective writing. It is part of building skills in a writing process, but not *the writing process*. Students are introduced to *the writing process* from a very early age and it is taught with the understanding that students will be able to call upon it at any time and apply it to any piece of writing much like the checklist that has Pullman so concerned. Such a pre-configured process is not necessarily a bad idea, but so often it means that students must generate a theme, their topic sentences, a complete outline, and all their research notes before they begin to write. That kind of structure ignores the benefits of writing for discovery and habitual, low-stakes composition.

Instead of using the term *the writing process*, Nancie Atwell acknowledges that there are various, but distinct stages through which writers progress on their way to final pieces (Atwell 126). "Rehearsing" and "Drafting" are important elements for almost all writers, she concludes, even though the stages may be done in a different order or called by different names (Atwell 127). She is confident, however, that there is *a* writing process that all writers, students or professionals, move through before they create a work worthy of attention. Because writing is done in this way, I would argue that the idea of teaching *the writing process* must be relinquished to some degree in order to give students the relative safety and inventiveness of a writing process that incorporates informal writing.

Students may learn of the capability writing has for discovery, practice, and enjoyment through an in-class writing routine. Informal writing can condone, perhaps for the first time, students writing on their favorite topics. Individuals often continue to do what they enjoy; if writing can be made satisfying for students, increased writing-time is likely to follow. Pat Belanoff says that the reason she began using freewriting in her courses was because "almost all students like it" (Belanoff, "Freewriting" 16). Her students found the exercise liberating and valuable. The reason for this, she concluded,

> was that freewriting made students better writers because it got their writing muscles (all of them: hands, eyes, brain) working at full speed – akin to a pianist playing scales or a marathon runner doing stretching exercises and warm-up sprints – and it produced rich, if rough, first drafts. (Belanoff, "Freewriting" 16)

Belanoff found that this particular kind of in-class writing led to three beneficial results for student writers. Enjoyment was the initial reaction, but her students also gained practice and improved their content through discovery.

Improved content through discovery is not necessarily tied to informal writing, but it is deeply connected to habitual writing. If writing is done in a regular, expected way, important ideas can be maintained and meaning cemented. University of New Hampshire Professor Emeritus Donald Graves witnesses the benefit of habitual writing in young students. He reports,

> When students write each day on topics they've chosen themselves, they tend to think about their work even when they aren't writing. When they do sit down to write, the topic is already in motion. Miss a day, and it's as if they are starting a book or paper all over again, especially when the children are very young. (77)

Writing according to a schedule not only allows for this kind of content development, but the kind of practice Donald Murray talks about when he talks about the experience of writing. His own motto was a phrase from Horace: Nulla dies sine linea. Never a day without a line (Newkirk and Miller xi).

Of course useful daily writing requires sustained attention. Donald Murray emphasizes that no matter the length of time he sets aside for this ritual, he must be assured that during his writing time he can "fall out of the world, forgetting time, place, duty, and listen to the writing flowing through me to the page" ("Getting Under the Lightening" 80). The reason for this, he explains, is "with all the necessary distraction and all the unnecessary interruptions, I need to be able, at the time of pre-writing and writing, to concentrate on the task over all others" (Murray, "Getting Under the Lightening" 80). Focus is fundamental for the kind of enjoyable, *dedicated practice* Murray recognizes as essential for his own writing. It is difficult to find an environment where such concentration or *self-regulation* is possible or even preferred. For this reason, it is important that concentrated writing is practiced and modeled in-class so that students might experience and appreciate its value. Under ideal circumstances, students would repeat this kind of focused practice at home or in their dorm room through self-assigned routine writing.

