Empowering Students through Language & Critical Thinking: The Bard College Language & Thinking Program

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Abstract. In many parts of the world, and particularly in Eastern Europe and Asia, educators and institutions are turning to liberal arts education because they are recognizing the limitations of old didactic teaching methods—pedagogies based primarily in lecture, rote memory, and disciplinary rigidity. At the heart of the liberal arts classroom is a student-centered pedagogy, but aside from hearing about the values of a "student-centered" pedagogy by visiting scholars, few educators seeking change at the classroom level get to experience what a "student-centered" classroom actually is—teaching practices and methodologies that foster active inquiry, autonomous expression and agency among students who have traditionally been passive recipients of information. This paper presents one liberal arts college's strategy for promoting a liberal arts pedagogy: the Bard College Language & Thinking Program developed to introduce educators and students alike to a classroom in which learning is interactive and where students are encouraged to raise questions, challenge assumptions, and to actively engage in intellectual inquiry and collaborative work through writing-to-learn practices. In the Language & Thinking Program, the teacher does not have a monopoly on knowledge, but instead guides students through a variety of reading and writing strategies used to actively empower students through language and critical thinking.

Key words: liberal arts pedagogy, student-centered learning, writing-to-learn, critical thinking, engaged learning, active inquiry, reflection, metacognition, collaborative learning, active listening, writing-to-read, interactive learning, reading and writing strategies, focused free writes, process writing.

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In 1981, at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, Bard College President Leon Botstein responded to what he saw as a lack of substance and depth in students' writing by creating the Language and Thinking Program, an intensive introduction to the liberal arts and sciences with a particular focus on using writing as an exploratory process to enhance critical thinking. It would become a mandatory three-week program for all incoming first-year Bard students—what

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the *New York Times* called a "boot camp for writers." The Program grew out of President Botstein's vision of the need to address widespread challenges facing incoming first-year college and university students—to articulate ideas in writing and engage those ideas both critically and creatively. Theprogramwould immerse students in reading, writing, and creative activities that would foster in students an awareness of not only what critical thinking is but the habits of mind that would support them throughout their academic careers and help them grow intellectually.

During thirty-four years of successfully implementingthe Language & Thinking Program at Bard College and across its network of Bard High School Early Colleges, several international institutions have also adopted the program to transition their own classroomcultures from a traditionallylecture-based format to one that embraces a more student- centered pedagogy. The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University (Smolny College)—Bard's oldest partner institution—has been offering the Language & Thinking Program for over ten years. The American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Al Quds Bard and Al Quds University in Abu Dis, Palestine, and the European Humanities University in Lithuania have also adopted the program with great success; and most recently, Yangon and Mandalay Universities in Myanmar have piloted the Language & Thinking Program and introduced an initial group of faculty and students to student-centered teaching and learning methodologies.

For international institutions that have not experienced the classroom as a site of student-centered, active, engaged learning, a crucial aspect of liberal arts pedagogy, the teaching methodologies of the Language & Thinking Program illustrate how to harness autonomous expression and establish agency among students who have traditionally been passive recipients of information. Students learn to ask questions, entertain new ideas, and listen productively. For students who come from an educational system in which rote memory is the norm, the introduction to the program's more collaborative and participatory forms of learning transforms their ideas of who they are as students, what their role and responsibilities are in their own learning, and how they can apply these new practices and this new awareness to other areas of their lives. All of these aspects of learning are central to the liberal arts classroom—a classroom, as Jonathan Becker, Dean of International Studies at Bard College, explains, "is designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently, and to prepare them to function as engaged citizens' [Becker, 2014].As one international professor observed, "This program makes our thinking and writing skills more effective and innovative even as professors."[1]

[1] Dr. Yin Thu, Yangon University, Yangon, Myanmar. November 2014

What follows is an introduction to the Bard College Language & Thinking Program—the innovative teaching methodologies, curriculum, and supporting activities that make it an intense introduction to the liberal arts and sciences, and what it means to participate in the intellectual and creative life of the college. The mission of the Language and Thinking Program (L&T) is to foster robust interdisciplinary study, innovative pedagogy, and writing across a wide range of genres. The work of the program aims to cultivate habits of thoughtful reading and discussion, clear articulation, accurate self-critique, and productive collaboration, all essential skills of an engaged citizen and learner. Central to all of this work is an examination of the link between thought and expression. Deeply rooted in theories of Writing-to-Learn and Process Pedagogy, L&T hinges on the idea that "writing represents a unique mode of learning" [Bazerman et al., 2005][2] and that writing can and does "order and represent experience…Language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding" both in and outside of the classroom [Fulwiler, Young, 1982].

