My teaching over the past several years and my observations in this article are intimately bound up with my decision to leave academia. As I came to understand that I was not looking ahead to many years of college teaching, I was increasingly compelled to ask myself what it’s all for—that is, what is the purpose of teaching and studying writing and literature at the university. I tried to discern what students need from college reading and writing, what they will and won’t take with them, what will and will not be important to them in their lives.

At the same time, working with the National Writing Project’s Making American Literatures research group during the final year of my teaching at UC Berkeley, I grappled with the notion of a tension between teaching forms and nurturing student voices. In our discussions, members argued that to gain access to further education and to success beyond school, students must learn to write in certain forms. Yet, as group members also argued, aiming all writing assignments toward mastery of those forms can silence the voices of students who don’t master them easily and students who possess forms of expression that don’t mesh well with writing school essays.

Members of the research group, teachers from widely varied educational levels and contexts, struggled with what appeared to be a strong opposition between teaching form and nurturing voice. The group questioned whether these two projects are necessarily at odds: don’t some students find their voices through learning forms? Aren’t coming into one’s voice and using form—any form—to gain access to an audience the same thing? In my own teaching, I asked myself, how can I explore and negotiate a tension between form and voice?

This essay is the story of how I changed my teaching in two junior-level literature seminars at UC Berkeley to address these questions and to get at what teaching writing in literature courses is really for, how my students responded, and where those responses took all of us. Along the way, I gained a sense that it’s fundamentally important to demystify the forms in which students are asked to write, to admit that English teachers operate and evaluate on the basis of formulae for writing, and to tease out the sometimes maddeningly mystified features of those formulae. I tried to be as explicit as I knew how about my own expectations and standards for student writing—expectations and standards with sound pedagogical rationale or not.

(Explaining those expectations compelled me to sort out which seemed grounded in reasonable goals and which did not.) At the same time, students’ frustration with the narrowness of the college-English essay pushed me to move farther beyond the standard school formulae than I ever had before. Through what became swings back and forth from very explicit treatment of form to open choice about form, I came to understand better the urgent importance and extraordinary possibility of inviting students to be present in their own writing.
Listening to College Writers

Conversations About Forms and Voices

In fall 1999, I set out to teach a junior seminar on American literature, gender, and consumer culture. I felt bewildered about deeply questioning the forms and purposes of college writing with junior English majors: weren’t they already committed to writing literary-critical essays as part of the discipline they had chosen? But I forged on. Early in the semester, I asked the students to write definitions for terms like college writing, personal writing, and essay. I did my best to explain to them the features of the essay as I understand it, and to make explicit my own standards for evaluating student essays.

My naïve expectation that the students would be firmly invested in writing college-English essays was quickly extinguished. For example, Kate defined college writing this way:

That which crushes the creativity out of your writing style and individuality. Basically, here’s a frame: use big words, fill in the blanks with an idea that’s already been addressed 8 million times, and make sure it’s in 12-point font.

Not many of the students’ responses were worded so strongly, but many expressed similar frustration.

Then I asked the students to talk in class about their definitions of college writing. Quickly, we had the basic features and distinctions up on the board. Before long, as I made clear that I wanted to hear the ugly truth, we got past polite talk to some striking honesty about their experiences. For one thing, these English majors were savvy about not just the forms, but also about the formulae that got them good grades. Almost immediately, they offered formulae for the arguments instructors wanted to see. Several students suggested in tandem that you can always begin with a thesis in the form “In Melville does X.” Further, remarked Hanna, you’ll tend to get a good grade for a thesis in this form: “It may appear at first glance that Melville means X, but a deeper look reveals that he means Y”—where Y is more subtle, conflicted, and complicated than the simple message X.

Eureka! The students had lit almost immediately on one of the features academics in the humanities most value in writing, for better or worse: addressing what’s not straightforward but rather complex and ambivalent. Alongside their savvy, the students expressed distaste for writing just to meet instructors’ expectation: it’s “disgusting,” remarked Jennie, to write only to please the teacher. They also registered the awkwardness and artificiality of writing for an audience of one—the teacher—but phrasing their argument to mask that: not writing, we laughed, “Dear Anne-Marie.”