An Issue of Time

In English class, dedicating time to in-class writing obviously uses precious moments normally reserved for literature discussion. In most English courses there is a priority put on understanding and analyzing literary text. Of course reviewing literature is valuable. It is not, however, *more* valuable than writing. All teachers are aware of the dual demand of reading and writing instruction. Many schools, including Nancie Atwell's, separate the subjects into two classes so that each might receive a larger portion of time. If she did have to combine her two sections, Atwell argues that she would designate certain portions of the week to each topic and "schedule three periods per week of writing workshop and two for reading, still giving writing and reading highest priority as English class activities, making as much time as I could for both" (160). Another solution might be to establish a "writing lab" much like science courses require. But given that reading and writing are likely to be the domain of a single class period, it is necessary to find a way for each to benefit from the other. Peter Elbow argues that student writing must be given greater importance in the classroom for such a relationship to succeed. He explains that if we "give more emphasis to writing in our teaching and our curricular structures and use writing in more imaginative ways" than the traditional evaluative essay, a more "productive balance" can be achieved between the two subjects (Elbow, "The War" 281). The following section discusses the way in which a writing-heavy English curriculum might benefit students even while the usual time restrictions remain.

Given the obvious connection between the act of writing and the act of reading, it is not too difficult to perceive that the practice of low-stakes writing is in a unique position to enrich both the reading experience and the way students think about literature. It has often been argued that students ought to write in an effort to further their learning in other subjects. The reason for using writing in this way is usually tied to the fact that writing provides students with the occasion to reinforce what they know and explore their individual ideas. Donald Murray calls this "the discovery of meaning through writing" and he recognizes it as "the most important step" for a student writer ("Internal Revision" 126).

Janet Emig argues that writing for the sake of learning provides unique benefits that other techniques lack ("Writing as a Mode of Learning" 122). She explains the way in which writing naturally reinforces ideas as they move from the mind, onto the page, to be read and absorbed anew (Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning" 124). When writing, students must also create a deliberate structure for the "web of meaning" in their minds before turning their ideas into a series of logical symbols on the page (Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning" 125). Because the process is complex, moving from scattered thoughts to a structured idea to a piece of writing, students must consider the material in a number of different ways. According to Emig, the restructuring and reconsideration of ideas that occurs when writing provides depth and new understanding.

Donald Murray suggests that the textual understanding developed by practicing writers is distinct from other readers. He argues that the reader who writes becomes

"involved in the text" in a different way, the same way "the woman who plays basketball [watches] the game differently than the people around her in the bleachers" (Murray, *Write to Learn* 244-45). A greater understanding for written language can, in the very least, only benefit the student reader. In the best possible scenario, students will become more connected to their reading as they "begin to understand through his or her own writing how reading can be made" (Murray, *Write to Learn* 247). When a student reads as a writer, the benefits include a stronger connection to the text, more involvement with the language, and a student reading with an eye for writing that they wish to emulate. Donald Murray says that a student with this perspective can gain "a new appreciation and understanding of the product we call literature. They may be able to read it in a way which will help them discover the full implications of what the writer has done and is doing on the page" ("Internal Revision" 141). Peter Elbow suggests that, unlike reading, writing is rather transparent in the way that it demonstrates the construction of meaning. Students are able to "experience the construction of meaning more vividly, even painfully, when [they] write" (Elbow, "The War" 290). Combining writing and reading then can serve the traditional purpose of English class – to understand and evaluate literature – while providing students with time to experience composing.

Writing provides significant insight into reading and ways of thinking about literature, and it is also true that exposure to various forms of literature can help students experiment with writing. In this way, students can "make reading serve writing" (Elbow, "The War" 296). Elbow emphasizes that authors often use this

practice when they "use the theme or structure or spirit or energy of the text to spur their own writing" ("The War" 296). Literature can inspire student writers as they "use the reading as something to reply to, bounce off, or borrow from" (Elbow, "The War" 296).

Nancie Atwell does not teach the overlap between reading and writing explicitly, but she does encourage an interaction between the two activities by promoting "borrowing." Quite naturally, she explains, students wish to incorporate aspects of literature into their writing, or, conversely, examine a piece of text in relation to their own writing experience. She does not have to force the idea on her students. Atwell provides an example of one student, Hilary, who borrowed the structure of a poem discussed during the class and re-writes the content in order to suit her own situation:

> I never asked Hilary to relate her writing to her reading, nor sponsored exercises calling on kids to make writing-reading connections. It happens naturally, inevitably, in workshop settings. In writing workshop conferences and mini-lessons we talk about what authors do. In reading workshop conferences (the journals) and mini-lessons we talk about what authors do. It doesn't take very long for students to begin to bring knowledge and expertise from one area to the other – to view literacy as both considering and trying what authors do. (Atwell 227)

When students take part in the literate world as much as Nancie Atwell's students do, the idea of borrowing ideas from authors, trying their techniques, and writing in a way that brings them closer to a text, is rather a result of their experience with writing. When we stop to think about it, this seems natural. Writing serves reading in Atwell's classroom and vice versa.