At the heart of the writing inthe Language & Thinking Programare innovativewriting-basedteaching practices that directly engage students in a variety of student-centered activities. Thesewriting activities are called "high-leveraged"[3]*writing-to-learn* practices (not to be confused with simply assigning more writing in a course) because they engage student in active inquiry in the classroom. The central purpose of these practices is to encourage and empower students to become independent, active learners; theyhelp students develop higher-order skills and engage in deep, critical thinking in the classroom. L&T faculty "guide" their students through a variety of these informal writing-to-learn practices called "focused free writes"[4] to engage and make connections with an initial idea, read a text, put a text in conversation with other texts from different genres or disciplines that are engaging the same ideas but through different disciplinary contexts and rhetorical strategies; or, to write poetry, fiction, or a brief

[2] "Writing to Learn is based on the observation that students' thought and understanding can grow and clarify through the process of writing… James Britton and Janet Emig(especially Emig's landmark article "Writing as a Mode of Learning" 1977) are primarily responsible for turning this into a pedagogical approach" [Bazerman et al., 2005].

[3] "High leveraged" practices are defined as those that are research-based and have the potential to improve student achievement.

[4] A "focused free write" is a writing prompt or question developed by the workshop faculty member to either engage an idea, a text, students' prior thinking about a topic; or, to help students generate thinking around a concept, a visual image, a film, an object, or piece of music. They purposely shape the scope of the content—and frequently the form of writing responses, thus faculty can lead students to engage different modes of thinking.

one-act play, or engage through observation, description, and analysis some aspect of the world around them.

Focused free writes, or brief, informalwriting-to-learn practices, can take many forms, depending upon what the faculty is hoping to accomplish. Examples of focused free writes includewriting to read strategies, which encompass a variety of different ways to engage a text through probative writing. Writing-to-read strategiesare rooted in the larger idea that when students write "about a text they are reading [it] enhances how well they comprehend it". There are many writing-to-learn and writing-to-read practices that can be sequenced to allow students to find their own way into a text and to move towards closer reading strategies that foster and developthe various skills of analysis. A few basic writing to read strategies include the following:

- writeyour first thoughts about the text;
- find and respond to a passage that's important your understanding of the text;
- find a passage you think is important to the author—respond to it and explain why you think it's important;
- articulate the question or problem you think the text is addressing;
- dialogue with the author;
- identify the author's prejudices (where do you find them in the text or language of the text); identify your own prejudices;
- rewrite a part of the a text in a different genre or for a different audience;
- believe and doubt an assertion the text is making;
- or, working backwards from the conclusion, map the key arguments or partsof the text and explain their function.[5]

All of these writing-to-read practices help students engage a text more closely, help them identify key elements, and offer them a means for connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating its ideas[Fitzgerald, Shanahan, 2000], as well as understanding their own relationship to the text and identifying the larger "poly-logue" the text is a part of.

Another core writing-to-learn practice is dialectical notebooks, a practice that helps students develop habits of mind that support a more authentic encounter with a text and helps them"learn to negotiate a written work and the ranges of responses that readers might have to it" [Vilardi, Chang, 2009. P. 95].There are many ways to construct a dialectical notebook depending on whether one is working in math or science, or writing to read a philosophical or literary text, or responding to an event, image, or object. The main structure of the

[5] From "Writing to Read," the Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking (2011).

dialectical notebook is dividing two notebook pages into four columns and engaging a chosen topic in four ways:

Dialectical notebooks allow students to dialogue both with themselves and a peer about what they know and don't know about a text, problem, or concept and arrive at new place of inquiry or understanding. As one student commented about engaging the practice, "My experience dialoguing with peers was really helpful and informative. They saw things I didn't see in a text which helped me take my own ideas further, helped me find deeper meanings in the passage, and also form new thoughts. It helped me read more carefully—notice language I hadn't" (L&T 2014).[6]

