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Reflecting Upon Composition: Breaking Free of Structure

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In this essay, I propose to test the validity of the open-ended writing process as described by Peter Elbow in his excellent book, “Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process.” Breaking free from the boundary of structure, and engaging the mind in the process of thinking, my hope is that I will be able to experience the birth process of an idea, and then enjoy the journey as that idea develops and matures until it bursts forth as a completed, thoroughly explicated thought. Risking failure – a failing grade – is what is at stake, yet, despite my anxiety and anticipation of that risk, I feel compelled to explore this process, and to find out whether or not this approach can relieve burden writers, myself included, express when struggling to complete any type of academic writing assignment.

“The open ended writing process is at the opposite extreme from the direct writing process. It is a way to bring to birth an unknown, unthought-of piece of writing – a piece of writing that not yet in you. It is a technique for thinking, seeing, and feeling new things. This process invites maximum chaos and disorientation. You have to willing to nurse something through many stages over a long period of time and to put up with not knowing where you are going. Thus it is a process that can change you, not just your words” (Elbow 50) .

Childhood writing has always been of keen interest, and has been my focused study for the past six years. Although not an educator by trade or a professional writer by any means, writing in general, has held a special place of honor and been a point of great pleasure – and – of intense discontentment. Writing and the basic skills associated with it, be it the mechanics or the actual storytelling aspect, has remained a constant companion and friend. Critical writing and analysis has been the demon crouching upon the shoulder. Both aspects of writing, both styles and both types, have been necessary companions to me over the ensuing years, and through time, through experience, and through application, I have learned to come to terms with the requirements of writing for pleasure as well as for academic assignments.

Not so, thirty years ago, when after what was a humiliating experience in a college English course. Faced with the challenge of learning how to write a properly formatted essay, I found myself face to face with an instructor whose approach to writing consisted of one method alone – writing dry and dull research papers. This instructor refused to accept any kind of writing except for ones formatted to his exacting standards. His rigid and formatted research essay allowed little room for freedom of expression, for genuine experience, and for personal reflection. The instructor behaved more like an Army sergeant who drilled format into his students, and critically analyzed every word, every phrase, and every sentence written during the class. The purpose of the class – as explained – was to learn how to write college-level essays. The method employed and the outcome experienced served only to discourage the students from ever wanting to pursue any kind of writing be it original, expository, or exploratory.

For me, that particular course turned what was once an enjoyable pursuit (creative writing), into the monster in the closet – the feared enemy, with the constant threat of “less than perfect” performance, and the knowledge of an inability to measure up to an impossible standard. In every course after this one, the fear of writing a poor paper loomed over me, and after a time, became a crippling terror. No matter how well I performed in class, on quizzes and tests, and in classroom discussion – the required writing of one or more essays was always the death knell for my course experience.

One summer as I was thinking backward to a time when I first enjoyed writing, I remembered fondly how I used to make up stories to share with friends. In 9-10th grades, I belonged to a small writing circle where we would create stories (mini-novels) that would then be read at weekly meetings.

Our stories ran the gamut of young girl romance novels to poetry collections and even children's stories with illustrations. I loved getting together to listen to my friends read their newly created chapters. We would listen, and then offer suggestions on how we thought the story could be improved. Sometimes, the suggestions were helpful, other times they were discarded honestly but with fond appreciation. For me, writing was a coping mechanism, a way to express deep thoughts and the awkward emotions associated with becoming a young woman. It also served as a way for me to hide from the pain of my childhood experiences, and often, allowed me the forum to pour out raw emotions and delicate issues that were too complex and complicated for my young adult mind to handle.

Some time in between the sweet innocence of adolescence and the hard cold reality of a college classroom, my once childlike joy of writing creative stories and the free expression of my imagination was hindered in favor of the stricter and regimented approach considered critical for college success. I have no doubt that my first year college English teachers sincerely desired to prepare me and their other students for the task of writing good college essays, and as such, their dedicated efforts to train their students in the art of proficient format writing took precedence (Teaching Composition). Their emphasis upon mechanical reproduction soon replaced any passion I had of natural expression. My fairytale focus, my personal reflection, and my subjective interpretation fell to the wayside, as I was set to the task of creating well-ordered, well-designed, and well-executed essays.

