

In Praise of the Open-Ended Process Note

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1. Introduction In his 1993 essay “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out the Three Forms of Judgment,” Peter Elbow makes a provocative point about the value of “liking” in the assessment of writing. While he acknowledges that the concepts of liking and disliking may *seem* like “unpromising topics” seeming “to represent the worst kind of subjectivity,” he argues that an orientation toward liking student writing, on the part of both teacher and student alike, is vital to the project of developing student writers (199). Elbow offers this comparison to illustrate his point:

The old story goes like this: We write something. We read it over and we say, ‘This is terrible. I *hate* it. I’ve got to work on it again and improve it.’ And we go, and it gets better, and this happens again and again, and before long we have become a wonderful writer. But that’s not really what happens. Yes, we vow to work on it—but we don’t. And the next time we have the impulse to write, we’re just a *bit* less likely to start.

What really happens when people learn to write better is more like this. We write something. We read it over and we say, ‘This is terrible... but I *like* it. Damn it, I’m going to get it good enough so that others will like it too.’ And this time we don’t just put it in a drawer, we actually work hard on it. (Elbow 199)

Liking, in this formulation, is not uncritical—to like one’s work doesn’t mean to rest on one’s laurels, or to assume that it is perfect, or even good. Rather, for Elbow, liking is a kind of affective orientation, one that is enabling rather than paralyzing. It is important, he argues, not just for the writer, but for the teacher as well; “*good teachers*,” he argues, “*like student writing*... [They] see what is only *potentially* good, they get a kick out of the mere possibility—and they encourage it” (Elbow 200).

This is an essay inspired by the power of liking. When I first came to Elbow’s now thirty-year-old essay a couple of years ago, it was something of a revelation. Perhaps it hit particularly hard given the timing: it was the fall of 2021; we were in the depths of COVID, and the students in my literary studies courses at Bard College at Simon’s Rock were, like students around the world, struggling with anxiety and isolation. A pedagogy infused with positivity felt liberating, and I tried to embrace it as a mindset when framing the writing process for students and in responding to their work. In 2022, I began a new teaching position, this time at The Loomis Chaffee School, a boarding preparatory school in New England. In some ways, I was

teaching a student population with whom I was familiar: Simon’s Rock was a pioneer of the “early college” model, and students there matriculate after 10th, or sometimes 11th grade, moving directly into college coursework¹. My juniors and seniors at Loomis Chaffee were the same ages as my incoming Simon’s Rock students had been, and as students in upper-level “College Level” (CL) courses, they were likewise transitioning to a more advanced level of literary scholarship.

In other ways, however, I was teaching a radically different group of students. Almost by definition, Simon’s Rock students are outside-the-box thinkers, having opted to leave high school early, and they come from a range of high school contexts, so there was considerable range in their writing styles and orientations to writing. While my Simon’s Rock students were beset by various types of pressures and challenges that could impact learning, by and large, they did not tend to be overly grade motivated. This reflects one of the arguments school founder Betty Hall made in support of the early college model: by leaving two years early, the student could be “free of the invidious comparisons which beset the student in competition with his fellow in a ‘preparatory track’” (Hall 2). Loomis students, in contrast, are squarely on the “preparatory track,” and with college looming large in their minds, my 11th graders in particular expressed tremendous anxiety about their grades. There was a significant curricular difference as well: the Loomis English curriculum has traditionally been quite formula-focused in its approach, with an emphasis, particularly in the freshmen and sophomore years, on students mastering specific templates for structuring sentences and paragraphs as the building blocks for analysis. These factors led to students who were more focused on their writing products, and my ranking of those products on a 100-point scale, than on their process. While the 11th grade year is meant to be one in which the students take the tools and structures of academic writing that they have learned in their first two years and apply them in more sophisticated ways, I felt that for my students to be able make that shift, they needed first to develop a deeper sense of agency in and awareness of their own writing.

And so, with Elbow’s affective framework in mind, I turned my attention to process writing, building it into every ma-

¹ Simon’s Rock, founded in 1964, remains the only accredited 4-year early college, and its model served as a template for the development of the Bard Early College network. In the United States high school system, an 11th grader is typically 16 or 17 years old.

jour writing assignment over the course of 5 months in a year-long CL Junior English class. I had a few interconnected goals in mind. First, I was curious to see whether, and in what ways, sustained engagement in process writing would enhance students' metacognition around analytical writing. More specifically, though, I was interested in whether and in what ways student participation in process writing (often referred to as metacognitive writing) might affect students' affective relationships toward their own writing and the writing process. My students are all smart, talented, and high-performing academically, but their self-esteem as writers was hindered by their fixation on grades and sense that academic writing was a formula over which they had no control, and as bell hooks has argued, poor self-esteem is a "wound" that acts as a "serious obstacle to learning" (122). My hope was that exploring this mode of writing in a sustained way would help the students cultivate a sense of ownership over their own language and deepen their understanding of the way they use language to connect with their reading audience. In what follows, I will first explore the concept of process writing more broadly, then I will explain my specific intervention and general outcomes. Finally, I will offer some key takeaways that I gleaned from the experience.