A final example of a writing-to-learn practice is what Peter Elbow in *Writing with Power*has named*loop writing*. Loop writing describes a strategy that develops and balances "both control and creativity" through writing about a specific topic from a wide array of perspectives or angles that call for different modes of thinking or rhetorical strategies [Elbow, 1981].Loop writing is an excellent way to help students engage a single topic from a wide angle of perspectives, discover what they already know, and begin to generate new thinking, language, and questions about a topic, event, or problem. Students engage a series of brief focused free writes about the topic that include first thoughts, narrative writing (telling a story connected to the topic); they might writea dialogue between two persons or authors; create a portrait or a scene; write a letter to an author; or vary the audience they think an author is writing for, among other options. Asking students to engage varied writing prompts that call for different rhetoricalstrategies and structuresaids them in actually thinking differently about a topic from multiple perspectives—first by writing broadly and creatively through different modes of thinking, and then by honing in and re-shapingthis initial writing to write something more focused and analytical. Brief writing-to-learn practices in the form of a series of focused free writes or "loops' are ultimately a means of extending and deepening students' knowledge; theyalso act as a powerful tool for content specific learning in all disciplines, giving students the power to develop their own disciplinaryunderstandings and perspectives [Sperling, Freedman, 2001].

Beyond the various forms of sustained and attentive in-class writingactivities, both performance and collaborative learning are also invaluable aspects of what makes the L&T experience so formative for students. Students are always reading and engaging with texts through writing, but in L&T they never just read a text alone at home and then return to class to have the professor tell them what

[6] It's important to note that student comments are collated from evaluations they complete at the end of the three weeks. Evaluations cover multiple aspects of the program—readings, workshop practices and activities, events, and especially their own reading and writing.

they should have knowledge of, a common practice of lecture and didactic learning.[7]Instead, students work together in the classroom to bring texts to life, working with them in a variety of creative ways: performing them; turning a philosophical text into a dialogue or play; developing an oral position statement to represent a particular interpretation through the analysis of a play's dialogue; or, writing a poem from a scienceor economic text's discipline-specific language to help them familiarize themselves with the language and to make the language their own, a necessary precursor to using the language appropriately in their own writing and research. Performing a text involves "text rendering," a term that refers to a way of "speaking about" a text by performing the *actual*language of the text aloud in a variety of ways. As Mark Sample, a professor of Digital Studies, notes, "reading aloud—reading *out loud*—is in turn one of the most powerful ways of rereading. It's active, performative, and engaging, an incredibly rewarding strategy for understanding difficult texts"[8].

Similarly effective when working to deepen critical reading and thinking practices, are collaborative learning activities. By working in small groups of various sizes, students enter into productive dialogue with one another and take responsibility for their own ideas, perspectives, and learning processes. Kenneth Bruffee attributes the importance of this kind of peer work as helping students to "maintain authority over the knowledge they have constructed": they learn to ask questions and respond to their peers' who frequently have different viewpoints. Through regular work with peers, students learn to sharpen their analytical skills by being exposed to different points of view; they learn too to "depend on one another rather than depending exclusively on the authority of experts and teachers' [Bruffee, 1999]. Once students have engaged a text in a variety of ways, faculty then facilitate larger discussions that arise out of the students' collaborative work and the writing they've done in relation to an idea, issue, or text. Throughout this process, students read their writing aloud, thus workingsimultaneously on the important skills of presentation and engaged listening.[9] Engaged listening asks students to quickly note what they've heard after listening and then say it back to the writer or reader before entering into further dialogue—to ensure students

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[7] In fact, writing to learn strategies are the antithesis of the lecture format in which students are mostly passive receivers of knowledge and speak little in the classroom to ask questions, discuss ideas, or offer their own critical perspectives.

[8] samplereality.com 2011

[9] Engaged listening often involves taking notes on what a listener hears to be able to say it back to the writer, thus affirming what they've heard before adding to it, challenging it or asking a question in relation to it. "Say Back" is one of several ways of responding to other's writing that is read aloud, as well as a method to respond to drafts of essays.

have listened accurately and can re-articulate their understanding. Discussion occursthen not just between student and teacher, but student-to-student. In this process, students, in turn, become excited—even inspired—as they realize that the serious task of decoding and understanding difficult issues and material is possible through their own individual and collaborative efforts.

L&T also works with students to foster in them the importance of understanding their own learning and thinking processes. It is well known that students who have an understanding of their own learning processes are better able to revise their thinking, manipulate and communicate their ideas more accurately and sustain the rigors of prolonged inquiry. Faculty foster this awarenessby asking students to engagein what is called metacognitive thinking or writing—a practice that is commonly called “process writing,” that is, “using writing to step back from an activity and assess how that activity is going” [Vilardi*,* Chang, 2009. P*.* 53]. This kind of writing enables students to hold themselves accountable for the discoveries they make over the course of the work they do. Since they have a written record of much of their thinking, they can begin to identify where they themselves are struggling with an idea, closing their thinking down too quickly, or where their own thinking begins to wallow in feelings or belief rather than critical thought. Through process writing they are able to recall the mental processes that occurred while they wrote and then repeat or change those processes depending on what they hope to rethink, revise. As one student reflected on her own writing process:

> I learned to allow myself to write without thinking about the stiff formula of the essay I learned to write in high school. I learned I can explore my ideas in an essay and that everyone’s writing about a passageor idea is not going to be the same. For the first time, I was pushing myself to think new ideas by making different kinds of connections and that was challenging and stimulating, though it got messy sometimes. But my thinking has flourished by writing so much and then learning to go back to rewrite(L&T 2013).