As I moved from high school into college, I assumed that I was prepared for my English courses and the demands of college writing projects. My classes from high school were sufficient preparation, I thought, and while I was not an "A" student; I survived high school, and scored well enough on entrance exams to enroll in English honors courses. In my view, all English courses were synonymous with arduous writing assignments, constant critical thinking exercises, and page after page of sentence diagramming. Essays were not my favorite, and when they were assigned, groans and moans echoed from within me – rarely did I look forward to a writing assignment. At the most, I dreaded the task, I feared the evaluation, and I loathed the anxiety generated through the entire process.

Uncertain as to why I was among those young writers who felt alienated and disenfranchised with the writing process, it was not until I actually understood that the method used – an overly strict approach to writing instruction – was the vandal (Downs and Wardle 556). It was not until I took a break between college, leaving one school for another, switching from one major to another – that I actually came to learn how to write for enjoyment and no longer feared the job of essay writing. Thanks in part to a seasoned writing instructor, a creative poet, and editor, I found that I could enjoy writing, and that there was a place for personal input and reflection. As I became more liberated with my writing style, and took chances – expressing my views as well as letting go of past negative emotions tied to the writing experience – I came to appreciate the writing process and the journey one follows from creative thought to freedom of expression.

Finally, freed from the shackles of those bland format-writing courses, I came to value the role of composing essays. Moreover, I came to appreciate reading great writing, and I found that I enjoyed studying the works of professional writers, those who dared to create and express themselves persuasively through the written word. For a brief moment in college, I actually considered studying English Literature with the intention of becoming a college professor. I started down that road, but time and money, prohibited the completion of my Masters degree in English (my first attempt).

I gave up all hope of becoming an English teacher until many years later when I had the opportunity to teach my child at home. My son, then age 10, was struggling to develop in public school. He was suffering academically and personally in the classroom even though he was considered gifted academically. By his 5th grade year, the problems at school had come to a head, and home schooling had become an option. I had not really considered it seriously, but when I saw how poorly my son was doing at school, and the on-going behavioral problems associated with his giftedness/inequity in the classroom, I knew that something radical had to be done. Once I made the decision to home school him, I expected the transition from public school to home school to be simple and straightforward. Armed with the required curriculum, graciously donated by the school's administrator, I felt that I had everything necessary to complete the school year. Little did I know that the problem was not so much with the environment, but rather the issue at hand was the curriculum and teaching method used in the traditional classroom setting.

Once I began to review the curriculum given to me, I quickly surmised the problem. I read the 5th grade textbook for Social Studies, and struggled to comprehend what was being said. I tried to answer the “discussion questions” only to find that I missed every one of them. I was not able to figure out what the correct answer was from the way the question was written. Furthermore, the answers I gave – legitimate and with corresponding reference to pages within the chapter – indeed were correct. It only took me about an hour before I ditched the textbooks, and began searching for something that made more sense.

It was not until I began the process of teaching my own child at home, that I realized just how inadequate the current curriculum was, and how desperately I needed something different, something more tangible that would teach him what I thought was necessary for each subject area. I jumped into the search, looking for the one program that would solve all our problems, but the more I researched curriculum options, the more frustrated I became, and the more I began to feel that uneasy sensation that I would never be able to teach my child at home.

In critically evaluating my son’s abilities, I noted the following areas of concern: lack of reading skill (basic phonics as well as pronunciation of words); inability to write a cohesive paragraph (resulting from a lack of understanding of proper sentence structure), and an overall inability to grasp critical thinking questions and exercises normally assigned to this age range (5-6th grades). Truthfully, I was shocked at the poor skill exhibited by my son when it came to English and Reading. Nothing in his previous five years in school would have given me any hint of a learning disability or inability to process language skill. In fact, my son routinely scored PHS (post-high school) on the Stanford Achievement Test for Language Arts. He scored in the top percentage on the Arizona AIMS test in Language Arts for third graders. The only question as to his academic ability occurred when he was singled out as a potentially gifted student in 1-2nd grades, but later when officially tested by the Special Education teacher, was denied admission to the school’s pull-out gifted program for English, Math and Science.