The other truth that emerged from the series of classroom discussions was that most of these students defined the college essay as a severely limiting form. Over and over, they spoke in terms of what you’re not supposed to do in college essays: you’re not supposed to use the first person because it’s too personal and because “mere students” lack the authority to make “I” statements, particularly about literature that’s already been studied by scholars. (After saying that you haven’t got the authority to use the first person, instructors then ask you to make a strikingly original argument about a Shakespearean play that has been discussed for centuries.) In his written definition, Chris characterized college writing as writing with “no grammatical or syntactical errors.” The topics are limited; the style is limited to a formal, academic, and verbose one (“the discourse,” one student called it); the language is limited; the form is limited. Calvin suggested that college instructors forbid the use of the first person because it might disrupt the process of “standardization,” the purpose of writing instruction.

This sense of limitation was strongly echoed among the members of a second junior seminar in spring 2000, this one focused on Edith Wharton. In this class, I first asked the students to list valuable skills, if any, that they gain from writing college-English essays. But the conversation quickly ranged to frustration with instructors’ arbitrary, varied, and sometimes infuriatingly implicit and unprincipled expectations, including the expectation that students both adhere to rigid forms and put their souls into their writing. Explaining his frustration, Colin exclaimed, “They put you in a strait jacket, and then they say ‘fly’!” Instructors’ exhortation to “put more of yourself” into your writing, suggested Ashkan, becomes just one more paralyzing constraint.

Before we got to these expressions of frustration, the students did list useful skills to be gained from writing college-English essays, and I wrote them on the board:

- Making effective written and spoken arguments
- Being clear and explicit; stating some thing in a way that other people will understand
- Writing in any structure
- Becoming highly observant of detail
- Learning to hear and to sort through others’ criticism of your work.

My immediate response to this discussion was to lean even harder on myself to become explicit about my own expectations for student writing, offering formulae for thesis statements, paragraphs, the introduction, and explication of evidence. As the
students forcefully argued, mystifying the formulae that are in operation does not make the essay form less limiting. It just paralyzes student writers.

Toward the middle of the junior seminar on Wharton, I began to hold small-group discussions with students on their writing experiences. From these discussions, a more nuanced view of writing emerged. The students also shed light on my original question about a tension between form and voice.

Strikingly, several students described how practicing form strengthened their voices. In response to my question about memorable or useful writing experiences, Jane remarked that it was writing in the strictest, least personal of forms, a scientific paper, that enabled her to come out and say what she wanted to say in English papers:

I had a field project in a biology class... It actually helped me with my English papers, because they kept hammering into our heads, “Be clear.” We don’t want any of “Oh, you know, it’s a bright sunny day.” We don’t want any of that. Just get to the point. And that helped me a lot in my English papers because that kind of cleared my head—OK, what’s the point?

Joe, who had told me that his ambition was to become a pastor, spoke eloquently about the power of a voice “well-crafted” through practice in writing.

I was having this thought in class today as I listened to [Bharati] Mukherjee lecture. She speaks so carefully and acutely and without seeming hardship... I’m sure that’s from years and years of writing short stories, reading fiction, knowing the language so well! And so as an older woman, able to speak to a class, she’s able to say her mind very clearly, and she can say in an hour what it would take me thirty hours of intense study to say about a text. And so to bring that out into life would be one of my goals. I don’t know exactly what I’m going to do, but I know that I’ll be a voice. And so for my voice to be something that’s as well crafted as hers is the most important thing to me about what I’m doing now. Who knows, I could end up being a pastor, and do I want to be in church talking to my congregation and using a thirty-minute sermon where I have all these fuzzy ideas where nobody knows what I’m talking about, or do I want to spend thirty minutes touching their hearts and really penetrating into their lives? And I think that strikes at the importance of what we’re doing here. I don’t know—I think the essay form is a way of cultivating that craft, and it’s been tried and true for a very long time, and I have problems with it, but it is something that is a discipline and that will get us to that point.

Joe also suggested that being compelled to rigorosity by “staying close to the text” in writing English papers has made his writing better, giving him a “frame” on which to hang his own thinking: “When I got to Berkeley, I was very thankful for an awesome teacher who recognized that I had a lot of creativity and wanted to create my own ideas, but recognized that I also needed to be articulate—and I also needed to be humbled.”