Process writing asks students to reflect on not only their thinking and writing, but how it was done, and how it might be done differently had they more time. Three generic forms of process writing are: 1) Past: How did you do what you did? A detailed report?2) Present: What is your present sense of your work? What works? What doesn’t? 3) Future: If you had more time what would you do next? All of these process writing-based questions are essential to sustaining the development of research and collaborative projects, whether during their academic careers or later in their professional lives.

Process writing can also help students reflect on who they are in the classroom, their resistance to specific material or an assignment, their role in collaborative work, or what they’d like to change about

their own habits of mind or learning processes."It [process writing] helped me" as one student claimed, "to understand my thoughts and feelings better, to be more sure about who I am in the class. I had never thought about this in a productive way before. I only compared myself to others."[10]Gaining theability to be critically self-aware of themselves as learnersenablesstudentsto view themselves more accurately and develop more conscious models of learning, which they can then return to when they find themselves struggling academically. Becoming critically self-aware as a learner also aids them in applying these same skills to other areas of their lives.

The Language & Thinking Program curriculum itself isdeveloped under the rubric of what arecalled *Enduring* Questions. Enduring Questions are questions to which no single discipline, field, or profession can lay an exclusive claim. In many cases they predate the formation of the academic disciplines themselves. Examples of former L&T themes which were developed under an enduring question rubric include "Boundary Conversations," "Monuments and Monumentality: Memory, Culture and Otherness," "Being Human: 54 Thought Experiments' and most recently, "What Needs to Be the Case for Things to Be Otherwise."For Socrates, it was clear that we learn more effectively when we pursue questions and seek the answers ourselves. Students in the L&T program pursuequestions that arise from their collaborative engagement with the L&T theme andwith questions around that theme that connect to the worlds they live in, that help them think about who they are, who they want to be, and what knowledge is. As one student observed in describing the program, "L&T is a discussion and writing intensive workshop for first-year students to think about their place in the world while preparing for the college class/work environment. It makes you think about how you learn things' (2014). And knowledge, as Socrates reminds us, cannot simply be poured, like water, from one large container into an emptier one [Plato, 1993. P. 175d].The acquisition of knowledge requires active engagement with the language and ideas of oneself and others.

Engaging students in questions through multiple disciplines and genresalso helps them understand the value of interdisciplinary learning and thinking—they understand that a question, an idea, can and *ought to be*pursued across multiple disciplines and genres, that the arts are no less critical in their discussion of justice than philosophy, political studies, or anthropology, that an interdisciplinary approach yields a far richer inquiry-based learning process.A typical L&T anthology includes texts (and images) from Literature and Poetics, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, and Social Sciences, fromMusic, Visual Art, and Architecture, from Politics, History, and Religion, and from the Natural, Physical and Formal Sciences. And while the anthol-

[10] Smolny student participating in the L&T Program.

ogy comprises the core curriculum of the L&T Program, students also attend guest lectures and music performances, see films, visit museums, and engage other cultural activities as well. Buildings, parks, sculptures, maps, museums, all invite students into dialogue with history, culture, social and civic life, and the questions of what history is, what knowledge is, and what's valued and maintained as knowledge—that the life of the mind is not meant to be limited to classroom experience but to be *lived* and experiencedin a community. As Jonathan Becker points out, educators are turning to liberal arts education because they recognize and "understand that contemporary modes of thinking and the demands that the cotemporary marketplace puts on students require them to move beyond the constraints of rigid disciplinary structures' [Becker, 2014].The Language & Thinking Program's multidisciplinary curriculum exposes students to this crucial awareness at the very outset of their college careers.

