

Focused Freewriting, Writing by Hand and Reading Aloud as used in a *Text and Meaning* Classroom

Makafui Aku-Sika Cudjoe

Ashesi University

1. Introduction This study investigates the impact of the “low-tech methods”—Writing by hand and Reading aloud on student engagement and class participation. In a digital technology era where Artificial Intelligence has opened up conversations and attempts at negotiating and structuring how learning should take place effectively, the “low-tech” methods of Writing by hand and Reading aloud deserve careful consideration. They invite students to engage with their own thoughts with their pen and paper—away from their screens, responding to Focused Freewriting prompts, critiquing their own work and those of their peers, and ultimately spending time thinking about and writing their responses in class before being called on to read their written responses aloud—verbatim.

The instructor/researcher ultimately looks at the study through the lens of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff’s writing on sharing and responding, leaning particularly on their view that:

The process of reading out loud brings important learning: You can feel strengths and weaknesses physically—in your mouth as you pronounce your words, and in your ear as you hear them. And you can tell about the effects of your words by watching your listeners. Reading aloud is more alive. But if your piece is very long or time is short, you will need to give paper copies. Paper texts give readers more time to read closely and reflect on your writing, especially if the material is technical. (13)

For the purposes of this research, students were required to write short and timed responses (given at least twelve minutes) as they thereafter read their responses aloud in class. With regard to the methods for the research, the instructor used surveys distributed at the end of the lessons. The surveys were administered to Ashesi University First Year Text and Meaning students during the 2021/2022 academic year. In addition to the surveys, the researcher uses her personal reflections and observations on the use of the practices after class sessions to achieve the study’s objective.

2. Institutional Context The Text and Meaning course at Ashesi University of the University is one of the University’s foundational courses to be taken during the first year of studies. Ashesi as a liberal arts university has core courses that aim to provide students with the foundation needed to broaden their knowledge base in the humanities, arts, and social sciences even as they pursue the courses they choose to major within in their STEM fields. Courses such as African Literature (ENGL 215), African Philosophical Thought (POLS 221), Africa in International Settings: Africa Beyond Aid (POLS 231), Ghanaian Popular Culture (SOAN 225), African Music and the Contemporary Art Music Scene (SOAN 233), and African Cultural Institutions (SOAN 322), are tailored to help students know more about Africa’s place in the world and how significant ideas developed from various areas of the world impact the continent.

The Text and Meaning course, specifically, invites students to critically engage with theories such as Feminism, Marxism, and Postmodernism, making sense of them and how the theories have influenced thought in the parts of the world the students are familiar with. Since the majority of the students are of African descent, African-centered examples are strongly encouraged in order to better understand the impact of the theories on the region.

Ultimately, the word “text” in the Text and Meaning course, in the Ashesi context, is used as a blanket term to include music, advertisements, documentaries, speeches, magazines, newspapers, archival documents, websites, and blogs. The texts are interrogated after they are read; reading that is not only limited to words on the page but an engagement with the auditory, visual, and other modes of text consumption.

3. Pedagogical methods and Theoretical Underpinnings Velez (2009) researches the Bard College writing model and its application in an urban high school and says of the model, “certainly the Bard model cultivates healthy, trustful relationships among its writing communities so that the dialectic development of ideas can occur.” (17) He further presents, in chapter four of his thesis, observations of the Bard model he implemented, highlighting the role of emotional involvement in the thinking and writing process.

The writing and reading pedagogical practices used in the Ashesi context and discussed in this research are some of Bard College's IWT (Institute of Writing and Thinking) pedagogical practices which were extensively researched by Peter Elbow, one of the researchers who played a pivotal role in the founding of the Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking. Elbow (2010) records an important observation about reading aloud. He says:

Reading aloud intensifies our own experience of our own words by increasing our bodily experience with them: we get to feel them with our mouths and hear them in our ears and indeed experience them in our bodies—not just see with the eye and understand with the mind. Multiple channels of perception give us a much richer and stronger experience of language. When we revise, we come at our words from the outside, but reading aloud takes that outside perspective and puts it inside us. (Chapter 12, p. 1)

He further makes the argument that "Reading aloud is far different from unplanned speaking, yet it's also a use of the untutored tongue." (Chapter 11, p. 3) This view is especially relevant to this study, seeing as the aim of using the practices in the classroom was to encourage classroom participation and engagement by giving adequate time to students to think about and through their responses thoroughly, to write them down before being called on to respond in class, in effect, veering away from unplanned speaking.

