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## Uninvolved = Poor Writers

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## *Professor as Student*

Roy Starling

SPECIAL SECTION:  
*Involving Students*



# The Uninvolved = Poor Writers

Joseph M. Moxley

Students' perceptions of their role and of the teacher's role affect learning. In writing classes the impact of students' attitudes is particularly keen because writing inevitably involves students in self-disclosure. Some students, however, lack the necessary writing ability to elaborate on and clarify their experiences and knowledge. Their difficulties in communicating with audiences beyond the self can lead to tremendous frustration, to a tendency to dislike everything associated with writing, and thus to avoidance of writing. As Mina Shaughnessy (1977) observes in *Errors and Expectations*, these negative feelings often prevent students from developing the independence and responsibility that will lead to learning. She argues that the writing teacher must identify students who have negative perceptions and seek to understand what handicaps these perceptions can be.

In order to discover more about how such perceptions affect students' development as writers, I interviewed five students over the course of a semester. As these interviews reveal, students' perceptions have implications for improving practices of writing teachers and of all other teachers who have students write. The students in this study were enrolled in three sections of an introductory writing course (which I did not teach) at a large state university.

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One of them, Bart,<sup>1</sup> was much more experienced than the others. A senior, he had scored well on the English department's placement exam and so was enrolled in the class out of choice. The other writers were less experienced. They were freshmen, had scored poorly on the writing exam, and were required to take the writing course.

The following discussions summarize what these students said about their perceptions.

### Barbara

Barbara explains that she completed few writing assignments in school, with the exception of a recently completed developmental college writing course and her current writing course. She reports that she completes absolutely no writing outside of school.

Of the five writers, Barbara is the least committed to writing. She perceives her role as following orders. She refuses to assume responsibility for selecting or organizing her work; she feels that she is not responsible for the quality of her written work, which she views as the teacher's problem. She is so reluctant to take charge of her writing, in fact, that she openly admits her practice of extensive plagiarizing.

Q: And how did you go about writing a piece like that?

B: Sometimes I copied from the book. It wasn't hard to do. Just put in a lot of footnotes. Put it together. Change it around a little. That's all. They didn't bother to check.

Q: They didn't bother to check what?

B: The sources. See if you copied out of the book.

Q: Did you copy out of the book?

B: Yeah. All the time.

Unlike the other writers in this study, Barbara seems to dislike her student role. She appears to have created a "Catch 22" situation for herself in that, while she thinks all writing must be governed by the teacher's desires, she also says that she is never interested in subjects the teacher suggests. In fact, she implies that her antagonistic relationships with her writing teachers are responsible for her dislike of writing. Repeatedly she has shunned writing topics that she could have enjoyed and learned from because she did not think the teacher would like them, or they were too personal to be shared, or some significant person in her life, such as her roommate, vetoed the topic.

Barbara's negative, defeatist attitudes and dependence on the writing teacher clearly interfere with her development. In fact, I suspect that Barbara and other students like her will not be able to develop as writers until they assume some responsibility for their writing. She would probably benefit by a one-on-one student-teacher conference. Students like Barbara need encouragement to select their own topics, topics which interest them.

### Victor

Victor explains that he must write because he is a student. Outside of school, he addresses no significant

writing tasks. Within the classroom the domination of the instructor, as goal setter and evaluator, is upheld. Victor compares his role to that of an “army private following orders.” Most dramatically, without the instructor’s demands, he explains that he will not write: “The only writing I’d do on my own is something that involves no responsibility.”

Victor also mentions that he must structure his material to meet external demands:

V: I structure the material in idea form.

Q: Why are you structuring it?

V: Because in my draft stage I’m only gonna do two drafts then a couple of revisions; so I’m structuring it after I’ve done two freewrites in a draft stage.

Q: Who are you structuring it for?

V: For the English teacher, the class, the English department.

When I asked Victor if he would write in a different way from what textbooks or teachers suggest, he said he would like to develop sufficiently as a writer to be able to fully integrate all he has learned about the writing process from textbooks and teachers into a more organic, personal form:

Q: What are the differences between how the teacher says to do it and how the book says to do it?

V: Okay, they’re very similar . . . Textbooks that I have read give advice. Do it this way, that way, etc. Someday I’m gonna do it in the best stages I feel. I mean my freewrite will be a freewrite, then become a draft right away (Victor snaps his fingers).

Clearly, Victor’s perceptions are much more conducive to his development as a writer than Barbara’s. He hopes to develop enough so he will not have to rely on textbooks for organizing strategies. Yet, like Barbara, Victor also relinquishes responsibility for the selection and development of his ideas. Students like Victor need to be encouraged to assume responsibility for their writing. As William Zinsser (1985) mentions in *On Writing Well*, successful writers first write for themselves. In fact, my research has also shown how thoughts of external audiences can in-

trude on the development of a piece of writing (1985).

### Ann

As with Victor and Barbara, Ann does not write outside of school. At school, she also sees herself as someone following orders. Ann holds the teacher mainly responsible for what is and what is not appropriate content for any given paper. Moreover, the teacher is at least partially responsible for motivating students to perform writing. For example, Ann describes her teacher as “using the class period right now to get us motivated to write about an idea.”

