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Writing for Their Lives

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WRITING
for
THEIR LIVES

*Second in a series
of occasional papers from
John Strassburger, President*
URSINUS COLLEGE



URSINUS COLLEGE

HOW WRITING, READING AND SPEAKING
ARE CHANGING THE WAY STUDENTS
LEARN — AND LIVE...



AT COLLEGES ACROSS THE COUNTRY, and all across the Ursinus College campus, a learning revolution is under way. It is a revolution in how young people develop the capacity to use language confidently, precisely and powerfully to change their world. This revolution is facilitated by the digital revolution, but its importance far exceeds that of any technology.

Writing and the related skills of textual analysis and verbal presentation, long regarded as skills subsidiary to “what students need to know,” have moved from the periphery to the very center of the curriculum. At Ursinus, these skills provide a common set of experiences and expectations for our entire program. Whether students major in English or economics, biology, or chemistry, we continuously ask them to translate their knowledge and experience into words and take responsibility for the impact of their words on readers and listeners. As students gain command of language, it’s as if they had discovered that the wrench in their tool box is really a nuclear reactor and that what they had thought was good for tightening loose bolts can power a whole city.

At Ursinus, the evidence of this revolution is everywhere, from journal writing in mathematics courses to the rebirth of our undergraduate *Journal of Politics and International Relations*, written and edited

by students. The results of this revolution are most obvious in the high quality of the work Ursinus students are producing. They are finding that writing and speaking can foster clearer thinking, higher ambition and a productive sense of community. In the following pages I want to describe how this discovery — it is really a transformation — takes place and why nothing we do at Ursinus is more important than helping to make it happen.