One very important rationale Elbow (2010) gives further in support of reading aloud, which goes to illustrate the impact on writing, is put succinctly in the words:

I find that when students have the repeated experience of reading their writing aloud, they are more likely to write sentences that are inviting and comfortable to recite—which in turn makes the sentences better for readers who get them in silence. Putting this differently, the sound of written words when spoken is a crucial benefit for silent readers, yet too few students hear the words they write. When they have to read their writing aloud frequently and thus hear it, they tend to listen more as they write—and readers hear more meaning as they read. (Chapter 11, p. 5)

Ultimately, Elbow argues that reading aloud and writing by hand aim to foster a sense of ownership over one's work. As students engage in written reflections by hand, and are given ample time to process information deeply, they engage texts more productively and see nuanced perspectives clearly.

4. Research Methods and Findings In addition to instructor-researcher observations and reflections, survey questions were given to the Text and Meaning class of forty-one (41) students, and responses recorded. In the first

three sessions of classes held (from 23/8/22–8/9/2022), the instructor did not require students to write down their thoughts about questions asked before answering. Students who responded to questions volunteered and joined discussions when they had ideas to share. Because the class size was forty-one (41), all students could not be waited upon to make submissions on all topics. The instructor thus looked out for and called those who were not regular contributors and engaged them when they volunteered to make submissions at any point during class discussions.

During the second session of class, the instructor called on students row-by-row, but informed those who could not respond readily to gather their thoughts and respond when they felt ready (even after everyone else had responded). Two students joined the discussions later, but due to time constraints, the class had moved on without hearing from three others who could not respond earlier.

In the third session, students responded to images projected by the instructor and were given at least ten (10) minutes to think about their responses. The fourth session saw a shift to the use of Focused writing prompts, Reading aloud and Writing by hand practices. The rationale for not introducing Focused Freewriting prompts, Reading aloud, and Writing by hand in the first three sessions was for the instructor to observe if there will be a marked difference in the response/engagement of students with texts before and after the introduction of the practices.

The instructor recorded the following observations after the fourth and fifth sessions (when Focused writing prompts, Reading aloud, and Writing by hand were introduced):

September 22, 2022: Observation—I allowed the use of laptops and phones in class when they were required for research purposes. When Writing by hand and Reading aloud was introduced, all laptops had to be put aside. This made me observe full engagement with the texts assigned.

Further, two particularly introverted students who I realized were having difficulties joining class conversations voluntarily, read verbatim from their writing and seemed quite at ease after making their contributions.

Instructor reflection: The initial ten (10) minutes given for the writing prompts was extended to fifteen (15) minutes. In subsequent sessions, students will be prompted to begin finding comfortable points to round up their writing in the sixth (6th) instead of the eighth (8th) minute. Bracketing off a portion of writing to be read will be done in the tenth (10th) minute and writing will stop in the twelfth (12th).

Instructor reflection on October 20, 2022: The decision to prompt students to begin finding comfortable points to round up their writing in the sixth (6th) instead of the eighth (8th) minute, bracketing off a portion of writing to be read (in the tenth [10th] minute), and stopping all writing in the twelfth (12th) minute seemed a good one as students did not call for extra minutes of writing.

Findings: The following was feedback recorded from students from the surveys given after using Focused Freewriting prompts that required the use of Writing by hand and Reading aloud:

Question: Write down any other ways you think the Focused Freewriting practice helps you express yourself better.

Student 1: Apart from focused freewriting practice helping to get my thought right to be delivered in discussions, it also help reduce tension when speaking in class because you know what to say when called to speak.

Student 2: Yes, the freewriting exercise before any discussions helps. That way, you get to articulate your thoughts before you are called on the floor to share what you have on the discussion topic. More often than not, one tends to forget what points they wish to discuss during a discussion as is evidenced by how “the mouth could sometimes be faster than the mind.”

Student 3: I am able to come up with preliminary ideas and later on, I am able to build on that when I start speaking out those ideas. I am able to see other people’s thoughts and be able to comment too.

Student 4: It makes me think deeper into the topic.

Student 5: Yes I believe am able (sic) to express myself better.