I did not understand then that the issue facing my child was centered on learning process and not squarely on curriculum. Curriculum was at fault, at the least, the public school textbooks donated to me. I knew there had to be a reason why my son could score so high on a standardized test, but fail so miserably in the classroom and with grade level materials. It seemed that there was some sort of disconnect between my son’s ability to learn, and the assessment used to scale or grade that learning. The assessments were standardized and provided a way for teachers to gauge the development of a group of students. In our case, the assessments were saying one thing, but practical experience was telling a completely different story.

In an effort to bring my son’s Language Arts ability up to 6th grade level (I had assessed him at the following levels: reading, grade 3; writing, grade 2; and comprehension, grade 1), I worked with him over the summer, drilling and using beginning elementary materials to reinforce basic concepts. My efforts proved fruitless, and rather than building up skill, I found that my son came to loath anything remotely characterized as “school” or learning. I felt that I had failed as a teacher, and more importantly, that I had let my son down by not being able to provide a better solution for his academic needs.

I was about to give up, to give in and put him back in public school, and let the professional educators find a solution to his learning gaps, when a friend introduced me to a teaching method based on the original writings of a 19th century British educator named Charlotte Mason. I knew little about home schooling methods, but my friend, a former 4th grade teacher and long-time home educator, shared with me a number of books written about Charlotte Mason and her suggestions for teaching children at home.

I read these popular books, really “how to” books based on her teaching and curriculum suggestions, and knew instantly that her method seemed genuinely “do able.” Additionally, the cost of the curriculum was minimal since it consisted solely of reading good books instead of textbooks and worksheets. Moreover, character development and habit training were included to develop discipline and focus. I was overjoyed to find such a straightforward and simple method, and I believed that using this method might be the only way to help my child learn how to read, how to write, and how to process language (critical thinking).

In my efforts to find the “best” curriculum for my child, I researched various educational methods and philosophies of education created by writers, curriculum developers, and others who felt that their particular view or method was “best.” Among the many options I studied, Charlotte Mason’s method for teaching children to love learning, and to develop a love of good books won out. The more I learned about the woman and her educational philosophy the more I knew that her method was something powerful, something intrinsic and something radically different from other curriculum available.

Mason, an avid educationalist and philosopher, believed strongly in the ability of young children to learn through exposure to beautiful examples of complex language and through the acquisition of mental and physical habit training. She believed that education was necessary for all children regardless of their race or social rank or class. Her emphasis upon using “living books” as source material is synonymous with her entire method. Often referred to casually as a “living books curriculum” by many in the home school community, it must be said that Miss Mason’s approach to language arts instruction was nothing short of intensive and proactive – and furthermore – it was in no way casual or simplified (Mason I.1).

Another term often used alongside Mason’s teaching philosophy is the concept of progressive education. While not suggesting a progressive sense as in modern vernacular, rather, her ideal was to create curriculum appropriate for children grouped by age and similar ability. Thus, in her own classrooms, she would teach children in age ranges, for example, 6-8 year olds or 9-11 year olds or 12-14 year olds. Mason had a unique ability to grasp the significance of mental development and to understand that not all children are ready for a specific level of instruction based solely upon their singular age (as in modern classrooms where typically children are no more than one year apart in age). Mason believed that children should not necessarily be segregated by age, and that by grouping children of complementary ages together, the teacher as well as the students would benefit from a collaborative learning environment.

Likewise, in her progressive school model, students matriculated through the years when they were ready to do so, and not because they had reached the next age level. In this way, students could be taught right where they were academically, and were enabled to develop the skill required for more complex learning as a natural byproduct of the methods used. When a student was ready to be matriculated, after 12 years in the progressive school model, they would have amassed the same kind of college-level education being taught by the most sought after colleges in the United Kingdom.