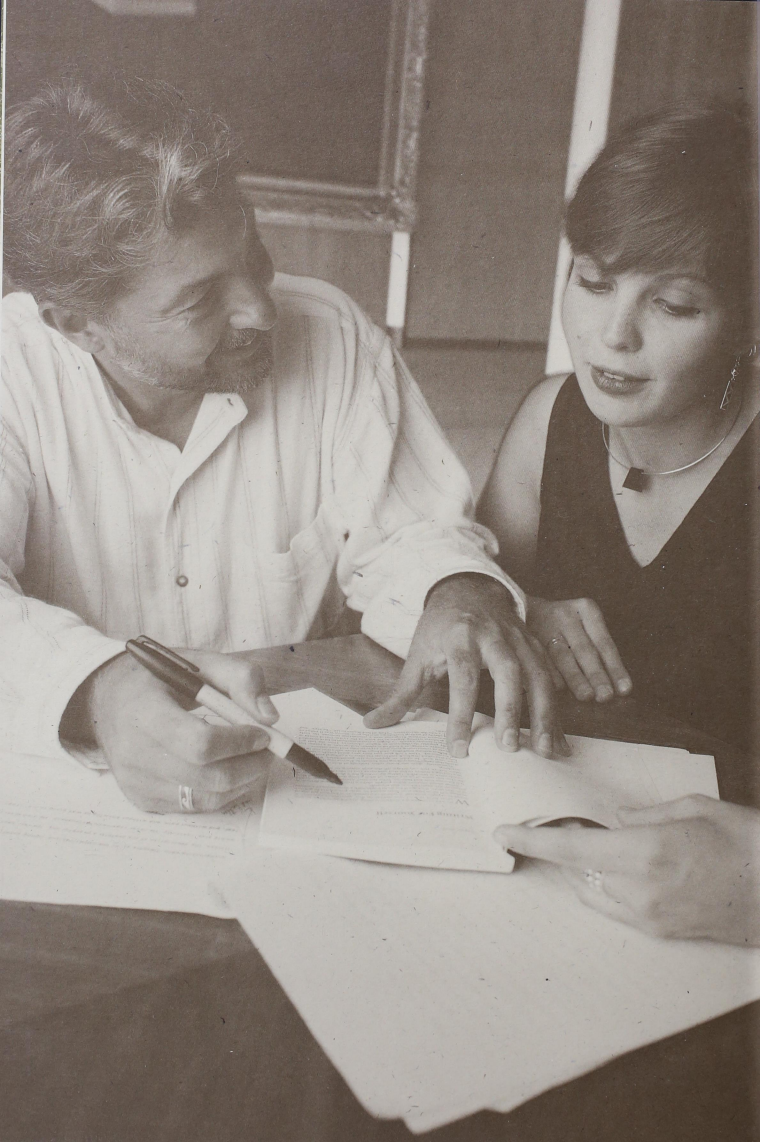
...BY ENCOURAGING ACTIVE LEARNERS

Recently, we conducted a poetic exercise with a group of upper-level Ursinus students. They were asked to compare their writing skills when they entered the college with their abilities now by using animal metaphors. These students were majoring in a variety of disciplines, from biology to politics, but they all got into the spirit of the game. "I was a turtle and now I'm an eagle," said one. "I was a house cat and now I'm a tiger," remarked another. "A rabbit and a giraffe," added a third. Clearly, their metaphors reflected a growth in their confidence and sense of their own linguistic powers. One student, however, cut to the heart of the matter: "I grew limbs," he said.

At the most basic level, growing limbs means developing the ability to engage the world actively. Learning how to write well is almost a physical process, and it requires an awful lot of exercise. Ursinus students should know because they are doing more substantive writing than ever in all their courses. They have continuous opportunities for

writing in depth and for independent projects that used to be confined to a few honors courses. This immersion in working with words begins in their first year with the Liberal Studies Seminars. Here freshmen are introduced to the idea of writing as a process of thinking and revision through multiple drafts, not simply a one-shot, all-or-nothing performance. These seminars are topical and so build bridges to the curriculum. Students can readily find subjects that are close to them. One cause of writer's block for first-year students — and for college presidents — is having to say something about completely unfamiliar subjects. But writing about sex and gender issues, for example, can lead students to ask meaningful questions that extend well beyond their immediate experience. And discussions soon progress from "I feel..." to "Here are the reasons for my conclusion."

"No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," Samuel Johnson once said. It is true that few of us write for pleasure alone. We need a purpose, whether it be rallying the staff with a memo, placating trustees with a report, or venting some steam through an irate letter to the local newspaper. By the time our students decide on a major, most have developed the ability to find a purpose for their writing that is more urgent than fulfilling an assignment. This comes largely from the faculty's insistence that the students themselves develop the topics they will pursue. An Ursinus history professor remarked, "I constantly tell my students, 'Show me why you care about the subject. Write to teach me something.'" Our students do. Many of our faculty pursue research along avenues suggested by student projects. A small college can support intellectual lane changes in a way that large universities cannot, and that makes the dialogue between students and faculty real and exciting.



Writing well is hard work, like wrestling a snake into a bottle, as someone once remarked. The steady exercise Ursinus provides raises the bar for what students are willing to attempt. The senior who “grew limbs” through his writing is a perfect example. An English major interested in postmodern critical theory, he might easily have contented himself with a senior thesis expounding recent developments in the field. Instead, he wrote a story incorporating postmodern elements and then proceeded to analyze it as a scholar would. He wrestled the snake into a bottle, took it out again, and wrestled it into another bottle. He became both creator and critic, with a deepened understanding of the demands both must meet. “In writing, I am using everything I’ve read and experienced,” he remarked. “I feel at last that I can grasp the world. It’s mine.”



...BY TRANSFORMING TEACHING AND LEARNING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Quantitative information is more important to our daily lives than ever before, so why are Ursinus professors giving fewer quantitative tests and fewer strictly factual examinations than ever? It is because they are providing students more and better ways to demonstrate what they know, by using knowledge and writing about it. Every Ursinus major, whether in the humanities, natural sciences or social sciences, includes an intensive writing component. This has important implications for learning across the curriculum — and for the outcome of students’ education.