Even further, Steven suggested that writing literary-critical essays in particular, far from excluding or standardizing the personal, serves a deep personal function:

For me, what I enjoy is writing about literature and interacting with it on such an analytical level. Especially looking at situations of characters, the choices they make and how they end up... It is not really applicable to my life, but it is in a way. You get something personal from that. Not like a lesson, but kind of like a lesson... So, you know, it’s hard to separate it from your life.

Steven implies it’s not only possible, but actually irresistible to connect literary analysis with one’s own life in school writing.

On the other hand, students spoke vehemently about how being required to use school forms alienated them and shut them down. Melinda talked about her experiences of writing instruction at the junior college she attended before transferring to UC Berkeley: “When we did those stupid in-class timed things, it was all about structure... and that was very alienating to a student who doesn’t get it, because immediately you shut down and you just think, fine. I’ll just write whatever.” Talese responded that she, too, simply checked out when the form became too restrictive in her junior-college classes: “If you’re not driven, or you don’t have confidence—I would be close to just giving up.” The students in the small-group discussions argued forcibly that without moments of relative freedom—freewriting or “creative” assignments—many will become so alienated that that they will permanently absolve themselves from school writing and writing in general.

At the same time, both Talese and Melinda acknowledged that learning forms is important. Talese noted that she was grateful that teachers had pushed her to overcome her lack of confidence with the five-
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paragraph essay, placing her in AP English despite an apparent lack of competence in that form. When the group discussed the usefulness of freewriting that allows a natural "flow" of thought, Talese concluded that it’s the "clarity" that results from such flow that’s valuable: “With stream-of-consciousness, there's generally clarity at the end. But through it, it's kind of a working process, isn't it, where everything's kind of pouring out of your brain. But you need the form also. In order to learn, you need both.”

In my inquiry about teaching form and giving free reign to student voices, these small-group discussions pushed me to a similar conclusion: in order to learn, you need both. As the students argued, teachers need to be very explicit about their expectations for form. It's only fair, and it saves students paralyzing guesswork. Also, through acknowledging that different teachers have different formulae and by giving students practice in various forms, teachers can frame form not as a universal, mysterious set of restrictions handed down from on high by the god of school essays, but rather as a set of tools available for getting something across to an audience. Teachers can frame form as the means, not the end, of writing. And, as Melinda argued, by giving students choices about form, teachers can also accommodate a variety of learning styles, "especially in high school, when you're trying to figure out what kind of a writer you even are. I think variety's going to help more kids be more successful."

What Do You Most Want to Say, and How Do You Want to Say It?

In fall of 1999, in the American literature, gender, and consumer culture course, I set out with my question about what students will say in honest discussions about form and with my intention to be especially explicit about formulae. Yet, by midterm, compelled by students' frustration at the constraints of the English-class-essay form, I swung in the other direction, giving students enormous latitude in their work, asking them what they most needed to say in relation to the coursework, and asking them to choose or invent the form in which best to say it: written, visual, oral, or musical. My notion was to get them to begin with what they cared about, and therefore to feel motivated to make rigorous use of form to get that across. (I should note up front that this sort of assignment may be most fruitful in a course that already includes visual or musical works.) Below is the assignment I handed out at midterm.

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### English 100, Assignment 2

Think about what you most want to say about anything in the course so far, and consider in what form or genre you can best say it.

Don't panic.

I'm interested in what you have to say about anything that we've read or that has come up in the course so far: [Here I list all the texts for the course, class discussions, and classmates' work that they've read or heard read aloud.]

You may choose or invent any form or genre that suits your purposes. You may also choose your audience: Me? The class? The readership of a publication? An internet audience? Your younger sister? The people on Sproul Plaza?

I’ll suggest a guideline of 3–6 typewritten pages.

I'll ask you to hand in with your piece a brief, informal statement about what you set out to achieve: that is, to get across to an audience and to learn as a writer.

This is not a bizarreness contest. If what you most want to do is write an essay interpreting a literary work, go for it. Nor is this a contest about who can spend the most time on the project. I encourage you to budget the same amount of time you would spend producing a short essay. In fact, this is not a contest at all. I don't grade on a curve, and I'll evaluate each project on its own terms.