Miss Mason’s motto, her philosophy of education as it is described, can be summed up in one sentence: “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life” (VI.94). To Mason, education was a process, a journey that began at birth and ended at death. The student never stopped learning, and never lost the ability to learn. She railed against traditional schools, rote memorization, and strict standards that depleted enthusiasm for learning, and reduced the student’s entire education to one of *pro formata exacti*. Dullness, dreariness, and distaste for anything remotely considered learning were the result. She vowed to change the way in which students learn, and developed a method that allowed students to become well-educated, life-long lovers of learning.

Besides Mason’s desire for children to read from good books – living books as she coined the phrase – she also strongly advocated other non-traditional approaches to the teaching of language arts. Specifically, Mason believed that young children were not ready cognitively to receive traditional instruction in grammar and composition. In her “programmes,” or yearly curriculum suggestions, Mason stressed teaching basic grammar and sentence structure up to grade 4. Formal grammar instruction was not to be taught until grade 7, and then more advanced grammar in grade 9. Repetitive and progressive instruction common in our modern public schools would have not been advocated or deemed necessary. Students were taught the subject collectively over 3 years rather than as we typically do now, doling out small bits and then re-teaching the concepts repeatedly in successive years.

Composition instruction was taught in a similar manner. Basic penmanship was started in Year 1. Children focused on copying letters until they were able to print them correctly. Once the alphabet was mastered, short phrases from famous poems were copied and memorized for later recall. Students continued to practice penmanship throughout their years in school, and would copy longer passages, poems, soliloquies, and other memorable items – committing them to paper and to memory. Writing, and the actual instruction in composition, began sometime around age 10 or year 4. Students would begin the process of learning how to narrate or tell back-stories through oral narration and drill. Once the student had mastered paying close attention to oral and silent readings, they would begin writing down their “narrations” on paper or in a copybook. This habit of writing what they read was not critiqued nor evaluated for its comprehension. Children simply wrote down what they remembered from the story they had just read or heard read to them (VI.190).

In the later years, students would begin to write reflective essays based on readings from their weekly assignments. These would have come from books on a variety of subjects: literature, Shakespeare, history, natural history, religion, philosophy, etc. As their interest developed, students could decide to write comparative essays or even argumentative essays, but rarely were they assigned such tasks.

The purpose of writing according to Mason was to encourage the freethinking and imagination of the student. The secondary benefit was to reinforce language acquisition, vocabulary and the ability to express clearly and cogently ones opinions and thoughts on any range of topics or subject matter.

The collective emphasis of language arts focused as central to her entire curriculum. Writing, copy work, dictation, memorization, and recitations formed the foundation of language structure and acquisition. Students wrote from all subjects, even in mathematics and foreign language – no subject was off-limits or considered solely unfit for composition. In sharp contrast to today's methods for teaching any of these same components of English, students are taught single subject emphasis – grammar for example, beginning in grade one and continuing on through high school. Writing is taught through instruction in format, and in learning how to compose structural elements such as sentences, paragraphs, and essays. In Mason's view, students learned the natural delimiters from reading books, and copying well-written examples into their copybooks. Students mimicked writers, using similar language and style, as they began to develop confidence in writing skill. It was not uncommon in her schools to hear year 1 or 2 students speaking the language of Shakespeare or writing poetry similar to R. L. Stevenson or Christina Rossetti. In the upper years or forms, students often studied essays that are more complex and would copy significant passages in an effort to learn how to develop their own well-worded papers.

Natural writing, therefore, developed out of an immersion in the beautiful language and masterful works found throughout the liberal arts continuum. The teaching of writing was not a consistent focus, but rather was a natural extension of the expressiveness of the student and his or her connection to a particular work. It was this connective force, in part, that gave specific emphasis to Mason's interest in the learning theory of the period. Not content simply to believe that children are blank slates, waiting to be written upon, she forged her own philosophy, which supported the idea that children were born natural learners. As such, from birth, she encouraged parents to immerse their children in the beauty of nature, in the environment of music, of language, and of art – for the exact purpose of providing a rich and varied buffet from which their minds could enjoy and engage (VI.23).