2. Approaching the Process Note Process writing is, in the words of Alfie Guy, "a practice of using writing to step back from an activity and assess how that activity is going" (53). It can be productively applied to any manner of academic activity including, but not limited to reading, engaging in class discussion, or writing an essay². Process writing prompts can be targeted to help students identify specific areas for growth or to reinforce specific skills, but process writing can also help students come to a deeper understanding of writing itself, ultimately and ideally helping, as Guy notes, "foster the general habit of reflection" (55). The metaphor of reflection implies passivity—a mirror reflects the objects in front of it—but as scholars of teaching and learning have long recognized, in the learning process reflection is anything but passive³. Reflection is itself a mode of metacognition; Kathleen Blake Yancey notes that the two terms tend to be used interchangeably in scholarship on higher education (*Rhetoric* 6). Building a critical awareness and understanding of one's own thinking is integral to student learning.⁴

² For example, on the use of process writing in the cultivation of college-level reading skills, see Carillo. In his essay on process writing cited above, Guy discusses the way in which process writing helped him cultivate new habits of listening and contributing as a student in the classroom.

³ Gillie Bolton also writes about the limitations of the reflection metaphor, describing instead a "through-the-mirror" approach to reflective writing, a formulation intended to emphasize the dynamic, developmental qualities of reflective writing (11).

⁴ For a synthesis of the scientific research backing this assertion, see *How People Learn*, 18-22.

While process writing takes many forms, my own approach is heavily informed by my experiences at Simon's Rock, where I quickly learned, from colleagues and veteran students alike, how tightly the concept of the "process note" was woven into the fabric of writing instruction at the college. "Process note" is a relatively generic term; at Simon's Rock, it entailed a 1-2 page document that accompanied each essay, explaining and reflecting on the student's writing process and the resultant product. Process writing was certainly not new to me; in graduate school and beyond, I consistently built it into my teaching. Two things, though, stood out to me as I came to understand the role of the process note in the writing culture at Simon's Rock: its *ubiquity* and its *open-endedness*. While individual teachers may have had specific instructions for process notes, my overall experience was that they tended to be flexible in their framing; they were required, but they were also occasions for writing in which students had to exercise agency around the orientation and scope of their writing. At the same time, because they were so widely applied across classes, my observation suggested that students came to understand the process note as a genre unto itself and, through repeated engagement in the exercise, come to understand their formal writing assignments as part of a larger creative/scholarly journey recorded in the process notes.

The cover letter is a common approach to process writing that is closely connected to the process note as I am describing it. Submitted with the paper, it is a space in which the student explains and explores their piece, but to a reader, to whom the letter is addressed. Teachers can guide the students toward certain avenues of reflection based on the questions they ask the student to engage. Guy describes a common question sequence he uses in his cover letter prompts:

What were you trying to accomplish in this essay?

Where did you have success, and where did you run into trouble?

What would you do next if you were to work more on this essay? (Guy 55)

These questions prompt the writer to assess the work they have produced in a manner that looking both backward ("where did you have success") and forward ("what would you do next"); it is easy to see how the student's response could itself be a prompt for revision. Like Guy, in her "Letter to the Reader" prompt, Sandra L. Giles first asks the writer to explain their intent. She then poses a series of questions aimed at helping the writer "describe [their] process of working on the essay[:] How did you narrow the assigned topic? What steps did you go through, what changes did you make along the way, what decisions did you face, and how did you make the decisions?" (Giles 194). Giles does not ask the students to assess strengths

and weaknesses—though the example letters she cites all reference them anyway. Giles’ questions instead emphasize student agency in the writing process, prompting the student to reflect on how their finished draft evolved, and, ideally, giving them ideas for how to approach their next paper⁵.

Giles’ questions reflect an underlying goal shared by just about all of the writing teachers I know: we are trying to help students see and approach writing as a process rather than as simply a product. In this noble quest, we are often working against the practical realities of grades and deadlines, which force attention onto the written product rather than the process that produced it. In any case, for many of my students, particularly those who have not yet had to write many papers longer than a few pages, the process which they are most familiar with involves procrastination, writing the entire paper in one sitting, and calling it a day. By helping slow students down and focus their attention on how and why they are writing, *process writing* can help make the *writing process* more legible. Through reflective writing, students “develop more insight into and control over composing and revising processes” (Giles 193), and in doing so, strengthen the sense of authorial agency that they bring to their writing more broadly.

