

Of Writing, Community and Transformation: Lessons Learned from a Faculty Developer

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1 WHAT IS THIS ESSAY ABOUT?

This essay is about my time in the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking CLASP Fellows Program, and my journey to discover new ideas, worlds, and writing techniques. It is about how my pedagogical practices changed, what I learned, and what I still need to process in this path. It's about how these techniques have a meaning at an individual level and, more importantly, about how they help construct communities that are more empathetic and responsible for each other.

2 HOW DID I GET HERE?

I'd just gotten an email inviting me to join the July Weeklong Workshops at Bard's Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT). I had no idea what this was, but it looked interesting. Plus, I didn't have to pay for anything, and this was new to me: I didn't know anything about IWT, but it sounded like something I would like. I applied; I got in. I found myself taking a flight to Upstate New York with my dear colleague Andrea who had been accepted to the Center for Liberal Arts & Sciences Pedagogy (CLASP) Fellows Program. I had no idea what to expect. When I got to the airport there were a bunch of people waiting for the shuttle bus to campus. I had never heard of Bard College before; I had never heard of IWT practices either, but I found myself being a minority in this lack of knowledge because everyone around me seemed to have an idea of what they were. After an almost 3-hour-long drive, we got to Bard: it was the full college experience. I'd never had this – I never had to share a bathroom, go to the canteen, and have this shared experience of community. Then the workshops started, at 7pm on a Sunday which I thought was insane. I found myself in a room with four other women and a male facilitator who acknowledged

that there were no more people coming into our workshop. Then he proceeded to ask us to write about “what we had left on pause” to come to the workshop. That was the first time that I heard it: PAUSE. What did that mean? *I hadn’t paused anything to come here*, I thought. Was I supposed to write in English or Spanish? We did mention we were going to share – I am not fond of sharing what I write – what if it’s no good? I was reluctant. I didn’t want to do it. I thought “what is this hippie thing I got myself into? Oh por dios, dónde me metí?” But I didn’t have a choice...I was there, sitting with just a handful of people; everybody concentrated and writing in these huge notebooks, which I found odd at first! They had this red margin that just got in the way of my writing: *how am I supposed to use this notebook?* I thought to myself.

I was reluctant. What had I paused? Do you pause things? I’ve always been a “good student,” yes; reluctant, “rebellious,” but I always do my homework – I wasn’t going to start *not* doing things now – what would they say about my Uni if I didn’t? I took my pen and wrote what was in my head, and I found the exercise weirdly liberating. I had paused “motherhood” to be there. It was the first time I was away from my son, and it hit me: I had to share. Again, the horror. I was scared; I am not fond of talking in public: an odd feeling for a teacher of faculty development. I didn’t know these women. I thought *I am not here to share about me, but to learn. What am I going to learn from this?* But there was no place to hide. No large room. No anonymity. Just a room with six people. Someone started and it felt strangely familiar and warm. Everybody listed, took notes, acknowledged each other’s presence and pauses. I was seen by others. Truly seen. I felt listened to. I felt safe. And by the end of the week, I was sharing with other people without fear of judgment (most of the time at least), and without questioning if my writing was any good, or had some grammatical errors. I just wrote, bracketed, shared, listened, and wrote some more.

It was a great week. I felt that I encountered new ways to engage in writing that I had never experienced before. I still had doubts about whether applying for the CLASP Fellows Program was a good idea. Luckily, I knew people from the other cohorts, and they said (without a doubt) that I should apply, as it was a valuable experience. They said, “you will learn loads, you will know other people, and it will open your horizons.” They said I could only “win,” and besides, applying didn’t mean getting in. I talked to my boss, and she said that I should do it: “embrace everything that will help you grow,” she said, and proceeded to help me with the letter of recommendation. A few weeks later, I found out I had been elected to the CLASP Fellows Program, and a new adventure started.

3 WHAT DID I LEARN?

3.1 IWT TECHNIQUES

So, what is all the buzz about it? What did I learn in these two years that I've been meeting people both online and offline? Well, I learned a whole lot of writing and thinking techniques; pedagogical practices that can help people process their own thinking while they are writing. I have experienced Private Freewriting, Focused Freewriting, and Process Writing, and found liberating the ways in which, when combined, they have a powerful effect on learning, and (for me, more importantly) one's identity.