There is another complication when bringing writing into the classroom. *Deliberate Practice* demands that students devote a serious amount of time and degree of concentration to writing, but it also places demands on the teacher. Frequent analysis and feedback is essential to the improvement of an individual student's writing (Kellogg 396). Like an athletic coach, teachers must monitor progress and offer suggestions. In a small classroom, this might be done by scheduling frequent student conferences and requesting samples of their un-graded work. With student populations on the rise and the expectation of instantaneous response, teachers must rely on alternate techniques to provide valuable feedback. Students can be taught to conduct useful peer conferences and instructors can make brief comments on the writing pieces leading up to a larger project. However, the time constraint still remains and presents a challenging obstacle when using *deliberate practice* in the writing classroom.

Although the use of classroom time will always be an issue, there is clear benefit to allocating some of this precious resource to in-class writing. Based on the previous experience of authors and teachers, writing can improve the study of literature, enhance a student's individual understanding, and further the quality of their writing. Donald Murray concludes his textbook by saying the following:

> I hope through your writing and mine you have found out that we do not write what we know as much as *to* know. Writing is exploration. We use language to combine experience and feelings and thoughts into a meaning which we may share with a reader. (*Write to Learn* 266)

Murray is clear that learning to write is meaningful work meant to benefit students in numerous ways. If writing is increasingly difficult for students outside of the

classroom, then it seems our responsibility as teachers is to provide students with a place for writing on our watch.

In Conclusion

In his Isis Lecture, author Phillip Pullman explains that writing is not just a skill, a quick response, but an entire method, learned the way one learns to fish at night. He talks about the hugeness of the sea and the fear that exists in setting out in a little boat for the first time in the dark. He goes on to talk about the many things that might discourage forever the inexperienced fisherman: a sudden change in weather, the appearance of an unknown creature, or the disappointing lack of a bite at the end of the line. But he also talks about the growth of the night fisherman, how he can learn to cast where the best fish are and discover subtle tricks to bring fish to the bait. This is how we learn to write, he argues, with patience and practice and seriousness, and the guidance of previous fishermen. We cannot neglect any portion of this process, cannot write a plan on shore than will compare to what is learned on the water. By bringing the writing process into the classroom, we give students the opportunity to fish with mentors and friends, rather than sending them to sea alone. Not to do so seems unfair; we owe it to our students to teach them to write in a way in which they are likely to succeed.

What counts as successful writing is obviously context and community specific, but students know when they improve. Meaningful education occurs when students improve in a useful skill and gain a sense of satisfaction from their improvement. There is no doubt that this result is achieved through hard work. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell searches for the common factor among successful individuals. He discovers that there are no "naturals" and no "grinds," people that put

in hours of work only to discover they did not have the capability (Gladwell 39). Instead, high achievers are individuals who were presented with opportunities and seized the chance to pursue those activities with a great deal of *self-regulation* and *dedicated practice* (Gladwell 267). These outliers devote themselves to complete concentration regarding their improvement and work "much, *much* harder" (Gladwell 39). When teaching writing, we can present students with a time and space away from their distracting lifestyles for this kind of focused *deliberate practice* through in-class writing. Whether or not successful writing can be jump-started through a habitual writing routine is yet to be decided, but Nancie Atwell thinks it is possible and Donald Murray found no substitute for dedicating at least a portion of his schedule to daily writing.