In their workshop coursebook *Community of Writers*, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff offer, like Guy and Giles, useful prompts for focused process writing exercises. I am struck, though, by the almost radical open-endedness they embrace in their broad explanation of process writing and its merits:

What usually works best for process writing is simply to tell the story of what actually happened with as much honesty and detail as possible. The goal is not to judge yourself or prove anything or reach big conclusions. You are just trying to *notice what happened* in a spirit of calm, benign acceptance. You can trust that if you do process writing regularly..., you *will* reach plenty of interesting conclusions. (10)

A couple of things jump out to me in this description. The first is Elbow and Belanoff’s emphasis on noticing and storytelling, rather than assessing or explaining. This description is a testament to trusting the process of process writing itself; the piece described above isn’t directed toward a particular goal or aim, rather, it is an open-ended invitation to explore. Elbow and Belanoff suggest that insofar as this kind of writing works to uncover insights

⁵ Giles is specific in framing the process letter as letter. The assignment specifies that students include a formal salutation and sign it (194). The letter form works to reinforce for the student writer that they are writing for a reader, prompting the student to break the metaphorical fourth wall of analytical writing (to borrow a term from theater) and to engage directly with an imagined (or real) “you.”

that extend beyond breakthroughs about an individual paper or assignment, it works through *iteration* as a regular practice, an observation that reinforced what I had observed about the benefits of a process writing culture at Simon’s Rock. I also notice the attention to the affective dimension of process writing as they describe it. While in the essay discussed above, Elbow identifies the power of liking as an engine for productive engagement in revision and evaluation, here, he and Belanoff implicitly recognize the stress of judgment that students often bring to their own work and aims to push against it.

I kept the affective dimension that Elbow identifies—and in particular, the relationship between feelings of judgment and student agency—near the front of my mind as I developed the approach to process writing I would use in my CL Seminar class. As Yancey has theorized, “reflective texts are primary texts in their own right, though of a different nature than ‘primary’ writing texts, and that the relationship between these two kinds of texts [is] dialogic and multicontextual, not hierarchical” (*Rhetoric* 5). The way the assignment itself is framed has the potential to shape the student experience of that relationship. While I have experimented with assigning cover letters in the past, I intentionally opted against that approach in framing the process note. The terminology of the term “cover letter” implies that the letter precedes the essay for the reader, and thus frames it in some way—a practice that has its uses, giving the opportunity for the writer to guide their reader’s attention. I have noticed, though, that when I ask students to read their writing aloud in class, I see a strong tendency among many to qualify their writing before they share it, to speak for their writing in a way that reveals their worries about its insufficiency. I didn’t want to reinforce that tendency in writing.

Also, while I appreciate the way in which the letter format prompts student to think more deeply about how and what their writing communicates to the reader, I was mindful of the fact that *I* am the most immediate reader for their work, and my reading is inevitably shaped by my status as the evaluator of its quality in a grading system that I am required by my institutional context to participate in. Given the hyperawareness of grades that the students demonstrate, I thought that asking them to write to me would inevitably focus their attention, even more than it might be otherwise, on that aspect of our relationship as writers and readers. I wanted to leave open the possibility that the process note could be a place in which a students could be in dialogue with themselves.

3. Building a Process-Based High School Seminar Guy notes that the reflection afforded by process writing is “especially valuable when completing complex intellectual tasks or when learning to do something new, or differently” (53). The upper-level juniors in my CL Seminar course at Loomis Chaffee were at precisely this type of inflection point, pushed to work with a new level of

autonomy and critical depth in their analytical writing. As one student, N.L., later put it, "In my underclassman years, English classes pushed a sort of equation on us on how to write a paper. The formulas were easy for me... When I entered 11th grade, we were challenged to abandon the rigidity of the formulas and instead lead with our ideas. This became hard." Meanwhile, while many of my colleagues at all grade levels incorporate process writing in their teaching, my students had never been asked to do it on this scale or with this regularity. The department has an Honor Pledge, which students are expected to write at the end of every paper, and it asks them to identify their process, but it is typically framed more with an eye toward integrity in the face of plagiarism than toward metacognition, and accordingly the students didn't seem to have interpreted it as a meaningful form of process writing⁶. In the words of student V. K., "When I first started 11th grade, I don't think I'd ever really given any thought to analyzing my own learning or thinking processes at all." I hoped that by the end of the year, that would change.

My section of CL Seminar had eleven students, which is in the normal range for the seminar, in which enrollments typically range from 10-13. Demographically, two identified as male, eight as female, and one as nonbinary. Four of the eleven students were international (the students were from Korea, Afghanistan, Thailand, and China). Two domestic students were African American, one was Asian American, and other students were white.