Joe Williams, whose Little Red Schoolhouse at the University of Chicago has become synonymous with educational innovation, has shown that students need to be able to think well to write well, and thinking well means having a chance to think — and write — about something substantial. So at Ursinus writing is learned in classes, as students think through material, and it is learned because professors ask students repeatedly to put their thoughts on paper.

For many years, a member of our mathematics faculty had studied how students learn (and fail to learn) calculus. She and some colleagues at other institutions thought students might learn better, faster, if they worked in groups and relied on each other to articulate and solve problems. At the same time, she also required her students to keep journals of their mathematics study. The Mathematical Association of America found this approach important enough to publish a volume on it. “Most of the challenges in math at all levels are conceptual, not numerical,” she remarked. “The two forms of communication, group work and writing, help students translate from symbols to concepts.”

Moving from symbols to concepts is a key activity in the natural and social sciences as well. Students must be able to relate concepts to data in order to ask questions, gather appropriate evidence and come to meaningful conclusions. Just as important, those who enter a career in science or medicine will be under pressure to convey the substance and impact of their work to an increasingly interested and careful public. Writing is absolutely essential. In our science and economics courses, students actually gain competence in several “languages”: quantitative, logical and discursive, through laboratory and field research, journals and written presentations in which they articulate

the significance of their work so that nonscientists can understand it. One student conducting research on a Howard Hughes Medical Institute grant found that biology at Ursinus is a liberal art. "To think about how to approach a problem and anticipate organizational difficulties are the exact steps you take when you write," she said. "I had to write in order to do research."

Our intense focus on the process of writing is also changing the way our students study literature and even the way they read. You might say they are approaching books "from the inside." That's how one student put it. With support from the Mellon Foundation, she is part of a group led by a member of our modern languages faculty that is using a computer program to identify and track metaphors and themes in a novel written largely in Guatemalan dialect. As they read, the students build a database of the increasingly rich and complex associations unfolding in the work. That database can be called up on screen at any moment, to expand understanding and appreciation. They are writing their reading, so to speak. Best of all, the reading is collaborative. The meanings they map are available for other students to call up and modify as they read. The student working with the program remarked, "I feel closer to the way the books are actually written, and that increases my appreciation for what I read."

For many writers, the difference between being merely good and truly outstanding is meeting someone who cares enough to read what they write as if it mattered. Not everyone is as lucky as T. S. Eliot, who got back his draft of "The Waste Land" from fellow poet Ezra Pound and found it slashed and chopped into one of the great poems of the English language. Yet small versions of this encounter happen repeatedly on a campus where faculty see themselves first and foremost

as agents of transformation: "I got back my first paper," recalls one Ursinus senior, "and everywhere I had written 'bifurcate' the word was crossed out and replaced with 'split.' The professor knew immediately that my erudite tone was a cover for vagueness and refused to allow me the luxury of imprecision."

Of course students must take ultimate responsibility for their words, just as they must for the results of an experiment or their conduct on a playing field. Yet our concern is how they arrive at that point. Praise and encouragement, salted with probing questions, can propel students forward — and make them more conscientious readers of their own work. One of our students expressed dismay that her essay came back with so much ink. "I could see that the professor had spent far more time trying to understand my words than I had spent writing them. I realized that if he was going to take me seriously, I was going to have to start taking myself more seriously."

In the real world, readers don't bring red pencils, only the need to understand. At Ursinus, the critic, whose job is to stamp out error, is transformed into a coach or, rather, into a reader who seeks a clarity that only the student can provide. The difference is crucial. Otherwise, survival strategies can replace risk-taking and genuine discovery in the classroom. Faculty know the warning sign: students will preface their submissions with, "I hope this is what you wanted."