Further research regarding in-class writing might observe and evaluate the processes and the products of students practicing habitual writing in a distraction-free environment. It would also be interesting to know if students used *self-regulation* techniques and better managed potential distractions after participating in this kind of regulated model at school. Although little research exists on the topic, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that these beneficial changes do occur. This past winter, for example, I asked my students, who all participate in regular in-class writing exercises, to keep track of the hours they spent completing a specific assignment. There were several students who at least attempted to write for a small amount of time each day rather than pull off a late-night, deadline driven response. Of course I am unsure of the influence in-class writing had on their *self-regulation*, but I know it

improved mine. My eleventh grade English course included time for in-class writing at the start of every class and when the year ended I continued to diligently write in my notebook. The habit fell off during college, but I remained aware of the fact that writing takes time to develop. I know all-nighters cannot achieve what is possible given advanced preparation. I also know that I need to be away from the computer when I write; I am too tempted by the possibilities of the Internet. I find it valuable to know these truths about my writing process. I learned them through experience, although I'm sure instructors often repeated such suggestions. Even if awareness is all that in-class writing brings to the table, I plan to allow my students the opportunity to learn about their writing by *writing*. I think the chance to provide this insight must be done during class time.

It is important that students gain significant, focused writing experience when they are learning to compose. According to cognitive research, most people write their sentences in phrases; they type a burst of words, pause, and then write another burst (Kellogg 392). The more experience a writer has, the longer their word burst. Graduate students, for example, tend to generate "twice as many words per burst (ten to twelve) compared with less experienced writers (five to six words for undergraduates)" (Kellogg 392). Kellogg explains that the reason for this is the ability of more experienced writers to call upon their long term memory, which might also be called their writing expertise (392). If phrases are generated in this way, then certainly the accumulation of focused practice is advantageous and word-burst interruptions in the form of technological distractions are detrimental. The science behind our ability

to compose reflects Pullman's understanding about writing: if the craft is practiced deliberately, the student can develop a foundation of understanding from which they can work to improve. In-class writing is the only way to ensure that students gain the experience they need to progress as writers.

The KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Academy is a concrete example of the incredible progress students can make when they are absorbed into a thoroughly academic setting for most of their waking hours. Established in the mid-1990s to improve the academic abilities of *very* low-income middle school students in the South Bronx, KIPP academies can now be found countrywide (Gladwell 250-52). The entire educational community is based on the principle that meaningful academic experiences come from a transparent connection between effort and reward. Central to the program philosophy is the distinctive use of time. Students are typically on campus from seven twenty-five in the morning until seven at night and there is school on Saturday as well (Gladwell 260). Activities and homework time takes place in the afternoon and classes are longer than in public schools (Gladwell 260-61). KIPP founder David Levin explains that KIPP students are "spending fifty to sixty percent more time learning than the traditional public school student" (Gladwell 261). The extra time creates a more relaxed atmosphere were students and teachers feel comfortable asking questions and practicing "methodically, carefully, with the participation of the class" (Gladwell 262).

The guided, in-class training that KIPP students receive often results in above-average academic achievement: "90 percent of KIPP students get scholarships to

private or parochial high schools instead of having to attend their own desultory high schools in the Bronx" (Gladwell 267). The students give almost all of their time over to education. Many of them wake at 5:45am and finish their homework just before midnight, spending all of their off-campus time in-transit, eating, or doing work (Gladwell 266-67). KIPP Academy is an extreme example of how *dedicated practice* can be applied to schooling, and also demonstrates the effectiveness of the theory that removing distraction and emphasizing learning can dramatically alter the possibilities for learning.

I have focused on technological distractions in this paper, but the ideas can be applied to varied scenarios. The students I have worked with are generally from economically stable homes and are academically inclined. During the academic year, their lifestyles revolve around their schoolwork. Obviously this is not the case for most students. Many young people live in situations that are not organized to promote academic study. For these students, in-class writing is likely to be especially beneficial. A low-stakes, supportive writing environment can provide space for the student who is unable to control their surroundings and also model the benefits of seeking a quite place to do thoughtful work.

Most contemporary students do not demonstrate the characteristics of *self-regulation* needed for *deliberate practice* (and improvement). I do not blame them for this lack of discipline since the distractions of the contemporary world are fascinating and profuse. However, young people should be made aware of the unique challenge they face as students in an age of great technological attachment. They should also

know that in order to improve their writing, they must invest time in habitual, regulated training. Educators should realize that if we are to teach writing in a meaningful way, composition must be practiced and the art of *self-regulation* must be emphasized as an increasingly important ability. Writing should be experienced, ideas discovered, and communication improved. Bringing writing into the classroom and making writing a part of the regular school day not only provides the time students ought to have for composition, but it also models a focused, regulated environment in which to write.

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