Beginning in the Winter term of the course (approximately 1/3 of the way through the academic year), I explained to my students that we would be building a process writing component into all major writing assignments. The process notes were 1-2 pages in length, and as these assignments themselves were in the 2-5 page range, it was a significant amount of process writing in proportion to "primary" writing. Intentionally, I did not use a rubric to formally assess the process notes, though completion of them was required in order for the paper to be considered submitted. Here was my initial prompt:

Your process note is due with the paper. It should be at least one full double-spaced page, not more than two. In the process note, you will reflect on how you approached the task of writing this essay and on the piece of writing that resulted. Beyond that, I am leaving the parameters of the process note intentionally open-ended. Here are some things you can consider, though to get you started:

- *How you approached the task of writing this specific paper, and what worked well/less well in your approach.*

⁶ The text of the Honor Pledge is as follows: "Having completed my paper by [student explains process], I pledge, on my honor, that this is a responsible effort, my own work, and unique to this assignment."

- *The stylistic or organizational choices you made and why you made them.*

- *Elements you are most proud of or excited about, or areas that particularly challenged you and that you feel you still need to work on.*

- *Any other aspects of the composition of the paper that you want to explain more fully.*

- **Important note:** *you don't need to focus on all these areas in your writing; rather, focus on the elements that seem to be the most important or relevant to you and your progress both with this paper and as a writer this year.*

The style for the process note can be informal; I won't be evaluating you on your prose. I just ask that you engage in the exercise fully and thoughtfully—so I do expect to see some detail and specificity.

Midway through the Spring term, and again at the end of the school year, I surveyed the students, asking them to reflect on their process writing (as one student asked, a little incredulously, "wait, you want me to write a process note about my process notes?") and its relationship to their sense of their evolution as writers and their attitudes toward writing (see [Appendix A](#) for a list of questions). Later in the summer, I had the opportunity to interview 5 of my students further and was able to ask some follow up questions.

In the end-of-year survey, 10 out of 11 students reported that engaging process writing had enhanced their development as writers during the year, with most giving concrete examples as to how⁷. These examples reflect a range of their responses, when asked if and how process writing had informed their growth as a writer in the class:

They helped me come to conclusions about my writing and think on a larger scale why I was writing the paper and what themes, nuances, emerged from it (C.K.).

I have become more aware of how I craft the trajectory of my writing... For instance, while I normally crafted my ideas by picking an interesting topic and puddling every idea I had on the paper, the process note has allowed me to slow down and think about the flow of my paper. In my process note, I would

⁷ One student who reported growth through engaging the process writing noted that she sometimes wrote her process notes *before* her papers, describing a process that sounds more like looped focused freewriting than process writing it. In reviewing the process notes she submitted, however, she clearly engages in reflective writing about her writing process; my sense is that she interpreted process writing expansively to include other forms of writing apart from the paper itself that were part of her process.

think then express my insecurities but then I would realize I could go back and change my paper (N.L.).

I enjoyed writing a process note for each assignment as it helped me to understand and gain a clearer image of what I was trying to accomplish for each paper (C.C.).

It forced me to confront areas that I saw room in myself for growth as a writer and actively confront them. It's so easy to recognize areas for growth, but sitting down and reflecting on my writing forced me to make sure that I was making active attempts to improve upon these weaknesses (V.K.).

Even though my work had been completed, I was actually able to word out my specific process, which allowed me to understand the specific struggles I had, the methods I tried out, and the portions of work I was most proud of (F.L.).

I don't think it really affected my writing as a whole, but I liked reading my process notes (T.M.).

It was notable to me that even the one student who reported that process writing had not aided in their development nonetheless referenced *liking* the process notes, and indeed, one thing that stood out across many responses was the extent to which the students enjoyed writing in that mode. To return to Peter Elbow's argument about the value of liking as a condition that enables student writers, I think that the fact that students liked both the *experience* of writing the notes and *what* they wrote (even when their writing reflected challenges or frustrations) matters. For one thing, it increased student buy-in in a task they might have otherwise dismissed or resented as "extra." The positive sentiments they expressed reflected, I think, the *pleasures* of metacognition—by focusing students' attention on their ideas, choices, and progress, and by prompting them to write in a more informal register about complex ideas, I suspect the process notes helped them tap deeper into what can be enjoyable about academic writing.

Looking across the responses, I see two different levels on which students found the process notes beneficial to their development as writers. The first lies in the dynamic relationship the process note had to the specific essay it was written to accompany. Multiple responses reference the benefit of perspective they gained from slowing down and spending time thinking about the paper they had just written. One student told me in class that she had never before re-read an essay after she had considered it "done" prior to needing to do so to write her process note. Multiple students noted that the writing of the process note helped them to refine and clarify their essays prior to submission. As student N.L. put it in a follow-up interview: "When writing my process note I would often

use phrases like 'I wish I had added more about X' or 'I was struggling with how to present idea Z. What I was trying to say was....' What I realized about the critiques I was making in my process note was that I was able to go back into my paper and work specifically on those less-confident parts." Not all students achieved this kind of dialogic relationship between process note and paper within the writing process, but think that moving forward, it is a dynamic that I can promote through in-class revision and process writing exercises.