I expect that many of you will be worried about your grades. Here are a few criteria that I'll use to evaluate your work: 
1) Meaningfulness and clarity: I'd like to be able to figure out what you're trying to get across, or what effect you wish the piece to have on the reader. 
2) Voice: I'd like to encounter genuine responses, genuine expressions of something that matters to you. 
3) Effective use of the form you choose or invent. If it's an essay, does it have a strong thesis? If it's a lyrical poem, do you avoid clichés and choose evocative images?

One-paragraph proposal due in class [a week and a half or so before the project deadline]. Briefly describe what you'd like to get across to your reader and gain as a writer and how you'll go about it.

Final projects due [date]. I'll make arrangements for students to read excerpts and/or present visual projects to the class. We'll handle this based on what forms you choose and how you prefer to present.
When I read the assignment aloud and then asked for questions, I was faced with a set of blank stares, the kind that usually mean students are harboring resentment, confusion, or alarm. "What do your blank stares mean?" I asked. "Are you feeling resentful, confused, or alarmed?" After more hesitation, students responded with all three. "What do you really want us to do here?" they asked. "How will you really evaluate our work? Won't people who put the most time in or do the weirdest project get the best grades?" One student even questioned whether I was qualified to evaluate "creative" work.

By the time the students handed in their project proposals, their anger and anxiety had begun to shade into excitement. Many students—many more than for a usual essay—turned up in my office hours to discuss their ideas, apparently out of anxiety and excitement. As part of my effort to alleviate anxiety about grades, I asked them to assign themselves grades and write a brief explanation of the grade to hand in with their work. While I reserved the power to give final grades, the students' justifications ultimately made very interesting reading on what they set out to achieve.

The week when students presented and responded to these projects was the most marvelous of my UC Berkeley teaching career. Far from having to lean on students to present, I had difficulty managing class time to fit in all of those who wanted to speak to the class on what they'd done. These are a few of the projects that we saw, read, or heard excerpted that week:

- Wenchi's brilliant rendition of Cholly Breedlove's section in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, rewritten in the style and voice of Theodore Dreiser. At one stroke, Wenchi unpacked the difficult meanings of this section in Morrison and lampooned Dreiser's clumsily explicit prose. ("There are moments in every childhood when the child approaches the distinct boundary separating childhood from blossoming adulthood. Very frequently, these moments of realization are spurred by or involve a newly developed consciousness regarding the distinction between the sexes....")

- Malcolm's multimedia project, also inspired by *The Bluest Eye*, as well as work we'd done with advertising: videotaped interviews with African American women about their own self-images in relation to the media; a collage of media images showing the prevalence of a light-skinned, straight-haired ideal for black women; and an open letter to "magazine advertisers" arguing that they need to "present black models of various shades so young black girls grow up with a broader definition of beauty."

- At the other end of the political spectrum, Michelle's fictional dialogue in which a lingerie company executive defends the practice of using idealized images of women to sell lingerie.

- Kristin's heartfelt letter to her mother, asking her to stop pressuring her to live up to a thin, glamorous media ideal of womanhood.

- Tracy's astute and hilarious parodies of print ads, including one that used over-the-top sexual images of women to market blueberries. Tracy had struggled unsuccessfully with writing a conventional essay earlier in the course, but her ad parodies were among those projects most admired and discussed by the class.

- Chris's photographs in which he posed male friends to imitate the gestures of female models in published advertising, noting the charming and disturbing effects, and exploring the differences between ideas of feminine and masculine "sexiness" for both gay and straight viewers.

- Jennie's group of poems about her childhood, including one called "Trenzas," about the meaning of braids: "If I could have one wish/ I would wish for trenzas/ Long silky ropes that swing/ Below my waist/ Queztalcoatl sashaying down my back...."

- Lacey's installation piece, which demonstrated that "voice" can be a complicated, questioning thing. The viewer sat on one of two stools. On the shorter stool, painted black, you listened through headphones to a soundtrack of tribal music from Nigeria. On the higher stool, painted white, you listened to European baroque music. Meanwhile, you watched a series of slides of disturbing images: a dead horse strung up on a line, meat, women of various races dressed in exoticized, quasi-tribal costumes and posed for the camera. The project provoked this viewer to think about how the objectified exotic looks from different cultural "seats."

