Cultivating Commitment—The Source of Writing Energy

by
Carmen Werder

The inclination to *not* write is strong, especially in the classroom. While knowing full well that most students are reluctant to expend much energy on assigned writing, we continue to tell them to "commit it to paper" with the "it" being ill-defined. Is it content or writing itself that needs to be committed? Many teachers complain of how students work at seeing how little they can write. The college freshman who responded to a 500-word theme assignment by stopping in mid-sentence when the magic number had been reached illustrates this prevalent concern with just meeting the necessary requirement. Never mind the quality of the writing. Yet, good writing does appear in the classroom, and it comes from students with a genuine regard for what they put on paper. I am interested in what prompts this commitment, for it may well be the factor teachers can most significantly influence. Cultivating an engagement with the writing process is not only legitimate teacherly work, it is essential.

There is ample evidence of a lack of commitment in written products. Peter Wason discusses this indifference as manifested in "obscurantism," a quality often found in the language of social institutions. This kind of writing aims to be objective and impersonal; its final effect is to be incomprehensible, though impressive to some. It sounds learned, seems scientific, and thus has a noticeable effect on academia (353). This kind of fuzzy language, sometimes termed beaurocratese or gobbledygook, demands to be translated into plain English. Its obscurity is unnecessary and imposed. "Intentionally or unintentionally," says Wason, "an obscurantist use of language conceals the lack of commitment of the author" (353). Richard Lanham might say that this indifference is evident in the "stylessness of American prose" (6) or in the prevalence of what he calls the "transparent" style, marked by a neutral tone (65). Peter Elbow would call it a lack of voice, a quality that can be heard like "a gear being engaged or disengaged" in writing (283). I hear it in muffled student writing that is just barely there and in writing that creates a kind of steady buzz—a monotonous, mesmerizing sameness in place of lively, varying tones. Like a musical theme with no variations, uncommitted writing drones on and on. Sound like a familiar tune?

This lack of involvement is evident in the writing process as well. When Janet Emig observed the composing processes of twelfth graders, she noted that students did not take satisfaction in their finished work.

Stopping their writing was a "mundane moment devoid of any emotion but indifference and the mildest satisfaction that a task is done" (87). Even "relief" seemed too strong a word to describe their reactions. In his 1975 study, James Britton noticed this apathy as well and made a distinction between writings that were "involved" and those that were "perfunctory" (7). When involved, the student indicated a desire to satisfy himself as well as the teacher. In perfunctory writing, he worked to satisfy only the minimum demands. Britton acknowledged that there are "differing levels of commitment, though we can not at this stage distinguish them" (8). Although he admitted that this involvement or alienation factor was highly relevant to any analysis of process, there was no time in his study to pursue it. In a 1979 study of college freshman composing processes, Sharon Pianko made a similar conclusion. Her findings showed that for most students, all stages of composing were brief. Even though they were given all afternoon to do each piece, the average composing time was 40 minutes (9). Like Emig, she observed that closure behavior was abrupt as students advised they were glad it was over but did not seem to feel deeply one way or the other. She concluded that the school context for writing was a critical factor in influencing the abbreviated process (11). Her study reaffirmed the assumption made about school-sponsored writing: there is little commitment to it on the student's part. Pianko explains that "if the writing is school sponsored . . . there is just so much energy that a person can expend" (11). The challenge for writing teachers then is to devise ways of conserving as well as creating energy to sustain the student for writing tasks.

Though we don't need these studies to tell us students are reluctant to put out in response to assignments, they do remind us of the implications of the problem on all aspects of the composing process. We are learning that any comprehensive theory of the writing process must account for the fact that writing is at times linear and at times recursive (Gebhardt 622). Sometimes thought pushes writing in a fairly orderly movement from one step to another, but usually the movement is more chaotic with steps occurring repeatedly and simultaneously. Commitment, therefore, does not enter the process just at the beginning but rather is a factor throughout. Further, any attempt to help students embrace writing involves a consideration of both perceptions of the process.

