Reflection Essay

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Using Freewriting in Public Speaking Courses to Remedy Student Apathy: An Unconventional Solution to a Common Problem

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Abstract: Student apathy—a lack of motivation or mental presence in the classroom—is common in many academic institutions and courses of study. In Public Speaking courses, speech anxiety can be a factor that contributes to student apathy. To solve this problem, I suggest implementing an unconventional approach—in-class unguided longhand freewriting—that requires students to write nonstop about anything that comes to mind, without censoring or editing, during the first five minutes of each class session. I base this recommendation on my own observations of the students' body language during the freewriting period, as well as my qualitative analysis of 95 students' written feedback regarding the effect of freewriting on them. I found that this practice helps reduce student apathy through increased self-reflexivity, decreased anxiety, and improved presence.

Public Speaking (PS) is one course I have taught for the past two decades. One of the problems I have encountered repeatedly in this course is student apathy. According to Marshall (2012), "apathy in learning is an expression of indifference, lethargy, and/or disengagement in the classroom environment" (p. 275). Apathetic students are bored, checked-out, and show neutrality toward higher education (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). Student apathy, which has been blamed on factors such as ineffective teaching and student failure to study, has posed stark challenges for classroom instruction (Becker, 2010; O'Brien, 2010; Turner, 2016). While apathy may occur for several reasons and can be present in any course of study (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), this essay focuses on apathy in the PS course as a unique context—a core course that nearly all college students, including mine, are required to take during their first year.

However, many students take the course unwillingly: they want to avoid the stress that is almost synonymous with PS. They are not alone as Dwyer and Davidson (2012) noted that

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"people fear public speaking more than death" (p. 99). This great fear--or speech anxiety--often is experienced through physical sensations (e.g., upset stomach) before and during a speech; psychological responses (e.g., loss of memory) during a speech; and emotional responses (e.g., loss of control), before, during, and after a speech (Fujishin, 2015). Based on my experience, on speech days, some students are too anxious to sit still, while other students skip class altogether because they "got sick." During their speeches, many students display behaviors that signal anxiety, such as drawing a blank, coughing nervously, trembling, or using verbal fillers (e.g., "like," "you know").

During classroom discussion, apathy is apparent in that students generally appear disengaged, indifferent, fatigued, and emotionally absent as their minds are too preoccupied with speech anxiety, if not other distractions, to be fully present during class. Because anxiety is linked positively to apathy (Sashittal, Jassawalla, & Markulis, 2012), it is possible that student apathy in PS classes is a cover for anxiety. The pedagogy challenge in this course, then, is to use an approach that can help students release their anxiety and unpack their preoccupied minds.

Solution: Unguided Longhand Freewriting

Scholars have offered numerous teaching techniques to remedy student apathy, or to motivate and engage students (Barkley, 2009). One such technique is the use of freewriting, defined as writing minus "the normal constraints involved in writing" (Belanoff, Elbow, & Fontaine, 1991, p. xiii). Freewriting, which can be guided or unguided, is a kind of writing where students "never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what [they] are doing" (Elbow, 1998, p. 3). Students who engage in freewriting are able to cleanse their minds (Keshishian, 2009), improve their academic writing skills (Somerville & Crème, 2005), and overcome writing anxiety, especially among English language learners (Scullin & Baron, 2013). Freewriting is commonly used in composition courses as well as sometimes in courses such as performance, archeology, and engineering to help generate ideas (Somerville & Crème, 2005). Defining freewriting as "unformed exploratory talk and writing," Palmerton (1992) suggested using freewriting in PS classes as a tool to "facilitate the process of formulating thought" (p. 338).

My Own Experience with Freewriting

I discovered the power of freewriting years ago, when I was having difficulty finishing my doctoral dissertation. A friend suggested that I read Cameron's (1992/2002) *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. The book helped me realize that I was unable to write because my mind was preoccupied with so many other things (e.g., school work, finances, homesickness). To release this preoccupation, Cameron urged, "Get it on the page" (p. 11). Every morning, I wrote about these things for 20 minutes and noticed its positive impact on me almost immediately. It helped me overcome my writer's block, as well as helped me become more present, focused, decisive, and productive as well as less afraid to write.

Despite my conviction about the power of freewriting, however, I hesitated to use it in my teaching, believing that writing would be unpopular among students, especially Millennial students, a generation that grew up surrounded by high-speed Internet, touch media, Wi-Fi, iPads, iPods, and MacBook's in an educational environment that has embraced information

communication technology (ICT). Imposing an archaic process such as longhand freewriting on them, therefore, did not seem to be a good idea. I was aware, however, that students who write their notes have a different type of cognitive processing and outperform those students who take notes on a computer (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). This awareness suggested freewriting might still be useful. Moreover, freewriting has been identified as a technique that helps students form a concrete self-concept, which Fontaine (1991) defined as "a sense of who [students] are, what they value, and the bases on which they determine these values" (p. 13). This insight again made it seem that freewriting was worth investigating.