Teaching by the coach/mentor model is labor intensive. Its demands far exceed the grading of an occasional essay, and it can be accomplished fully, I believe, only at a small college, where student outcomes are paramount. E-mail has proven to be a liberating tool. All our faculty have electronic addresses, and more and more students are sending queries and works in progress, not for judgment but for direc-

tion. At least partly as a result, students are less daunted by longer assignments and more willing to engage in independent study.

Digital doorways notwithstanding, the success of the coach/mentor model depends, finally, on face-to-face communication. I can remember as a student having to read an essay out loud in class, suddenly stopping in the middle of it, almost as confused as my audience, and saying, "What I'm really trying to tell you is..." Students need the opportunity to see if an approach works, so faculty schedule time for these reality checks as part of the writing process. With support from alumni and foundations, faculty are also creating opportunities to work closely with students on research projects, where the discussion of work in progress is even more extensive.

The audience doesn't have to be a professor to spur clarity. My classmates didn't get it because I hadn't gotten it. They were a good litmus test. In many of our humanities courses, students review each other's work before it arrives, on faculty desks, and our Writing Center, although mentored by a faculty member, is staffed by some of our best student writers. They are not faculty surrogates or walking grammar books but readers on call to ask, "What do you mean here?"

Peer involvement can make writing a paper feel more like real communication and the writing itself something that you own. In the senior politics seminar, students are paired up and review each other's work in progress. They have an actual reader over their shoulders, to borrow a phrase from the poet Robert Graves. At the end, each one leads the discussion group of the partner's paper. Ursinus students are sometimes just too polite to each other. They tend to feel that challenging others might make them feel bad. Pairing up in the politics seminar guarantees that there is always

someone to get the sparks flying with a trenchant question. One student remarked, "I don't feel that I am writing for someone who knows it all anyway but so that my friends can understand. They are a tough audience."



...BY STRENGTHENING YOUNG PEOPLE'S
SENSE OF ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The best description I know of the crucial relationship between writing and speaking — and what is ultimately at stake in these uses of language — is provided by Peter Elbow in his influential book *Writing with Power*: "There is a deep and essential relationship between writing and the speaking voice....To write with clarity and power requires an essential act of taking full responsibility for your words — not hedging, holding back, or being ambivalent. Reading out loud amplifies your sensation of taking responsibility for your words."

Elbow refers strictly to reading aloud, but his words apply to public presentation of one's ideas and writing. Saying what we mean, whether in person or in print, is an ethical act, a commitment to the possibility of truth. Every word we use builds — or undermines — our integrity. Public presentation reinforces the ethical dimension of writing by associating us directly with the words we have written and thought. The give-and-take with an audience ought to be exhilarating. As one student put it, "When you present your work to others, there is no place to hide."



The power of the spoken word is intoxicating. The skills of the podium need a context or they reinforce the idea that effective public presentation is somehow independent of the substance of what's presented. When I was a graduate student at Cambridge University, I enjoyed the student debates at the Union. Yet it always bothered me that these students could easily switch sides and argue the opposite position with equal passion and adroitness. Being able to convince people of things you don't believe in is certainly a form of power but not necessarily a virtue.

Ursinus has taken a different approach. Just as we have done with writing, we have woven public presentation into the curriculum. In nearly all upper-level courses, students are required to deliver the results of their study to classmates and faculty. In the natural sciences, laboratory results are regularly discussed in a group, often with the formalities that would accompany a conference presentation. As part of our effort to increase student research, we have designated a day each year on which students present the results of their projects to the entire campus community. Indeed, last year, Ursinus was home to three conferences devoted to the presentation of undergraduate research. On a larger stage, our students have presented research to regional and even national audiences.

Students understand that it matters whether they make themselves understood. The respect and trust they seek depend on it. Clarity and integrity go hand in hand, and they matter terribly. George Orwell once wrote, "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity." He wrote these words just after World War II, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, at the time of the Stalinist purges in Russia, and the dawning of an age of potential nuclear destruction. Orwell saw euphemism

— insincerity — being employed to whitewash vast campaigns of political murder, and he felt that the gap between public utterance and action had grown dangerously wide. At the same time, he foresaw the rise of impenetrably specialized discourses, whose obscurity often masks to the experts themselves the human consequences of how their expertise is used.