But Ann differs from the previous two students in that she shares some of the responsibility for her writing assignments with her current teacher. She believes she is now more motivated to write than ever before, partly because she is personally involved in her writing tasks and partly because of the increased maturity and greater desire to learn gained during the seven years that she stayed out of school following graduation from high school. Finally, unlike Barbara, Ann is at least resigned to the role of student. For example, although she contends that she hates most teacher-assigned topics, she explains that her need for a passing grade makes her acquiesce.

Ann appears to be much more committed to her writing than the other inexperienced writers, although she, too, sees herself as someone following orders and believes that the teacher is supposed to motivate the class. Ann’s dependence on the teacher, however, is balanced by her desire to improve.

### Frank

Frank reports that he has only once written on a topic that totally involved him—a piece that concerned his parents’ divorce. Yet, even though Frank flunked his first college developmental writing course and at the time of the interview still had not turned in the first two reports assigned by the teacher in the current course, he thinks he can become a successful writer:

I think right now I’m mediocre, but I’d like my writing to be much better. I know I could be a good writer because with that kind of emotion and feeling that I had in that paper, I think I could definitely become better.

As with the previous interviewees, Frank perceives his role as “following orders.” Essentially he works to respond to the teacher’s directives. Otherwise, he explains, “You automatically fail.”

In contrast to Barbara, but in agreement with Victor and Ann, Frank perceives the teacher’s role in a sympathetic fashion. To him, teachers of writing are solely interested in improving student writing.

But Frank clearly harbors a few misconceptions that may be interfering with his development. For example, he incorrectly assumes that writing teachers and most other readers do not evaluate prose according to how interesting and well developed it is. He would benefit from the knowledge that the depth and development of ideas often determine the success of prose. He needs to understand that successful writing is descriptive, thoughtful, analytical. Students like Frank who are extremely dependent on the teacher must be encouraged to write for themselves first and to have more faith in themselves. Absolute dependence on the teacher is probably pernicious, because some personal commitment must be present in successful writing. Further, the paucity of Frank’s writing background suggests that he may benefit most by writing more frequently.

### Bart

In contrast to the other four writers, Bart, the experienced one, is motivated to write; he is the only one who speaks of extended writing plans and of any writing outside of the classroom. He is also the only one to have written a long piece of prose of any kind (a short story of 55 pages). Often, he speaks positively about his current writing, his writing background, and his writing future. He expresses more varied and flexible insights into factors that influence his composing processes. For example, since he plans to be a lawyer,

he conceives of writing on subjects that he does not care about in order to achieve financial gain. He explains that he feels joyful and creative when writing.

Bart does not see his role as "following orders," nor does he conceive of the teacher's role as that of total autocrat. Because the teacher is perceived as a source of greater knowledge, Bart does not ultimately hold the teacher responsible for the way in which he writes. He feels confident about his writing and follows his own interests and desires when writing. The contrast between Bart's perceptions and those of the other writers couldn't be much greater.

The distinctions between the perceptions of the four inexperienced writers and those of the experienced writer are particularly interesting. The inexperienced writers hold the teacher responsible for the organization, selection, and quality of their completed work. They also perceive the teacher to be the primary source of inspiration and motivation; without the teacher's demands, none of these writers would write. While the inexperienced writers are alienated, dependent on their teachers, and have completed extremely few in-school and out-of-school writing projects, the experienced writer is involved, is much more independent of the teacher, and has completed varied writing projects. Bart perceives writing to be a learning process. He appreciates the power writing gives him, explains that he often discovers new ideas when writing, and mentions a variety of career writing goals.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to identify factors that caused Bart to have more varied, flexible, and positive perceptions, it is intriguing to

note that the chief distinction between Bart and the other writers is that he is the only one who has had a variety of writing experiences. Could it be that Bart's wealth of experiences helped him develop his greater ability and that his ability caused him to perceive writing as a pleasurable, learning process? Or could it be that through writing about his experiences Bart has come to value his experiences more and to enjoy communicating them?

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### **Bart does not see his role as "following orders," nor does he conceive of the teacher's role as that of total autocrat.**

#### **Implications of Students' Perceptions**

The foregoing summary of selected student perceptions suggests that the teacher-dependent attitude on the part of the inexperienced writers, combined with their lack of a writing history, interfere with learning. Certainly, Barbara's lack of involvement and subsequent plagiarizing and Frank's failure to turn in assigned reports are the negative outcomes of their passive attitudes toward writing. Out of the four inexperienced writers, only Victor mentions being independent as an ultimate goal.

If the presumption is correct that self-involvement is a critical ingredient of learning, writing teachers, as well as all teachers who use writing in their classes, must find ways to alter students' dependent, defeatist attitudes. Writing that is shaped in response to purely external demands is likely to be dull, stillborn, incomplete, or plagia-

rized. Writing so deeply withdrawn from self-involvement seems likely to fail. Effective writing demands some personal involvement. For instance, effective revision—a necessary process in successful writing—cannot occur without commitment.

The lack of joy expressed by the inexperienced writers appears equally disturbing, if not surprising. Shaughnessy graphically describes how inexperienced writers perceive writing to be

a terrible ordeal, an ordeal of self-flagellation and humiliation. Concerned teachers must design activities to promote self-involvement and teach students that writing can be a pleasurable, engaging learning process.

#### **NOTE**

1. The student names used in this study are fictitious.

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