3.2 COMMUNITY AND SAFE SPACE

In the rush of everyday activities, we tend to forget that learning is a personal experience but that it works better when it is a shared activity: we work better in community.¹ IWT techniques work at an individual level as they allow a person to engage with the material, with their own thoughts, and with their own experience. But all of this is potentialized when it is shared: when it is not a single person's activity, but the whole room working as a unit; everyone at their rhythm but with a common goal in mind. The sense of community that the techniques bring with them is unique and it becomes stronger the more we use them. We are a cohort of fourteen people, coming from all over the world, from very different contexts – we speak different languages, we eat different food, we have different cultures, and yet we share these habits. We become synchronized when we are in the classroom (or online), and we support each other.

Space becomes safe, even when some of us are not in safe spaces – far from it. But the classroom becomes a sanctuary, a place where we can be together, write together (think about the power of haikus and sonnets), question ourselves (can Private Freewriting be done with music? Can it have lyrics?), learn together (Dialectical Notebooks and Writing in the Zones), and support each other. But this is not something that magically happens, it requires well-crafted prompts, a scaffolding process of how to build that trust in the classroom,² an active modeling of how the dynamics work, clear instructions, and loads of active listening. It requires your hand moving on paper all the time: writing your own thoughts, writing those great ideas you just heard, and capturing language that comes from others. The sense of community and safe space is created through the spatial organization of the classroom where everyone is being seen. Of course, this works better in small classes, but it can be done in larger classes – it does require a bit of imagination and thinking outside the box.

3.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF PAUSE

In this very fast-paced world, taking the time to pause (and yes, it goes back to that first question from my initial July IWT workshop) is a rare privilege. Classrooms are fast-paced: new content every day, new ideas, new impositions, new accreditation needs. This fast pace has become more evident with the emergence of generative AI. Learning takes time, it needs time, it needs that pause, yet we keep moving. The IWT practices allow for this pause in time, they slow down your thinking while making it deeper, more profound, and significant. They allow for the connections to be made in your mind between your experience, other experiences, and to find how they relate in different ways. They are, in their own way, a protest of a rushed world and yet so many things can happen in those three minutes of writing. The IWT practices, I think, have that paradox: they make you pause and at the same time, they make every second count in the classroom. When I first started, it seemed like writing for five minutes was an absurd amount of time: my hand would stop fast, and I wouldn't be able to keep writing. This changed over time, and I found myself writing more freely and easily. I could get out a lot in a two- or three-minute prompt, and I have experimented with this for my personal growth and that of my students (more of this later).

In this sense, the IWT practices also allow for a lot of experimentation and creativity within the classroom. We know that learning is more significant as people engage with the material and are actively learning and doing something.³ IWT allows us to have different activities going on in the classroom and shift the attention from a teacher-centered space to a student-centered space. In the CLASP Fellows Program we were the students; we were always doing, producing, writing, and thinking. We were actively listening to others and by doing this it became a more productive learning space.

3.4 LESS AMOUNT OF READING AND MORE ENGAGEMENT WITH TEXT

Becoming more productive in the classroom is about promoting deeper learning and not about the quantity of the material covered in class. It is more about the quality of the interactions with the material than about the number of texts the students have read. IWT practices that allow for individuals to underline, to expand on a phrase's meaning, to dig deeper for the meaning of a word, and to change its structure allow individuals to grasp the text and make it come to life. Techniques like "I notice, I wonder," or asking "what pulls you in and what pushes you out," allow for an engagement with the text that goes beyond the meaning and what the author wishes to convey. They open the door for a conversation to happen and

force the reader to situate themselves in relation to the text and then share this with a group.

This sharing of experiences, understandings, and positioning allows for the groups to listen, discuss, debate, and construct shared meanings on the different texts. They create new texts and ideas from them. This centers the attention on the process and the discussion more than on the “right or wrong” debate that usually surrounds class discussions. There aren’t right or wrong answers, rather, the process (and working through them) is what matters and what allows for better comprehension. In this sense the classroom becomes a space of collective construction and not a space for competition (who gets better grades? Who has the best writing?). It’s a space for being vulnerable and to construct and learn individually and collectively. By doing so, the group creates shared meaning, shared experiences, and shared memories that allow for individual and group transformation and growth. With every IWT practice we mature; we see things from different perspectives, we expand our horizons.

4 HOW HAVE I USED THIS LEARNING AND HOW HAS IT SHAPED MY IDENTITY?

Maybe you have been wondering which of the techniques that I have learned over the past two years I have used and in what contexts. Beyond exploring and experimenting with them myself as a student, I have had the opportunity to use them in the classroom both with undergraduate students and in faculty development workshops. In what follows I will narrate two examples of the ways in which I have applied IWT techniques to illustrate what and how they have changed my curricular designs.