Student 6: I think the Freewriting process helps me gather my thoughts on the main points I want to discuss. However, I prefer saying what’s on my mind as it flows rather than writing all my thoughts first. It helps me be more expressive and concise with the points I want to discuss.

Student 7: I think it helps me put different related thoughts from different perspectives down and then edit it to become one idea.

Student 8: It helps in organizing thoughts and preparation so that there is fluency in sharing thoughts.

Student 9: It helps me organize my thoughts, make corrections, and take time to think of the factual elements of what I intend to share.

Student 10: 1. Increases confidence, 2. Generates honesty in writing, 3. Excavates emotional themes in writing, 4. Develops writing abilities and voice

Student 11: It helps me to identify the pointers that I might have left out by rushing into a discussion.

Student 12: Focused free writing helps me bring others into how I understood and analysed a text. It helps me trust my instincts, and it positively influences how I express myself, as it gives room for diversity.

Student 13: It helps me put my ideas together better.

Student 14: It improves my writing skills and gives the platform to write any thoughts that goes with the work I am asked to do.

Student 15: More confidence in my delivery.

Student 16: No other way.

Student 17: During it repeatedly and regularly makes it easier each time to express my thoughts such that I need less time to organise my thought each time.

View	Students
Number of students who thought the practices helped them gather their thoughts together better.	18
Number of students who thought the practices did not particularly benefit them.	6
Number of students who were indifferent	1
Number of students who were unable to fill the survey due to circumstances beyond their control / did not respond to the question.	16

Table 1.

The above table contains information about the reactions to the question: When discussions are held in class, would you prefer to write down your thoughts for about five (5) to ten (10) minutes (using the Focused Freewriting technique) before being called on to join a discussion?

As the semester progressed, (sixth through eighth week) regular contributors to class discussions and students who seemed extroverted began to talk out of turn, adding things they had not written on paper to what was supposed to be verbatim reading. To prevent this, the in-

structor reminded them at the beginning of every session that everybody had to read what they wrote verbatim. This helped the class stick to the time the instructor allotted for each discussion session and for those who were slower to join discussions to also gain the confidence to contribute to discussions without getting overshadowed by those who contributed often.

Again, after using Perusall vis-a-vis “the low-tech methods” during the sixth to eighth week, the instructor observed a high number of introverted students contributed to discussions on the Perusall platform. They particularly were enthusiastic when asked to read the comments they made in reaction to other students’ writing on the platform. The Perusall platform was to be used outside class sessions and this gave more time to students to think through their responses before engaging each other on the platform. When all students were later required to write by hand and read verbatim what they wrote in class after interacting on Perusall, a high number of students participated significantly in discussions. This made it clear to the instructor that there was a correlation between the increased engagement with texts before class, the classroom practices of Writing by hand and Reading aloud, and the participation of students who were noted to be particularly hesitant to join discussions. The semester participation records ultimately reflected this impact when the scores were collated. The teaching assistant recorded about eighty-five percent (85%) of the class got full marks for participation.

The following feedback was recorded from students in response to the question: In a sentence or two, write down how Perusall helps you engage with assigned texts before class.

Student 1: One thing I like about perusal is the discussion feature it has. It enables me to understand the opinions of my course mates about the reading before i get to class.

Student 2: It helps my understanding of the text. It also helps me relate to other people’s text.

Student 3: It allows me to better retain what I have read.

Student 4: I am able to see other people’s thoughts and be able to comment too.

Student 5: It helps me read between the lines and gather my thoughts before putting them across.

Student 6: Considering my course mates give their thoughts, it makes it excited to also read so that I can join the conversation.

Student 7: Because my comments will be seen and graded, I put in my best in perusal. It also enables me to interact with other students’ comments.

Student 8: You get to see other’s views and contribute to or argue against their line of thought, which is very great for sharing ideas.

Student 9: Sometimes, I find it difficult to talk in class but with the help of perusal, I am also allowed to put down my thought about what I think of a topic.

Student 10: it helps us to see other people views and critique on them or even agree with them

Student 11: It just gave me a brief introduction to what am expected to know. N kinda prepared me for the class ahead so well. So I kinda start thinking of what’s ahead, ahead of time.

Student 12: It helps me to see how others understand the text that is being posted. In this case when reading you are not only understanding the text from a single point of view but from others.