After the readings, presentations, and time for students to peruse the gallery, I asked them each to choose one project and write a brief response to it. Later, I also asked each student to write about the experience of
producing this project, comparing it to writing a conventional essay.

In short, almost across the board, students worked harder than they ever had on conventional essays, found ideas and arguments that mattered to them, and—perhaps most compellingly—treated one another as artists whose work deserved interpretation and critique on its own terms, rather than a superficial measuring against teachers’ yawn-worthy, irrelevant standards for form. As much as they were motivated by writing about what actually interested them, they seemed exhilarated by the risk and pleasure of using forms unconventional for literature classes. At the same time, many students set out to make arguments, using those features of the essay form they’d practiced before to create the effect that they desired: Malcolm’s open letter, for example, was concise and argumentative with a clear thesis.

This was the farthest I’ve ever gotten on the road to students treating one another’s work as literature, as texts for the course whose forms and ideas could serve as springboards for further thought. For example, in her final project for the course, Tasha actually based her work primarily on Malcolm’s. She noted that, in the images he had chosen, idealized black men were darker-skinned than women, and she surveyed middle-schoolers about their racial and gender self-images in relation to media idols.

During the spring 2000 course on Edith Wharton, having again set out to concentrate on making form and formulae explicit, I found myself inexorably drawn back to asking what the students most needed to say, and asking them to choose or invent the form in which to say it. Again, the results were compelling. Among the students of the small-group discussions, Steven wrote a sophisticated critical essay about masculinity in Wharton, and Jane wrote a letter in the voice of one of Wharton’s characters to the tyrannical husband in the short story, teasing out Wharton’s feminist messages. Joe came to my office hours and asked with some trepidation whether he could attempt a sermon about despair and redemption based on Ethan Frome. Talesse wrote a personal essay describing how her understanding of Wharton’s novel Summer had changed from when she read it at seventeen to now, at age thirty-two, and exploring what this shift means about her own growth.

At root, I enjoyed myself more when I asked students what they really wanted to say: I looked forward to encountering their projects, their all-over-the-map priorities and styles and personalities, rather than dreading a stack of essays ground out with absent, agonized, or carefully hidden personal engagement from the people who produced them. Rather than filling up a form with words, the students found, shaped, and used the forms they needed to articulate themselves. As I told the students, I couldn’t resist having this measure of fun during my last chance to do so as a teacher at UC Berkeley.

After this paean to my students’ work, I should note the very real costs and downsides to doing “both”—to spending class time on being explicit about form and making some conventional assignments even as I opened the door wide to many forms in other assignments. First, it’s a lot of hard work for the instructor. I spent much more time conferring in office hours, responding to student proposals, and writing responses to student work than I would have with conventional essays. Second, a few students really checked out in response to the “open” assignment, produc-

ing slapdash work that they didn’t seem to care about. Of course, the chances are good that those students would have done so in response to a more conventional assignment—but the point is that freedom in form will not reach all students, and some will see it as a way out of serious work. There are more specific downfalls, as well. At the end of the fall 1999 seminar, Michelle took advantage of an open and flexible final assignment to write a virulent personal attack on me and what she perceived to be my politics. It was one of the most challenging grading tasks I’ve ever taken on. (She got a B.) But I suppose she did write about what really mattered to her.

The most serious problem remains simply that there’s only so much time to spend with students. When I spent time on multigenre projects, I spent less time training students in the forms that they’ll need for their next English course, and less time training them in the correctness they’ll need to be heard in the world and on the job. Those students who most need to practice writing correct, expository prose will not do so if they’re given a choice; who wants to struggle in an alienating form? These are serious issues, and serious trade-offs in my obligations as a writing teacher. But watching students find exhilaration and confidence in new forms and in saying what mattered to them, I found that trade-off worth making.