Let's examine the linear or stage model first. Britton's paradigm proposes three stages: conception, incubation and production (22-35). In this scheme, commitment would be part of conception and could be defined as a time of hooking up, an engagement with the assignment, a tie-up that can be both visible and invisible. It is a time when the decision to write happens. Britton implies this view in his description of the conception stage as a time when the writer "recognizes *that* he will write and then goes on to recognize *what* he will write" (26). Like railroad cars coupling, this is the stage when writer connects up to process or creates a context for writing.

Others might say that this tying-up action occurs during the prewriting stage. In 1965 Gordon Rohman defined prewriting as "the stage when a person assimilates the subject to himself" (106). He said that every writing occasion presents the writer with two contexts to discover. The subject context involves finding ideas about the subject, while the personal context demands making a connection between the writer and the subject (108). I don't think he went quite far enough. A third context is needed as well: a process context, which involves making a connection between the writer and the process at a particular point in time. Since each writing situation involves essentially a new relationship between writer, subject, and audience, it necessarily requires a new hook-up to process. Thus, this process context needs to be established each time we write. Good writers are involved with the subject themselves, the audience *and* the process. If prewriting is the stage when a writer "assimilates the subject to himself" (106), then commitment can be described as the stage when a writer assimilates the process to himself.

One way to highlight this need to create a process context is to replace the three-step model with a four-phase one. I use the terms commitment, exploration, fusion, and submission to designate these stages. In this construct, commitment necessarily comes first and is distinguished from prewriting activities which are included as part of exploration, a time for gathering ideas on the subject. Fusion is the rough drafting stage, and submission includes all those finalizing activities done before a paper is handed in. Clearly, these distinctions are somewhat artificial and are made simply to pin down activities that are otherwise nearly impossible to get to hold still. This model is designed to help students learn that commitment is a time to create affectionate obligations to a piece of writing so that words get on the page.

Experienced writers establish these bonds with particular writing projects which, once formed, make it difficult to evade the writing; not impossible, but less probable. Usually, they are done unconsciously. Thus, commitment seeks to engage the unconscious writing self. There is a wonderful little book that was written over fifty years ago with valuable information on how to "harness the unconscious." In *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande describes the contrasting personalities of any serious writer: the business person and the artist. They need to work alternately, she maintains and then suggests some ways to help them get along. Teaching commitment, then, is teaching the business side of the writer. One strategy, she offers, is for writers to make appointments with themselves to write. In the morning it is necessary to determine what time will be available for 15 minutes of writing later in the day, and then at the predetermined time the appointment is kept. Scheduling the writing time has a curious effect, she maintains. It allows the writer's conscious self to go about life's business while the writer's unconscious self if busy composing. Schedul-

ing the appointment is the mechanism that engages the writing self. Students can learn other ways of triggering the unconscious. Not that all students should be required to follow some pat sequence but, rather, that they be urged to perceive this stage as a valid part of the process and are made aware of some available options. Here are some harnessing practices that students and colleagues have shared.

Talking to the instructor about a possible idea for an assignment is a good way to get involved. Even if the idea is later abandoned, students perceive the action as a way of becoming obliged to follow through. Because the conversation is with a significant other, the unconscious seems to interpret it as a kind of covenant to begin work.

Preparing a calendar of mini-deadlines is another possibility. Monday: do a ten-minute freewrite; Tuesday: make a list of ideas; Wednesday: talk to my roommate about my ideas; Thursday: do an instant version; Friday: write a rough draft. Even if the calendar is never followed, just plotting it out on paper provides another subliminal tie to the project. Visible, conscious actions trigger invisible reactions.

Another strategy is to purchase a special notebook or pen for a particular project. One student recently mentioned she spent $3 on a snappy, deluxe folder for a research paper she was especially concerned about. She remarked how the purchase immediately took some of the pressure off. As Donald Murray tells us "indulge in tools" because "they make a difference" (48). I learned from one instructor to suggest to students that they buy a 25¢ bluebook for each assigned essay to be used as a kind of project journal. Many say it helps to get started. The investment of money does wonders for commitment: "I spent a quarter; I might as well jot some ideas down here." The writer could logically say "So I spent two bits, so what?" and never use it, but usually, once we have invested something of ourselves (time or money), the human inclination is to complete the transaction. The more of these links that are made, the stronger the obligation and the more likely the follow-through.