Beyond just being helpful as one-off exercises, however, student responses suggest that the *series* of process notes was valuable for helping them both to understand patterns in their writing processes and to track their progress in developing the core composition skills we were working on throughout the course. Several students noted that they intentionally adjusted their approach to assignments as the year went on because they had identified problematic patterns in their process writing that they wanted to break. Indeed, in a meeting to discuss the final paper of the year, one student told me that continually narrating the effects of their procrastination in process notes had inspired them to get an early start on the assignment, because they were sick of writing about the same thing in each process note and wanted to be able to write about something new. Students also reflected in the process notes on their development in specific areas. One common area of focus was paper organization and argumentation, which reflected the course's emphasis on deepening the critical complexity of their analytical writing. While it's impossible to isolate process writing as a variable in assessing the overall improvement in writing I saw over the course of the year, in comparing analytical essays from early in the fall term to their final essays in the spring, I definitely saw evidence that the students had come to a more sophisticated understanding of the logical structures that underlaid their essays and were more adept at structuring theses and scaffolding their arguments in writing.

To build on this general reflection, I'd like to offer a few key ideas about this approach to process writing that I came to in this experiment in building it into an advanced high school/introductory college-level class.

4. Open-Ended Process Writing as a Non-Evaluative Zone In making his case for the value of "liking" as an orientation toward student writing, Peter Elbow situates liking relative to other paradigms of assessment—namely ranking (i.e. quantitative grades) and evaluation (i.e. qualitative assessment)⁸. Elbow advocates firmly for eval-

⁸ More specifically, he describes ranking as "the act of summing up one's judgment of a performance or person into a single, holistic number or score" and evaluating as "the act of expressing one's judgment of a performance or person by pointing out the strengths and weakness of different gestures or dimensions" (187, 188).

uation as a means of assessment over ranking, but at the same time, for Elbow, liking a piece of writing has a value that precedes evaluation of it—to *like* a piece of writing is to delight in its potential rather than to measure its objective quality. Elbow suggests that students habituated to constant assessment tend to fall into “a defensive or on-guard stance toward the teacher,” one characterized by “a desire to hide what they don’t understand and try to impress” (197). With that in mind, Elbow endorses the value of “evaluation-free zones,” noting that “Often the most powerful arena for deep learning is a kind of ‘time out’ zone from the pressures of normal evaluated reality: make believe, play, dreams—in effect, the Shakespearean forest” (ibid). I happen to be, by training, a Shakespeare scholar, so I admit that I was tickled by the metaphor, just as I found it usefully provocative. “Shakespeare’s forest” is, in his comedies, the space outside conventional power structures; it is also the space in which growth and transformation occur⁹. As a teacher of writing, I have often found myself feeling hyper-attuned to discourses of evaluation: rubrics, modes of communicating feedback, category weighting, etc., but in this case, I wanted to try out specifically prioritizing a space of student learning that was outside of—but in relation to—a traditional evaluative framework.

In my assignment structure, the process notes were required, but not evaluated beyond the pass/fail assessment of whether what a student had submitted met the process note criteria. In a couple of cases early on, I did ask students to add more to their process notes before I would grade the paper. In practice, they played a kind of odd-angled role in assessment, one I was as transparent as possible about in class: while process notes were not themselves formally assessed, they were often quite helpful to me in assessment, giving me lenses through which to interpret their efforts and language with which to be in dialogue in my written evaluation. Within the process notes themselves, there was at times an interesting tension between the *self*-assessment at the heart of the process note and the fact of my role as their primary reader (reflected, for instance, in third-person musings about what “Dr. Wanninger might think”).

Looking over student feedback, I saw that they appreciated the opportunity to write for me in a way that “counted” but was not graded per se. As student C.K. put it, “The awesome thing about the process notes is that they were graded only for completion, so it gave me room to ... showcase my personality. The voice I used in this

⁹ The structure of many Shakespearean comedies is such that the characters find themselves exiting the power structures of “real life,” for example, that of Athens, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or Milan, as in *The Tempest*, and venturing into a space of transformative possibility, emblemized by the forest, as Elbow notes here and as is the case in *Midsummer* or the island, as is the case in *The Tempest*. This classic argument is most closely associated with C.L. Barber’s 1959 work *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*.