“To Really Lay It Down, You Have to Pull It Out of Yourself”

What has stayed with me most strongly from the past two semesters has been students’ remarks that the most important thing they will take with them from English classes into the rest of their lives is the ability to bring out what is deepest in themselves with clarity, to take that terrible risk, and to be heard and understood by someone, whether
a teacher, their classmates, or an even broader audience. As Allison said, “To really lay it down, you have to pull it out of yourself, you have to pull out things that are personal to you.” For some, the process of becoming present in their own writing, of acting as writers, requires first a release from the constraints of conventional forms. For others, that practice and that risk is grounded in a struggle with form, the process of creating what we came in the small-group discussions to call “clarity of voice,” bringing what’s hardest to bring out into the light of articulateness in a form that someone else can understand.

On the last day of the spring 2000 semester, my last day of teaching at UC Berkeley, I watched the students in my seminar on Edith Wharton present their final projects. They showed their collages and illustrations, excerpted their adaptations of Wharton as children’s stories, folktales, or Archie comics, described their parodies and alternative endings and critical arguments. Some projects that weren’t brilliantly executed were great accomplishments of another kind. A student named Jeanene, who had rarely spoken throughout the term, explained her collage that used contemporary images in a comic way to show connections and contrasts between Summer and Ethan Frome, and then hesitantly produced a poem called “Hot and Cold Ethan” (about the two books) that she had been unable to resist adding to the project. The poem was sometimes clichéd, but at times a rapsounding modernization of Wharton—and she had felt compelled to write it and read it aloud to the class.

With a baby on the way she was feeling the heat
But no matter what, she wouldn’t take to the street.

Harney was a cheater, this much was clear,
And old Mr. Royall too fond of his beer.

As she read, her hands shook so hard that the paper trembled. Reading this poem mattered to her, and therefore made her vulnerable. Recognizing her presence in the work and appreciating its humor, the class applauded enthusiastically.

Finally, Joe stood up to give his sermon. I had never seen him so shaky. He had always spoken confidently and fluently to the class, but now, standing in front of his peers, he flustered, trembled, and hunched nervously over his paper. I imagine that part of what he felt was the risk of speaking about his faith in the profoundly secular setting of a university classroom. He explained call-and-response, urging people to interject “Praise the Lord” or “Amen” as the spirit moved them. No one did. He presented a short, preemptive defense of himself as a Christian, and described the struggle of his writing:

The only other thing I would ask is that you listen to me. I am not every other Christian and don’t deserve preconceptions, good or bad. I am Joe, the guy in your English class who is shaking before you with nervousness because he is about to share something that is both personal and powerful.

Writing this sermon has been a struggle for me. I woke up this morning with a sense of incompleteness, and what began as an attempt to add the final touches to what I hoped was a polished sermon, turned into a rejection of all I had set out to do. … What I rejected was my decision to force Wharton’s characters into my idea of redemption. So, instead of preparing to give a poised delivery of a polished sermon, I spent the small hours of this Thursday morning writing what I hope is an honest flow of personal reaction to Wharton’s work. … What I’m left with then, is an attempt to present the lack of redemption provided by Wharton’s world view, and contrast this with my world view, where I find ultimate redemption.

The rest of Joe’s sermon, unlike the brilliant, literary-critical essay he had written earlier in the semester, was awkward, meager in its treatment of Wharton, and explicit in its call to Christian faith. He was honest about his failure to find the messages he was looking for in Wharton. The class applauded stiffly and politely at the end. And I understood that this experience of bringing his deepest beliefs—and his most honest view of the literature—to light in an English class was terribly important to Joe, much more so than writing his earlier essay.

As Jeanene, Joe, and each of the students read aloud that day, I oriented every fiber in my body toward the speaker, silently urging the rest of the class to do the same: I’m listening; we’re listening; we hear you. That is my most important achievement as a teacher: making it possible for students to take that terrifying risk of articulating something that matters in a form other people can understand, and showing them that they have been heard and understood. Like Joe, they only ask that we listen. If we do, maybe they’ll take that risk again.

Anne-Marie Harvey is a San Francisco freelance writer and editor. Though no longer teaching at UC Berkeley, she continues to participate in Making American Literatures, a research group affiliated with the Bay Area Writing Project focusing on innovative ways to teach writing. "Listening to College Writers" is slated to appear in a collection of essays resulting from that research.