My own personal favorite involves pulling a kind of fast one on the unconscious. Practically always, when I have a writing assignment, my first step is to check out as many books and articles as possible on my topic. While this might sound simply like the typical pattern of research, I am not talking about reading the materials but just checking them out and having them around. Not long ago, in doing some literary criticism on Emerson, I counted 14 books on my office shelf devoted to this kindly gentleman. Even though I never read most of them, checking them out helped me to write. Having Emerson in my study fostered a commitment to the paper. Somehow, just surrounding myself with the titles created a milieu, a context for composing. Perhaps, it was my way of hooking up my unconscious to the reality of the project. I do remember staring at the titles at times while sitting at my typewriter. It was as if those books served to remind me of my duty. After all,

Ralph Waldo's presence was embodied in those books, and I wasn't about to let him down.

Once students understand the value and appeal of these exercises, they will come up with ideas of their own. I especially like one a recent student suggested. As soon as he receives and reads an assignment sheet, he circles the topic choice which he predicts he will write on. That's all. Sometimes, he changes his mind later, after doing some writing, but he insists the mere circling of the choice makes him feel like he has begun. His habit reminds me of a similar practice that I have noticed among graduate students. Often, they will spend considerable time reading and re-reading the assignment before doing any writing. Many have commented that even after they are sure of the requirements for a paper, they will continue to re-read the hand-out. It seems to be a way of assuming responsibility for the project.

Because all these strategies are painless, they have a way of sounding incidental and even silly, but no one snickers (aloud anyway) at Hemingway for his supposed penchant for standing while writing. In this business, whatever works, works. The important thing here is that we not leave these commitment practices to chance. Students need to be taught there are things they can *do* to initiate the composing process.

So far, we have discussed commitment as the first step in a linear model. Now, let's attempt a description using the non-linear model. In this construct,writing occurs as the result of activities that occur and recur in an infinite variety of combinations. In this scheme, then, commitment is an activity not a time. Further, it need not occur only at the beginning but may recur throughout the process. But what kind of an activity is it? Mental? Emotional? Both?

Most recent composing models describe writing as an activity of the mind (Foster 24), so one would be tempted to make commitment fit into this framework. Yet a study of the dominant, current cognitive model, by Linda Flowers and John Hayes, is mute on this activity. While their model thoroughly describes the mental processes and subprocesses involved in composing, engagement is not mentioned. They describe writing as a complex of elementary mental processes: planning, translating, and reviewing ("A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing" 369). After studying the subprocesses they include within planning (generating, organizing, and goal-setting), I am not satisfied that they have addressed commitment. While they claim that goal-setting is what guides the decisions writers make (379), it is unclear what prompts the goal setting. They do go on to say the Monitor is the force that determines when the writer moves from one process to another (375). But again, what moves or directs the Monitor to act? There is some other force at work here, and I think it is this force of commitment. The degree of commitment determines the amount of energy available to drive the whole process. So is commitment a thinking process or a feeling process?

Wason claims that involvement in a piece of writing is an affective process and needs a confrontation with the self. He sees self-esteem at the center (358). The implication is that if a writer values his writing self, he will value his writing. I agree.

We have said that commitment can be defined as both a stage and an activity that is marked by a hooking up or engagement with the whole writing process. It most notably occurs at the beginning of writing but can recur. It is perhaps a mental activity. It is more clearly an affective process. Now to find a use for this definition.

Building on Wason's contention that engagement involves the writer's self-esteem, we need to work on affirming students. I am reminded of the growth pattern of spring bulbs. Resting underground, flower bulbs lie dormant until the conditions are right. Then, nourished by their natural wrappings, they grow with remarkable power—pressing through layers of silt, poking 'round pebbles, even pushing through cracks in concrete. If bulbs could consider their earthly journey, they would never grow. Instead, they just simply respond to the power within them. Once the growth process is set in motion, this creative energy is vigorous and determined. Commited to living, these plants color and blossom. The writing class needs to be a place where people are equally commited in their push to put words on paper. Commitment flourishes in an atmosphere of comfortable seriousness. Implicit is the notion that writing should not weigh heavily on students; they need to forget its importance and just do it. Yet, this abandon can lead to a deep concern. Curiously, relaxation can free us to concentrate our energies in a serious way. I believe that by first creating a sense of comfort, we can ultimately create a sense of commitment.