4.1 DIALECTICAL NOTEBOOKS FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

One of the good things about having a colleague that also knows the IWT practices is that you have a partner in crime that encourages you to think differently and try new things. This is exactly what happened with Andrea:^{*} we had these new ideas to implement in workshops, and we were eager to try them. We were asked to organize a workshop for faculty in the General Education area of the University (CBU in Uniandes) to address the issue of student disengagement. This seemed like a good opportunity to try out at least one of the practices that we had discovered and experienced first-hand. To do so we had to negotiate many things during the design process. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges was that we had to explain to other

^{*} CLASP Fellow Cohort '24.

people, who hadn't experienced these techniques, why they worked. We ended up with an interesting design that allowed us to introduce some theory, to model IWT practices, and to allow time for faculty to discuss and share among them (a basic principle in all experiences facilitated by DIDACTA). We prepared the material previously (we weren't brave enough not to have a PowerPoint with the basic structure and instructions), we crafted the prompts, we tried them out, and we folded paper – just so the participants wouldn't get hung up on following these instructions.

The workshop had four parts: an exploration on the purpose of general education, a close analysis of one of the Uniandes teaching principles, a testimony from a successful course, and a final group activity. Apart from the testimony section, the rest of the workshop was designed to keep participants active by doing individual and then small group activities. This was a three-hour long workshop with a small ten-minute coffee break.

The idea behind the design was that during the first three parts of the workshop, participants engaged in different conversations and gathered information from different resources. We introduced the General Education manifesto, the Uniandes teaching principles,* and material with active learning ideas and good practices for their first day of class. They had also listened to a colleague talk about the things that had worked and not worked in their own classroom. We asked faculty to divide into groups of four and they were given a series of prompts. This Focused Freewrite was going to be shared with the rest of the group, but we didn't explain that this was a Dialectical Notebook: we wanted them to explore the strategy and then, promoting transparency, we explained the reasoning behind this activity.

The first Focused Freewrite asked participants to describe, with as much detail as possible, the way in which they felt student disengagement. We explained that this was a public writing in the sense that someone in their groups was going to read it. Since it was the first time we put this into practice with them, we gave them a short example of what this could look like. The PowerPoint came in very handy given the number of participants and the very large room we had. We allowed them to write for five minutes. When time was up, they were asked to shift their paper to their right and a new prompt was given with the disclosure again that all this writing was going to be public. No talking was allowed – this proved to be a challenge. Our faculty members tend to discuss orally more than through writing, and we wanted to show them a different approach that could change the way in which people engage in the learning process. The second prompt asked participants to respond to their colleague's situation keeping in mind the material previously introduced, the conversations we had before, and their own personal experience. This response was meant to be from the teacher's perspective; in other words, what could a teacher do in this situation? Participants were given three minutes. The

* For more information, see *Principios de la docencia Uniandina*.^o

third prompt asked participants to reply from the students' perspective, and four minutes were allowed for this. The last prompt asked for participants to provide a response from the institutional point of view in 5 minutes. After this, the *notebook* was delivered to its original owner.

We concluded the exercise by going over the steps that we had covered and making it transparent that this was a strategy that they could use in their classroom to make it more active and allow students to engage more deeply with texts and with each other. There was a brief discussion on how this activity had helped them be engaged, how much work had been done in a limited amount of time, and on the possibilities of this being replicated in the classroom. Overall, this experience seemed to be successful, however, we have no way of knowing how much of it was transferred to the classrooms or to reflect on the faculty's teaching practices.

4.2 TEXT RENDERING, FOCUSED FREE WRITING AND SONNETS

Sometimes I have the chance to teach a general education course. This is a mandatory eight-week long course on Colombia, and the general outline of the class has been predesigned, meaning that you have some room to play around with certain activities, but the grading activities and central projects must remain the same for all students. I have taught this course many times now, and it's a very unpopular course among students: they hate its mandatory nature; the engineering and hard science students don't understand why they must take it while the social studies and humanities students think it is repetitive for them. It's a course that has a reputation for asking students to "do a lot of hard work"; it demands loads of reading primary and secondary sources, and group work must be done during the last three weeks. This is usually a course of around fifty students, and you are assigned a Teaching Graduate Assistant to help with feedback, assessment, and logistics of the course. The course is designed in a way in which you only see students once a week. In order to engage students, you need to create and cultivate a learning environment fast. It is a tough course, but I enjoy teaching it, and it gives me an opportunity to try things, experiment, and have the experience to then discuss with other faculty.