One of the reasons Ursinus is so sharply focused on student achievement is that the process of tackling issues, studying them and reporting the results of that study exercises integrity like a gymnasium full of equipment. Learning how to use the work of other scholars responsibly demands integrity. Writing a footnote nurtures a sense of engagement with a larger intellectual community and that, too, demands integrity. Reporting results and conclusions requires not only clarity but, again, honesty. By asking undergraduates to produce substantial scholarly works — for the entire community to engage — Ursinus provides them a moral compass whose points are truthfulness, accountability, integrity and respect.

Our approach to writing across the curriculum offers the habit of authenticity, inculcated not by precept but by practice, among students and faculty together. Watching faculty make their raids on the inarticulate, and joining them in the battle, provides students a confidence that they can master a complex world and make a difference. Using words is not just a technique for gaining power but the means for making a secure self and forging its relations with the world. “Since I came to college, writing has become a key part of my life,” remarked one student. “My words are who I am.”



...BY BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF MEANING

Almost every Wednesday evening in a residence house on the Ursinus campus, a group of students gets together to read to each other. Sometimes there are no more than a handful, sometimes as many as fifty. They are the Ursinus Literary Society, but they represent many majors, not just literature, and they might read anything from a short poem to an entire chapter of a novel. What joins them together is that they are all reading work they themselves have written. They are not a shy group and they welcome visitors. It is a great place not just because the coffee is strong and the entertainment first rate. One of the most important developments on our campus is taking place here.

American society places a high premium on creativity, but it has also created some obscuring myths about it. One has to do with the loneliness of the creative act and the essential alienation of the creative individual. Hemingway pounding away at his typewriter, damning the critics and forging into uncharted territory is a favorite image not only of the literary artist but of the free imagination as well. Yet in business, law, medicine, scientific research and, increasingly, in the arts, creativity and innovation arise out of collaborations, exchanges. On a more fundamental level, people in these and most other fields are engaged in making meaning, increasing life's value and significance. This cannot be done in a vacuum. Meaning can only be made with others. The most powerful words, written or spoken, possess only the potential for meaning until they are unlocked by readers and listeners. This transaction of

making meaning is the basis for all forms of social life, the glue that holds communities together.

I am not talking about coteries, cliques or narrow-interest societies, which may look like communities engaged in making meaning. In fact, their goal is often solely to exclude meanings they don't want to acknowledge. What Ursinus seeks to build through its Literary Society, through an active student newspaper, through an increasing number of intellectual forums and research presentations and even through the design of its student union, are open, freely associating communities of meaning-makers. They don't have to be permanent and they can't be legislated. They come together around students' desire to engage and better appreciate some aspect of their world. In these communities, they can acknowledge their vulnerability and celebrate their growing confidence. What they accomplish is often extraordinary.

Let me offer an example. Not so long ago at the Literary Society, one student read a long and hilarious story about — of all things — suicide. He managed to bare 'all the painful confusions of being young and find in them a great deal to laugh about. And he got the rest of his listeners to laugh, too. When he was finished, there was something in the room that hadn't been there before, a generosity and an understanding. The rugged Hemingwayesque individuality of separate selves wasn't the whole story, after all. Everyone there had much more in common than they thought, or they wouldn't have been able to laugh. Writing, reading, listening and responding were all aspects of a larger creative activity, which depended on everyone together. By committing ourselves to being good writers, good readers and a good audience, we take an important step toward developing the capacity not just to think clearly but to build a world we would like to see.

ABOUT THE SERIES



THIS IS THE SECOND in a series of occasional papers about the challenges confronting students and what Ursinus is doing to help them enter adult life.

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