I also presumed, based on my experience as a student, that my students' minds were preoccupied with their own issues and that their state of mind itself was contributing to their apathy, because it is difficult for students to concentrate when preoccupied and that they, too, might be stressed, albeit for different reasons (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). In fact, one of the biggest stressors students face is speech anxiety connected to their PS course (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Thus, freewriting's potential [e.g., its therapeutic value and its capacity to free the mind (Cameron, 1992/2002; Pennebaker, 1997)] made it seem the assignment was a good match for the unique context of the PS course.

As such, I decided to implement in-class unguided longhand freewriting as a solution to student apathy in my PS courses during the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 semester. In my course syllabi, I explained to students that (a) they would need a notebook and a pen so that they could handwrite nonstop about anything that came to mind, without editing or censoring, during the first five minutes of each class session; (b) the freewrite assignment would be worth 5% of their total grade in the course, though class participation would not be mandatory if they were willing to forego five points; and (c) I would not read their freewriting but would keep a record instead of their participation during class. My reason for including freewriting in the course, I told them, was that not only had I personally benefited from it and wanted the same for them, but also that I was curious to learn in what ways, if any, the assignment would affect them. The project was approved by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

My Observations

During each class session, I observed students' body language before, during, and after freewriting to form an idea of their disposition towards the assignment. In the beginning, I made several observations: a few students were late to class or took a long time to start writing or kept checking the time to stop writing exactly when the time was up, possibly indicating a lack of interest in the assignment; some students who, in the middle of writing, put their pens down to massage their hands, perhaps to literally develop "freewriting muscles" (Elbow, 1998); and several students who wished they could write for just a bit longer. I also noticed that after a few sessions, almost all of my students seemed to appreciate the assignment: some students came to class early and ready to freewrite, some students began freewriting before the class started, and all students wrote without checking the time.

Student Feedback

Having obtained approval from my university's IRB, during the freewriting period of the last class sessions in both semesters, I asked students to provide me with anonymous written

feedback on the assignment by responding to the following question: "What impact, if any, did the in-class freewriting have on you?" I told them that their feedback would help me determine whether I should continue using the assignment in future semesters. To determine their holistic views about the assignment (Pope, Van Royan & Baker, 2002), I qualitatively analyzed their responses.

Of the 95 respondents, seven students found the assignment neither helpful nor harmful. A few other students wrote that they were skeptical about the assignment at first, but liked it later. The other students wrote comments that reflected their gratitude for the writing period, with many of them noting that they (a) wished they could do the same in other classes, (b) would continue freewriting on their own, and (c) would recommend freewriting to other students; they also recommended that I should continue using freewriting in my future classes as "writing for 5 minutes is healthy food for the brain" and "Good way to start class."

Furthermore, three themes emerged from the students' responses. The first theme was increased self-reflexivity. Concurring with previous research (Pennebaker, 1997), students' responses pointed to the therapeutic value of freewriting. They considered it cathartic and soothing in that it gave them a chance to open up and self-reflect and, in so doing, to better organize and understand their emotions. Two examples of student comments are "The writing acted as a therapy session. . . . This is something I would have never expected to learn about in this type of writing" and "It's as if a burden is lifted when we free-write whatever is going through our heads at the time."

The second theme was decreased anxiety. As previous research has not examined the impact of freewriting on speech anxiety, this possible effect did not cross my mind when I created the assignment. In fact, assuming that the students' minds would be too focused on their speeches to want to freewrite on a speech day, I asked students if they wanted to skip the assignment. Their collective and decisive "no" response made me wonder if I had stumbled onto something important. Based on their feedback, freewriting had a noticeable impact on them as several comments pointed to freewriting as a way to relieve stress and as a relaxing mechanism that helped them become calm. The majority of the comments, however, centered on speech anxiety in that students asserted that freewriting cleared their minds and reduced their speech anxiety, or the stress they felt, particularly on speech days or moments before their speech presentations. Two examples of student comments are "Public speaking makes me very nervous so writing down anything that could go wrong helped the most" and "Freewriting helped me walk into my speech better prepared mentally."

The third theme was improved presence in that students pointed to freewriting's capacity to help them clear their minds and thus be more attentive during class. Writing their thoughts before class helped them concentrate and be more present, focused, and participative during class. It also helped them be more positive and organized. Two examples of student comments are "The fact that the writing is called 'freewriting' makes a lot of sense as well because it helps free my mind" and "It helps me focus on what's going on around me and be 'in' the class and not anywhere else."

Conclusion

Through this reflection essay, I suggested implementing in-class unguided longhand freewriting as a possible solution to student apathy. My observations of the students' body language indicated that they learned to like this solution, which helped reduce their apathy through improved self-reflexivity, decreased anxiety, and improved presence. Unguided freewriting helped free students' minds to self-reflect, which in turn allowed them to commit to paper what was preoccupying their minds (e.g., anxiety) and, in so doing, become more focused and present during class. The assignment also gave students a chance to distance themselves from ICT, reflect, and contemplate things other than the latest twitter feed as they quietly practiced the lost art of handwriting.

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