At the beginning of the course, I explained to students that I was doing a professional development course where I was learning how to include writing activities for thinking, and that I had learned that writing by hand was better for our thinking. I asked them to bring pen and paper to class. This seemed like a ridiculous request, but so many students come to class with no materials, not even a laptop, that I believe the more we explain to them the reasons why we ask for something, the more positive reaction we have. I explained to the students that over the course of eight

weeks I was going to be introducing different exercises and that I wasn't sure how many of them would work out, but it was worth trying to learn. There wasn't much of a reaction from them, but no resistance either.

During our first session I gave them a prompt to discuss the value of general education in our institution. I asked them to elaborate on the following prompt: *The CBUs are a waste of time*. I explained that we were going to share this, asked them not to put their name on their paper, and that I was going to collect these responses at the end. I emphasized that I didn't know any of them (hence not their handwriting, either), that there wasn't a right answer, but that I wanted to explore their thoughts and to have some mutual understanding of what we were going to do with our time together. This was a long shot. I needed to be vulnerable with them – which I tried by telling them that I myself was a student of these techniques – and try to build a classroom climate that was positive and trustworthy. In a way, I needed to create a similar space to what I had experienced at the beginning of my IWT experience. The activity seemed to work as it allowed us to have a deep conversation on the place and value of general education and the reasons why we, at Uniandes, thought it was indispensable: it runs in our DNA and it's part of what sets us apart from other institutions.

The following week, students were supposed to read a primary source and develop a primary source table: this has always been controversial as it is not a very engaging activity, but it helps promote critical thinking skills. This table has become even more difficult to implement given the rise of generative AI. The table asks students to situate the author, understand the context in which it was written, and identify main ideas. During the course we work with narrative texts (this is partly to prepare students for their middle term project where they write the story of their own family and intertwine it with the history of the country). For this exercise I asked them to read Emma Reyes,* a captivating set of letters that the artist wrote to a colleague about her very difficult childhood. I asked students to read the text but not to complete the Primary Source Analysis table. In class I asked them to explore the prompt: what did you feel when you were reading the text? What emotions? I gave an example of what this could look like, just as a guide, but asked them to write *from the heart*. I was happily impressed with the number of students who had listened and brought pen and paper to class. Others decided to write on their electronic devices. Knowing that this isn't great, but that it's part of the process, I invited them to write regardless of the medium. We shared this in small groups and then proceeded to have a plenary.

Students were eager to share their emotions and feelings, and many of them also shared their rage with the Primary Source Table (which was not part of the assignment). The conversation went on for a bit, we discussed our own privilege, the

* Emma Reyes (1919-2003) was a XX century Colombian artist. She wrote twenty-three letters to the famous historian and friend Germán Arciniegas that have been collected in *El libro de Emma Reyes: Memoria por correspondencia* where she narrates the difficulties of her childhood. It's an excellent primary source to understand many different aspects of twentieth century Colombian society.

difference of context, and how things have changed and stayed the same for some people. At the end of this discussion, I asked them about the exercise and what happens when we engage with text while reading, and how their writing was letting me know more about them. I also confessed that the example that I had shown them had been done with generative AI and that a significant amount of the work in the course could be done using this tool, but we reflected on what we lost when we used it. We proceeded to have a very engaging debate on the use of generative AI: when, why, its limitations. This isn't on the syllabus, but it was the way in which we could engage with a real problem, reflect on the value of education, and come back to the agreements of our first session.

The next week we explored together *Carta a Antonia*,⁴ a piece of writing by Colombian sociologist Alfredo Molano. This is a letter to his niece right after the 2016 peace treaty was signed between FARC and the Colombian government. It's a very short piece, full of emotions and images and I find it very useful to model what is expected of them to write for their midterm project. Usually, students would be asked to read at home, but knowing that many of them wouldn't do it, I decided to give text rendering a try. I explained to them that this was something I hadn't done before, that I had experienced it as a student in a room of no more than thirty people, but I thought it was a powerful exercise for this text. I asked students to start reading: *just read until the next period mark. And the next person continues*. I thought this was going to be chaotic in a room of fifty. I was surprised at how easy we all got the hang of it, all eyes on papers, everyone in sync. We finished reading together and their eyes sparkled. We had done something as a community, all together. We then read it individually and discussed the text. Without asking them, students noted the power of the exercise: they felt connected, they felt the need to be there, present. They noted how the activity demanded their full attention, and this was something unusual. Many of them thanked me at the end of class; next time I would like to have some evidence of their engagement, something more besides my memories and their smiles at the end of class.