Students need to see themselves as writers. That words happen at all is a wonder. That they sometimes flow with grace and power on the page is indeed a miracle. Students need to perceive language-making with this kind of awe. When they see words on paper are nothing short of marvelous, then all writing, regardless of proficiency, is an achievement. A sense of comfort comes when students feel competent to begin with. They may be resting writers with creative energy lying dormant, but it is there. Students need to be advised at the outset that they are already writers and then constantly reminded to "keep the faith."

So it is a belief in themselves as writers that prompts a sense of comfort in students. And if they do not yet believe, they need to pretend until they do. I used to teach kindergarteners, and as I look back, I am impressed with how those five-year-olds wrote. Like bulbs, they simply did it—no energies spent in questioning whether or not they could. Little Joe might have been seen as the class artist and Melissa "the" dancer, but everybody was a writer. As soon as they could hold pencils and make marks, they were legitimate. Apparently, it had never occurred to them that with writing there is the suspicion that perhaps some cats got it and some cats ain't. They all assumed they were fat cats and purred over their squiggles. Now most freshmen on the other hand,

may have to begin with pretense. Until they are convinced, they will need to play the role, to assume the guise of writer. Instructors, too, might have to do some fudging. Those teachers who do not truly see all their students as bona fide writers must act as if they do—until they in fact do. This pretending is a necessary first step to genuine belief, a step of trust in what is essentially a faith journey. Teachers must believe that comfortable students are more likely to be interested in writing better. Students will be concerned with how to write if they first believe they can. Faith is at the center.

But a successful writer needs to behave as well as believe. Following is a discussion of how three specific strategies can invite commitment: writing groups, language sharing, and in-class journal writing.

There are many ways to enhance self-esteem and then to draw on its power. The energy to write and to keep writing results from the little joys along the way. Other people can help us to discover what is working in our writing and thus expedite the bliss. Writing groups can create energy. Dedicated to searching for the positive, the teacher can guide students in success analysis. The intent is to find something to commend in every paper. The challenge is to spot, not error, but worth. Finding out that we have a good idea can be delightfully good news and just enough to keep that faith. The support of others can sustain us when words come slowly or not at all; it can also nourish us during the growth spurts. From first day to last, the class needs to focus on the recognition of each member's skills. Once students realize they have written something worthwhile already, they will knock themselves out to make it better. Enter concern, but more—there is real commitment now because there is a vested interest. After all, the writing is already good so why not push my luck, says the somewhat smug student. Writers become obsessed with papers that have received praise. It's the old you-like-that?-well-watch-this syndrome. The obsession provides the energy needed to carry on: to press through muddy ideas, to work around blocks in development, and to push through to lucid and lively writing. This process of finding strengths helps students to feel rooted and stable. Their past successes serve to toughen them up for future composing problems.

This training in identifying strengths can be applied to writing from outside the class as well. Explaining why good writing works is more satisfying than analyzing why bad writing fails. Therefore, students can be charged with finding and collecting successful writing. They need to be encourged to look everywhere for it: poetry, song lyrics, fiction, newspapers, catalogues, ads, textbooks—everywhere. Rule out no sources or almost none, I've discovered. (One student just brought in a tea box with a pleasing example of parallel phrasing.) Then class time can be set aside for language sharing, a time when members read their good writing samples aloud and tell why they work. This kind of language show-and-tell can deepen the faith in the human potential to

compose and can prompt us to respond in-kind. Learning that there are many ways to write well is liberating, as one freshman's experience suggests.