Miss Mason's approach to education was not unique to her time, though her method for teaching was something of her own device. Many of her suggestions were common to her lifetime, and were symbols of classical education. Reading good books, studying history and literature together (of the same period), and devoting time to the arts – these practices were part of what might be considered a typical British education. And, though she worked primarily with parents who taught their children at home, and also as an instructor in teacher training schools (for governesses); Mason also realized that the kind of education she espoused was selective, was only associated with the upper middle classes. This was something she was passionate about, and her efforts transformed the landscape of British public schools to include free access for all children to the same kind of education as Britain's most elect students.

Proponents of the "Charlotte Mason" method today often are characterized as individuals/parents who want to keep their children stuck in the practices of the past. The idea of children taking tea, keeping nature journals, and learning brush painting – quaint and old-fashioned – are reasons why skeptics downplay the results of such an inspired education. Truthfully, most antagonism related to home education stems from individuals and educators who distrust the method, and fear the lack of assessment about educational outcomes. The most often accusation lobbed towards parents who educate using Miss Mason's methods is "out of touch with reality and the needs of a global society."

Little actual information exists to detail whether 21st century students educated vis a vis the Mason method are better prepared for the demands of college level courses. Personal experience and testimony, mostly from parents who report successful entrance exam results, interviews, and placements in select colleges, are the norm. These, however, are not publicly reports nor are they studied en masse in an effort to suggest warranted change. My own personal testimony and experience document the success of my student, who went from being unable to write a coherent sentence (after exiting the public school system in grade 5) to earning top English scores for writing essays in college. As a parent, the transformation was noticeable after about one year using this instructive method. My student who typically ended the most basic writing assignments in tears slowly became the child who would idled away the hours writing narrations, poetry, and Shakespearean-like dramas. The transformation was complete when my son, then about age 16, told me his aunt that his favorite subject was writing. Even now, though not an English major in college, my son's most favorite subject is still writing.

How did this transformation take place, and what specific steps were involved to facilitate such a change from non-writing to fluency? The main emphasis was to facilitate writing – any kind of writing. Once, I was certain that the basic rudiments of writing were established, then and only then, did I feel that I could begin to offer instruction in actual writing technique. The long process in learning how to write naturally seemed elusive to me, and though, I had fully read and understood Miss Mason's methods and suggestions for teaching writing to her students, I simply could not get my son to write anything substantive without a great deal of prodding (and producing more tears). After a while, I gave up on the entire idea, thinking that I was doing something wrong or that my son had some type of learning disability, which prevented him from learning how to write a complete sentence.

It seemed that once I actually gave up, and allowed the process to begin to take form; my son's writing ability began slowly to develop. I learned through trial and error that for writing to develop naturally, a student (child or adult), must be allowed the time to also let go and begin to write independent of any framework or structure. This breaking free, so to speak, happened on its own. One day, I was struggling to get my son to write anything at all, and the next, he was writing several pages of story – retelling what exciting events he studied in his history text. I did not “do” anything to encourage his writing; I just let his writing come out of him as another way of expressing his thoughts on the subject. In fact, I actually said these very words – just write what you are thinking of saying to me (orally). Once my son realized that all I wanted from him was for him to write down his thoughts on his reading assignment for the day, the rest *just happened*. In time, and with some structured teaching, we transitioned from writing narrations (telling back) to more complex essays whereby I might pose a question or ask him to elaborate on a specific point. The essay developed along the same lines – without much effort, and without much difficulty.

There is something to be said about letting go, about letting the process take shape and about taking pleasure in the journey as thought transitions through the brain and connects with language to form an expressed idea. In my son's case, the process of learning how to write developed slowly over time. With less emphasis upon structure, and more emphasis on reading good quality literature, history, and so on – my son came to love learning about things, about nature, and about what interested him most. He came to love learning, and ultimately, this was the intended outcome of our home education journey.

As his teacher, I learned something powerful too. I learned that there is something to be said about letting the process work, about not getting in the way of the idea. I think this is what Peter Elbow meant when he suggested the open-ended writing process as a way to master anxiety in writing papers. I tested his idea, I tried it, and while I experienced great anxiety over letting things go, over the “chaos and disorientation” that resulted, I do think the “process” was far less agonizing than had I attempted to write a research paper the way I have for years – with stress, with frustration, and with terror-filled angst.

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