Throughout the course I asked students to continue doing Focused Freewriting in our sessions to engage with texts and have more meaningful conversations. We all learned to keep writing and embrace the silence – we were not alone or disengaging – we were together, collaboratively writing. The mid-term assignment was a narrative of the student's family and in my experience, they are not happy or comfortable sharing them: they are very personal and many of them discover that their families have overcome very difficult circumstances (as, unfortunately, many Colombians do). Instead of asking them to voluntarily share, I asked them to make a list of all the things they learned while doing this assignment. I told them not to think too much, just keep the pencil moving and write everything they could think about.

I then asked them to pick one of those things and explore more about it. I asked them to expand on why they thought they had picked this element, on why it mattered. We had a final loop where students explored the relationship of what they had learned with their professional life. They came together in small groups and shared their answers. I asked them to compose a collective sonnet that had to include some sort of talisman or image. Before doing this, I remind them that I am not a literature professor, that I don't really know anything about poems, and that I was bringing this exercise to experiment. I had experienced this exercise two months before and I was delighted with how powerful it felt to me: my group created a beautiful poem even when none of us knew how to do it, we trusted in ourselves, in our abilities, and we tried. I came clean with students and said: let's give it a try, if it fails, we all learn. I was excited and nervous. What if they didn't engage? But they surprised me. They started their small group conversations, asked for materials, and later they were all sitting on the floor drawing, composing and bringing their own language and writing into the conversation. What I had designed to be a twenty-minute task ended up being a forty-five-minute activity where most of the students were engaged. It took us longer, but the engagement was deeper, they embraced the conversation, and they went over their learnings. I couldn't rush this final activity: it was meaningful to them, and it allowed them to materialize their learning. It was a powerful metacognitive exercise. We ended with a gallery walk to read our poems. They thanked me for the activity, they smiled, they talked. By the end of the term, they told me that this was one of their favorite activities and that it helped the class "go by very quickly."

5 TWO OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES I FACED

There have been many challenges through this journey. Perhaps one of the biggest ones has to do with the lack of confidence in trying something new and different. I always had this voice in my head questioning me whether something was ready and if I was ready. But I found that students are empathetic characters that are willing to experiment with you and learn together. The key to this, I believe, is the transparency with which I approach all the activities: I made myself vulnerable to them and honestly shared my fears and doubts. And I found students willing to try with me and learn along the way. The classroom was more democratic because of this, it was a community of learning where everyone could help, engage, listen, write, and bring something. But the vulnerability is not just from a teacher or faculty development perspective: I had to learn to be vulnerable in the classroom as a student. I had to let go of fears, to show myself to others, to learn to trust others.

This wouldn't have been possible if we hadn't created that safe space, that sense of community and of support: I wasn't alone. I was never alone, not as a student, not as a teacher. Learning is a social activity, so is teaching. Being vulnerable helps us shape that community and, in my perspective, it allows us to grow together and have deeper and more significant processes.

The second challenge I faced during these past few years has to do with translation. I am a native Spanish speaker, and I learned English in school. However, when it came to translating my understandings, to translate the wording of prompts, things got difficult. I could translate them literally, but I struggled to see if there was something missing. Unlike my other colleagues (who all teach most of the time in English), our instruction language is Spanish, and I sometimes struggled explaining the names and processes to students. Something wired in my head in a different way as I learned these techniques in English and I found it easier than when I had to think in my own language. However, I learned to embrace this discomfort as well, and as before, I explained to my students what was happening: I wasn't trying to be a show-off when words didn't come out the way I wanted, it was just the way I had experienced them the first time and I was struggling to move from them. They didn't seem to be bothered by this, and I think this has to do with the fact that we could be writing together, without thinking about grammar or spelling rules.⁵ It was a way to make sense of the world without following these rules that are essential in other interactions, but for the purpose of helping us think in class, less relevant.

6 A FINAL NOTE

This essay is about community, trust, and building our own personal identity. It has been a very significant journey for me. I've grown, I've learned, I've changed. I found myself writing more and more from the heart. Not that I have forgotten my mind, the need for a rational explanation. But I found that allowing myself to have a voice has a powerful impact on myself, in my teaching, and in my facilitation of professional development workshops. In a rational world, pushing us towards a faster, more efficient perspective of learning, resisting might include slowing down, writing, thinking, and allowing our human voices to come together in communal spaces to bring forward dialogues and conversations.

NOTES

- 1 Eodice, Geller & Lerner, 2025
- 2 Eodice, Geller & Lerner, 2025
- 3 Ambrose et al., 2010
- 4 Molano Bravo, 2016
- 5 Eodice, Geller & Lerner (2025)

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