[process note] space is more my authentic self, and I was able to use this writing to reflect rather than to care about a grade mark.” Looking to the future, this quotation inspires me to look for ways to help students better feel like they can bring their “personality” and “authentic self” to their graded writing, but as it stands, it speaks to the liberating qualities that attend to writing outside the grading mindset.¹⁰

Considering the question of evaluation from the teacher side, when discussing process writing with colleagues, I have often been asked about rubrics for evaluating how well students are engaging with the process, and, as Elbow and Belanoff note in their workbook, this can be a sticking point for teachers: absent an evaluative standard, it is hard to ensure that students will do their process writing “right”, that they will take from it the observations we as teachers might hope they would (10). It’s true that a student might not take from a process writing assignment exactly the lesson I would hope they would, but upon honest reflection, I don’t think that many students take from my marginal paper comments exactly what I hope they will either. This doesn’t mean, however, that such feedback has no value, and I would argue that the student-led thought-work has the potential to be more, and not less, consequential to the student. This is a feature we can embrace as educators; as Yancey argues, “to think of reflection only or exclusively as a mechanism for evaluation is to waste its potential: reflection can assist with assessment, certainly, but its larger value is linked to supporting writers in a myriad of ways as they develop both writing knowledge and practice” (11). Ultimately, we must, as teachers, *trust the process* of process writing.

5. Open-Ended Process Writing an Iterative Process I found that process writing accrued power when incorporated as a curricular ritual. This is true for a few reasons, but one is that process writing is a genre that students have to learn through practice, and repeated engagement with the form allows students to begin to find their own voice within it. For novice process writers, the experience can feel stilted or uncomfortable. As Guy puts it, “when you first pay attention to how you’re doing something, self-consciousness can seem to break the flow” (54). In telling the story of how she went from a process note skeptic to an enthusiastic practitioner, Giles recalls how performative process writing seemed to be when she was first introduced to it as a student; she describes it feeling

¹⁰ I should note that many scholars, myself included, have explored “ungrading” or contract-based grading schemas, aimed at achieving precisely the kind of transformative freedom that Elbow describes, though in these models, evaluation still typically occurs, and a numerical grade must ultimately be assigned. Given those latter points, the “evaluation-free” quality of process writing is still distinctive. Teaching in the independent school world, I suddenly found myself more explicitly tied to numerical grades and assessments than I had been previously when it came to community norms and policies, which is true in many teaching contexts.

“awkward, senseless... Like a waste of time, and like it wasn’t real writing at all. But it was required” (192). She explains, though, that through repetition, “New habits and ways of thinking formed. And unexpectedly, all the hard decisions about revising for the next draft began to come more easily” (193). The habits of mind inculcated by repeated process writing are integral to its efficacy.

As I look over the sequence of process notes from individual students, I see notable development in their growth as *process writers*. When I compare my own students’ early process notes to later ones, I see a marked increase in their level of detail and insight. The early process notes tended to focus on narrating the steps through which they constructed the paper and broadly identifying areas of difficulty. As we got into the second and third process note assignments, though, I noticed increasing specificity that emerged in particular as students were able to reference their previous process notes to identify similarities or areas of growth. That development was somewhat uneven—some students took to the register of reflective writing quickly, while others had a hard time breaking out of a purely descriptive mode. While I didn’t grade the process notes, I did, as needed, comment on them, typically with questions for further reflection. As students progressed as process writers, they demonstrated increasing awareness of *how* the choices they made reflected their goals and the lessons they had taken from previous papers. In other words, the arc of their process notes suggested an increasing sense of their agency as writers, not just in how they approached the writing process, but also in the structural and stylistic choices they made when crafting arguments.

One of my students, V.K., reflected on the evolution she saw within her process notes in our end-of-year interview. As she put it, “In the beginning, I wasn’t really sure what to write about in process notes. Over the course of the term, I tried to focus on less about my feelings about the writing (like if I enjoyed the process, was procrastinating, and such) and instead tried to dig into the actual process of writing, and reflecting on where I saw room for improvement and also areas I tried to improve upon.” Another student, C.K., also reflected on the effects of the serial nature of the process notes, identifying how her approach evolved over time. Her early process notes, she said, were “more geared towards complaining—explaining all the ways in which this essay was hard and the ways in which I struggled with it.” Over time, though, C.K. noticed that her focus shifted, toward “the things I hope to convey to my reader, and the things that I have appreciated about writing a specific paper that helped shed light on the complexities and nuances of each novel that we read.” C.K. described the sequence of process notes as “almost a diary for my writing. As we went on, I

could refer back to old process notes before I began my next writing assignment as a way to pay more attention and home on a particular thing in which I would like to improve.”