The culminating work of the Language & Thinking Program is not an exam, a required demonstration of mastering specific content, but an essay in the humanist tradition—inthe tradition of Montaigne, Emerson, Adorno and others—and is developed from the writing students have done on a daily basis throughout the program. The essay is driven by a question narrowed from the larger L&T theme and engages texts and ideas they've grappled with in their group. A crucial aspect of the essay'swriting is that it exhibit*thought-in-action*, or*thinking*, on the page. Instead of merely presenting the ideas of others, the paper asks the students to explore their question from multiple perspectives, disciplines, and genres to deepen their own understanding of what the question and its answers might entail. Asked how his sense of himself had changed as a writer over the three weeks in the program, one student wrote:

> My sense as a reader had the most drastic change, and I believe that my change in reading directed my sense of change as a writer and thinker. Reading and writing was at the base of everything we did. Learning how to analyze a reading in depth helped me to think of better ideas and write in a different way than ever before because I cared more about my ideas. I spent more time with them. (L&T 2014)

Instead of feeling as though there is a "big research paper" lurking at the end of the program, students become excited to revisit and revise the thinking they've been doing throughout the duration of the program, refining and further exploring their own questions, working through a series of revisions and meeting in small groups to respond to each other's writing, as well as meeting with the professor one-on-one. These final papers, often accompanied by a shorter reflective piece of writing, are frequently significant pieces of writing that students return to as they progress in their academ-

ic pursuits, returning to them again and again to find the seeds of their initial intellectual interests.

The rationale behind creating a writing-based approach in the Language & Thinking Program is to empower students through immersing them in a variety of experiences that involve critical reading and writing, while also stimulating a variety of cognitive processes that strengthen the learning process. In recent years, there have been a number of studies on the relationship between writing and cognition, particularly the relationship between writing by hand and brain processes. Writing by hand integrates three distinct brain processes: visual (seeing what is on the paper); motor (using fine motor skills to actually form letters and words); and cognitive (recalling and remembering the shapes and meanings of letters and words) [FYI Living, 2011].Charles Bazerman also positsthat "writing extends beyond a mastery of signs, forms, and procedures for language manipulation to the gathering and giving of shape to communicative impulses and thoughts, potentially in dialogue with all one has previously thought, read, and written" [Bazerman, 2011]. In other words, through engaging students in active writing, in active language making, one also engages them in a range of complex cognitive functions—responding to one's immediate environment, drawing and synthesizing past information, and engaging various language processes. It helps them begin to understand the connections between language and thought, as well as their limitations.

In a recent report from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Carnegie Foundation, working with Vanderbilt University, sought to answer the following questions about the relation of writing to reading:

- A. Does writing about texts enhance student reading comprehension?
- Does teaching writing strengthen students' reading skills?
- Does increasing how much or how frequently students *write* improve how well they *read?*
- The foundation's findings, as outlined in *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing can Improve Reading*, demonstrates that writing does indeed improve reading comprehension by "helping students make connections between what they read, know, understand, and think" [Graham, Hebert, 2010]. Writing to read also "nurtures an expanded sense of self, and a greater capacity for presence and engagement," even as it helps students recognize the assumptions, allusions, and motivations of their texts. As noted by the U.S. National Commission on Writing, "If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to

> someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write" (cited in[Ibid. P. 2]).

There is strong theoryalso that the use of writing-to-learn practices by faculty well-trained in their use improves students' mastery of non-cognitive skills, most particularly academic behaviors, academic mindsets, motivation and engagement[Farrington et al., 2012].Students who have participated in the Language and Thinking Program articulate significant growth in their motivation and academic behaviors: their ability to collaborate with others, to assess their own role in the classroom; to persevere through confusion and ambiguity as they readand write about challenging texts, and their willingness to take intellectual risks and engage new ideas—all necessary skills needed to succeed in college and university. Describing her own growth in the program, one young womanwrotepassionately about her experience:

> I learned how to communicate my ideas in a classroom setting. I finally wasn't afraid to express what I actually thought because I had thought about my ideas in writing and with others. I was asking my own questions and developing my own ideas instead of just taking the texts at face value andwriting essays and using quotes just to back up the author's ideas. I feel I am much more confident as an intellectual—like my thoughts are actually interesting, original and useful. I felt like I was finally challenged in a way that made me want to think about new ways of understanding the world. (L&T 2014)

Ultimately, the goal of the Language & Thinking Program is to introduce students to what it means to participate in an intellectual community, to participate in a classroom culture that is student-centered and driven by a love of learning, and to begin to understand what it means, and what the responsibilities are, to be actively engaged in learning. As one Russian student noted of the Language & ThinkingProgram's workshop atmosphere, "it helps to open students, their abilities and interests' (2014), and it does this because at the heart of theworkshop atmosphere is the liberal arts tradition offostering*active*inquiry in the classroom, inquirythat acknowledges, empowers, and respects the struggle, surprise, and processesthat learning involves.

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