He was an extremely shy student who was so terrified of writing that he could not bring himself to submit an in-class essay on the first class session even though there was no grade. He even expressed agony in writing it at home. He squirmed during in-class exercises whether he was expected to share his product or not. His essays were usually less than or barely met the word requirement. He was simply uptight about putting words on paper. Then for a language-sharing session, he brought in Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn." Needless to say, I was both startled and pleased with his choice. After a moving reading of the poem, he described the poet's word choice and the repetition of certain key sounds, qualities which he thought made this piece work. We were all visibly impressed. After that inspired reading, this student seemed to loosen up: he turned in longer essays and what he wrote was livelier. The experience seemed to give him energy to write. Finding good writing is somehow a share in its creation.

This drive to affirm students needs to be extended to the kinds of writing situations we provide them. Faith in writing as a meaningful life activity can be taught and caught. If students are invited to write for themselves, then belief can quietly slip in. As Lanham reminds us, we Americans tend to "use" language rather than to delight in it (10). If students are going to value writing, they need to mess around, to create language products that may only be useful to themselves, like personal journals.

In my class, we spend the first few minutes of each session making entries in our journals. Though not collected, they are required. They say to the students—to the world—writing is a way of finding out about themselves, and that is worth doing. I am determined this writing time be as pleasant as possible. Early on, I acknowledge the sense of peace that exists in the classroom when we're writing together and isn't that nice? They agree. I make a big deal of how infrequently we write in such a relaxed context and isn't that too bad? They agree. I say that writing can lead to some interesting surprises about ourselves; isn't that so? And they agree. Almost in spite of themselves, they learn to relax and enjoy these writing moments. They say this kind of writing relaxes them, helps them to sort through daily concerns, gives them time with themselves, and often gives them energy to carry on. For many, these pleasant associations with the act of writing are unfamiliar because it is the first time they have felt success. Here success means getting words on the page with a sense of ease. Devoting class time for journal writing and writing along with the students are essential if they are to regard this as a legitimate activity.

This matter of perception is crucial in terms of commitment. I am reminded of my earlier observation of how graduate students tend to re-read assignments. This was interesting to me in light of one study's findings that poor writers re-read the assignment repeatedly "as if looking for some ready-made goals" ("A Cognitive Process" 27). The

graduates, on the other hand, described it as a way of keeping involved with the task. So while poor writers might re-read an assignment in a desperate search to find an idea, more experienced writers seem to view it as a way of maintaining commitment.

Perception, then, is perhaps the most important element in getting involved with writing. As Britton stated, perhaps writing success is "more a matter of how the writer regards himself than it is one of ability" (192). Graduate students tend to perceive themselves as successful; therefore, they inevitably would view what they do as productive. As Rohman said of his recommended prewriting strategies, they taught a "way of seeing, gave a renewed sense of self and a renewed vision of things" (112). Commitment strategies can do the same.

It is the attitude of self-esteem that most accounts for commitment. It is a quality that seems to carry over from one writing project to another. In their composing process paradigm, Flower and Hayes describe how long-term memory plays a role in the whole process. They describe how the writer carries "tacit knowledge of form and content from one writing experience to the next ("The Cognition" 25). Wouldn't it be true that we also carry memories of process experience from one situation to the next? The more memories of past success with writing, the more commitment we take to the next writing task.

So, it is our biggest challenge as educators to cultivate a sense of engagement with writing. If we are successful, it will mean students who write after they leave school, after all, there are many ways to make students produce in the academic setting. Squeezing papers out of them with the threat of grades works, but what about the long-term effects? We can force bulbs to bloom indoors, but in the process their energies are spent. They must be planted outdoors in the earth to gain nourishment and develop a root system if they are to bloom again. Personally, I favor handling them with care and attending to their needs, thus assuring continual blossoms. So it is with students. Written words do not just happen. They are pushed, pulled, jerked, coaxed, begged, and, sometimes, even loved into being. This action requires a great deal of energy. There is no question that when it comes to writing, "energy is eternal delight." Not only does commitment result in more enjoyable writing, but it may also even be a requirement for happy living. As Wason says, writing in a committed voice "may be (in computer terms) a unique way to empty the store so that more space is made available for new ideas. . . . It may be necessary in order to get on with the main business of living" (359).

I am done for now. My energies, while not exhausted, are running low—thank God, I'm committed to this whole business.

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