When asked to reflect on the relationship between the development in her process writing and her sense of her overall development over the course of the year, C.K. responded, “I think I am more conscious of my writing tendencies than I was at the beginning of the year. I now feel more confident to use my skills to my advantage but simultaneously recognize where I need improvement.” This response reflects the capacity for sequenced process writing to help students develop meta-cognitive awareness and the language to express it. This kind of cumulative meta-reflection showed up within some of the later process notes themselves. I found a great example in what N.L. wrote in the process note for her final paper: “This, being our last analytical paper of the year, has made me very conscious of my improvement as a writer in a more demanding class. I am able to write quicker, analyze deeper, and feel comfortable straying from the set structural path I was presented in my underclassman years.”

6. Open-Ended Process Writing as a Tool to *Facilitate Transfer*

Ample research suggests that metacognitive practice is integral to supporting the transfer of learning, described by educational psychologists David N. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon as “instances in which learning in one context of with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials” (Perkins and Salomon, n.p.)¹¹. Citing Perkins and Salomon, Ellen Carillo notes that many students read and write within a high-pressure “learning culture of demand,” in which students are often asked to demonstrate their knowledge of specific material in “targeted, limited, and constricting ways,” a framing that tends to discourage students from drawing on what they’ve learned in future contexts (189). Transfer-focused teaching, in contrast, is more expansive in its goals, focusing not on boundedness and instead cultivating students’ metacognitive awareness. As Carillo puts it about the teaching of “mindful reading,” this approach helps students become *knowledgeable, deliberate, and reflective* about *how* they read and what different reading approaches enable (190, emphasis hers). If you substitute “write” for “read” in the preceding sentence, it describes what I observed in student process writing last year. Indeed, scholarship on teaching for transfer in the writing classroom suggest reflective writing is integral to fostering what Yancey et. al. call a “*writing transfer mindset*,” one that allows students to apply the writing knowledge they gain from process writing not only in subsequent assignments within a course, but also to other sites of writing (274).

¹¹ See Beaufort 23-25 for a concise but thorough summary of some of this research.

As I noted above, reading process notes from across the year clearly indicated that students were transferring insight from one exercise to future exercises within the class, even when the assignments differed. I was curious, though, about whether students perceived the effects of their sustained experiment with process writing in other classes. When I asked students to reflect on that question in the post-course interviews, N.L. said this:

While my English class was by far the most writing-based of the classes I had taken last year, most classes I had taken required varying levels of written assignments. I think that process writing... enhanced my writing in all of those classes because of how it reminded me to critique and identify parts of each paper and know where both my strengths and weaknesses were. While I did not do process writing in those classes, the habits that I had learned through process writing in my English class did benefit my other classes.

In her own study on reading, Carillo found that an expansive reflection-oriented approach seemed to prompt what has been called ‘concurrent’ transfer, in which connections are made between two simultaneous contexts,” and N.L.’s description of applying lessons from process writing to different classes within the same term reflects that kind of concurrent transfer (198). V.K described a similar experience, saying,

I think the awareness I gained about how I individually best process and produce writing through process writing was definitely applicable to any other classes I had involving academic writing. After doing some process writing in class, I found myself even sometimes subconsciously applying the same type of reflection to writing assignments in other classes.

7. Open-Ended Process Writing to Cultivate Voice and Agency In her final process note of the year, which accompanied an essay on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, student M.H. wrote:

While arranging my thoughts on each quotation, I pondered, paused, hesitated, stopped, took multiple breaks, then returned to writing. The anxiety and fear of failing to fit my deep impressions of this novel into mere words almost made me give up on what I wanted to write. But at the end of the day, there I was; writing, deleting, rewriting, and then staring at the screen simply to take in my own words, which, sometimes, failed to feel like mine. But I wrote them anyway.

I was struck by the lyricism of the description; as M.H demonstrates, the process note itself is a space in which students can practice their craft and explore their creativity as writers. The frustration that she expresses with the feeling that the words of her essay aren’t *hers* was one

that came up repeatedly in student feedback. I suspect there are a number of reasons for this, among them the relatively formal structures for analytical writing that the students were trained in in their freshmen and sophomore years as well as the stress that students tend to feel around graded assessments. However, when I asked students whether (and how) engaging in process writing had affected their attitude toward their writing, one thing that came up across several responses was that it helped them feel more connected to their voices as writers, in part by giving them a space to write about their ideas that felt outside the strictures of “formal” writing. As T.M. put it, “I looked forward to writing the process note because I could take a break from writing all formally and just talk like a normal person about my paper.” C.K. noted that process writing affected her attitude toward her writing positively because “it was an opportunity to hear [her] voice and not just her analytical voice.”