Student 13: I am sometimes not very confident to engage in discussions during class sessions. However, the inception of perusal am able to critically engage with my mate without any fear.

Student 14: Perusall helps in starting a conversation and driving me to do some research or extra reading concerning insights from the reading, which facilitates engaging discussions in class.

Student 15: I do not think perusal really helps me I prefer to have the thoughts shared in class so that it can be discussed.

Student 16: You get to understand the paper quickly basing from other people’s perceptions. It gives multidimensional lens when reading and analyzing text.

Student 17: First, Perusall gives a glimpse of what is to be discussed in class the next time. Foreknowledge of what is to be discussed next in class helps us better prepare and think of relatable and practical experiences we can share to help make the class an enjoyable and fruitful one. From the responses of peers on the platform, one tends to gain broader knowledge on subjects, ideas or topics. Our colleagues share really interesting experiences around a particular discussion topic and these experiences sometimes help in demystifying some pretty challenging concepts in the assigned text.

Student 18: I get to see what others think of the subject matter and how they relate to quotes found in the text.

Student 19: Perusal helped me keep track of what I needed to read to participate fully in class. Sometimes, I also forget the things I have read and the opinions I have generated due to the reading. So having perusal both helped me bring my fresh ideas and preview board while helping me keep track of what needs to be read for the course.

Student 20: It didn't to be honest because for example more often we don't read but comment on another student comment that make sense for us

Student 21: Perusall has been a great tool for me in engaging with class readings. One thing I like about it is that it enables you see all the comments you made which makes it easier to see paragraphs you would like to read more on.

Student 22: It helps me engage with the other students by reading through some comments they make. Perusall helps engage with the texts better through highlights and the opportunity to raise questions where necessary.

Student 23: I received wonderful insights and diverse analytical perspectives from several people, which aided me in contract writing. It's a fantastic platform.

Student 24: Perusal allow me to see what my other colleagues think on a particular subject under discussion. It also helped me to comment and add on to what my fellow colleagues have already done.

Student 25: Perusall is a helpful tool because it helps me raise discussion points before class by commenting on parts of the text and answering questions posed by colleagues.

Student 26: Perusal helped me follow up with class discussions, as it compelled me to read, so that I could actively comment and engage with the text before class.

Student 27: I get to see what others think about the text through their comments which helps me understand the text better.

Student 28: I am able to follow what will be taught in the class the next day and it also gives me the chance to ask questions about something that I got confused one while reading.

Student 29: Perusall has helped me to take part and share my thought on readings assigned to us. It has also enhance my participation in class.

Student 30: it makes me read and critically analyze the assigned text.

Student 31: It encourages me to analyze the text instead of simply skimming. It helps me get a better idea of the text through other people's comments.

Student 32: Perusall helps with understanding texts especially when classmates share thoughts on the reading.

Student 33: Through interactions with other students comments, I got to have a deeper understanding based on the perspective of my peers regarding the text.

Some of the IWT Writing to Read introductions to prompts used for the Focused Freewriting sessions during the semester Text and Meaning sessions were:

- First thoughts about the text
- Find and respond to
- A passage important to you
- A passage you think is important for the author
- The text reminds you of?
- The author's prejudices? Your prejudices?
- What question is this text answering? What problem is it addressing?
- Last things first: starting from the conclusion, what does the text say?

5. Conclusion Summarily, the survey results and instructor's observations validate the usefulness of writing by hand and reading aloud as practices that increase participation in the classroom. The study however, since it was limited to participation and classroom engagement, did not make room for measuring the impact of the methods on best writing practices. It will be deeply insightful to find out with further in-depth research how the practices impact writing practices of students.

Bibliography

Elbow, P. (2010). "How Does Reading Aloud Improve Writing?" Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=emeritus_sw

Elbow, P. (2010). "Revising by Reading Aloud. What the Mouth and Ear Know." Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=emeritus_sw#:~:text=Reading%20aloud%20is%20

[far%20different,done%20lots%20of%20substantive%20revising.](#)

Elbow, P., & Belanoff, P. *Sharing and Responding*. (McGraw-Hill, 1999)

Velez, R. N. *A Study of the Bard College Writing Model and its Application in an Urban High School* (Doctoral Dissertation). (Western Connecticut State University, 2009).