Writing Personal Essays in a Literature Class

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Many if not most academic creative writers belong to English departments where they also teach literature. In these classes they can function as an analytic critic, maintaining a certain facade of objectivity, or they can respond to texts as writers, who use novels, essays, and poems as artistic and cultural experiments. Students are generally trained in texts as structures of cultural signs which require a specialist to decode; it opens the classroom when students understand that most texts invite them into a conversation about personal and cultural perceptions.

The nature of reading for pleasure is vicarious identification with the character or voice and his or her plight. When the only intellectual tools allowed in a classroom are analysis and evaluation, students may believe that the teacher wants them to read for only the intellectual experience, not as an emotional, artistic, generative one. . the nature of the world and especially of the academic world is that of divisions. we are divided in academia into colleges, departments, and sections within departments. This is the way we teach classes. In his book, *The Learning Paradigm College*, John Tagg writes that such a top down structure results in an emphasis on teaching rather than on learning. He encourages assignments and assessment tools which are performances, such as writing, and which focus on what is happening in a student’s head rather than what is happening in a teacher’s head. If a student reads for vicarious pleasure, having only critical discussion and response makes reading into just another subject, divided from real life, just another artificial educational experience.

By definition a human is undivided. The focus of a liberal education is connection, holistic education. So students need to be trained to make connections in writing. They need to be taught how to write a thesis that blends their academic training and their personal meditation. When most have not been taught how to reflect as writers do on their own impulses, biases, beliefs and even experience, this is a difficult task. This is increased by the assumption in many English departments that writing is taught in specialized courses and not in all courses. So if a teacher is required by the department to complete a certain curriculum, there is not much time for the teaching of personal writing.

My suggestions: encourage the writing of inductive rather than deductive essays, connect the teaching and the act of writing, so the students sit in a circle, they are invited to consider connections and contrasts to contemporary society and their own lives, they are allowed to talk about their own experiences in class, both about reading and experiences not connected to academic life, the focus of discussion is on questioning, the discussion is driven by student questions written the night before and e-mailed to the teacher, or written on slips of paper and handed to the teacher, writing is brought into the class in the form of a journal, and there is time given to talk about the nature of personal writing.

The danger of teaching this way is that others may think of it as softer, warm-fuzzy education, where anything goes. It can be that way, but making rigorous self exploration part of a literature class can be achieved in a way that is not a weakening of standards.