J.K. references a similar split, but also describes how the process writing helped them find a greater sense of agency and connection with their writing in essays. They described previously feeling like they needed to find fancier sounding synonyms to elevate their ideas, but now embraced their writing as an expression of their “own authentic voice.” I asked J.K. to elaborate on what that “authentic voice” meant to them, and they responded:

By my authentic voice I just want to say, me! Writing... and not doubting it or thinking it’s too colloquial (which I don’t think anymore—I think this was the mindset of ***need a synonym*** me) and just trusting myself, my words, and thoughts. Perhaps this was through me simply becoming a better writer because my mind is developing and whatnot or because of the process writing and constantly going back to the mindset of writing the paper and putting myself back in the position, reflecting, and changing things I didn’t like and could improve on, slowly becoming a ME paper—maybe like structure and overall thesis argument, or diction. Whatever the case may be. But the reflecting part is what I believe made an impact.

It was exciting to me to see that for at least this student, the feeling of authenticity that they enjoyed in the process writing was able to translate into more formal writing too, and this is an area that I want to explore more in the future—how can process writing help students to cultivate their voice in meaningful ways? Can they translate some of the things they like about personal writing—its clarity, its expressiveness, their sense of ownership over it—to other forms of writing?

Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner suggest, in their research on “meaningful writing,” that assignments that help foster a personal connection to a writing occasion can foster greater student self-efficacy in writing, the effects of which can reverberate far beyond

the work of an individual class (6-7). The authors argue “that students’ perception that their writing is meaningful is also a perception of that writing experience as agentive (35). My suggestion here is that by helping students identify and explore their own agency as writers, process writing can be able to help them experience their academic writing as more agentive, and ultimately, more meaningful. The open-endedness of my process writing prompt also plays into these questions of agency. By requiring that they write about their process and product without prescribing the specific questions they should answer or structure students should follow, the assignment itself demanded that they consider what aspects of the prompt were most meaningful to them and to find their own voice in a broad genre.

While I may have been motivated by a desire to help students approach their writing from a spirit of liking, the reality is that for many students, the affective landscape of their relationship with academic writing is more foreboding and gloomy than it is sunny and warm. With that in mind, I was struck by something V.K. said about how process writing had affected her attitude toward her own writing: “I think process writing helped me appreciate the work and effort I put into writing certain papers, making me less inclined to dread writing the next paper.” While “less inclined to dread” isn’t quite the same thing as “like,” the shift she describes is perhaps more realistic when it comes to meeting students where they are—and of vital importance. I asked V.K. to expand on what she meant by “less inclined to dread,” and this is what she told me:

“Because I have struggled with this for the vast majority of my academic career... I allowed myself to accept that writing was just something I would probably struggle with for the rest of my academic career. However, through process writing, over time I was able to identify the specific parts of the writing process that I struggled with as well as the approaches to writing that worked well and did not work as well for me, which allowed me to find new strategies with which I approach an academic writing assignment. In doing so, by the end of the year I was able to form a methodology much better suited to how I process and am able to produce writing [in a way that is] less stressful, more enjoyable, and far less daunting.”

V.K.’s response indicates that for her, at least, the goals I had in implementing the process writing protocol were more than met. It demonstrates the ways in which a one’s affective orientation toward academic writing can be intertwined with one’s sense of writerly agency and metacognitive awareness. By helping to cultivate a student’s awareness of their own agency and giving them a space to register and reflect on their own communicative voice on the page, incorporation of this kind of writing can help students to view their own writing and writing process in more positive, agential terms.

Cultivating this sense of agency and an appreciation for voice in students matters now, more than ever. The winter of 2022–2023, when I began this project with my students, coincided with the launch of Chat GPT. The emergence of language generating artificial intelligence caused a furor among writing teachers that has yet to subside, raising questions from the practical (how can we prevent students from plagiarizing?) to the existential (what is the point of teaching writing when machines can do it?) to any number of pedagogical questions in between. The long-term implications of technology for writing and the teaching of writing are as yet far from clear, but one thing that conversations around AI has crystallized for me as a teacher is that if we want students to write for themselves, we need to help them see and feel that their writing is theirs and that their voice on the page matters. Process writing can open up a space for that discovery—and maybe even help them to write something they like along the way.

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Appendix A. Here is a list of questions that I asked students to respond to in the end-of-year survey:

- In what ways, if any, have you grown as an academic writer in this class?
- Take a look back through your process writing pieces from the winter and spring term. What patterns, if any, do you notice in the observations you make across those pieces, and how do the things you say about your process on these assignments fit with your own sense of your development as a writer this year?
- Again, looking back on your process writing from this year, do you notice any growth or evolution in your ability to reflect on your writing in those pieces? In other words, take a minute to evaluate the depth/nuance of your process writing itself and how it changed, if at all, over the course of the Winter/Spring Terms.
- Taking into consideration your answer to number 1 above, how, if at all, did your engagement in process writing help enrich or inform your development as an academic writer this year?
- Do you think engaging in process writing affected your *attitude* toward your writing or the writing process at all? If so, how?