THE WRITING CLASSROOM AS A LABORATORY FOR DEMOCRACY

An interview with Don Rothman

David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, sought out Don Rothman at the University of California Santa Cruz, who for more than 30 years has taught writing as Rothman puts it, “as if the world depended on it.” Brown was interested in exploring Rothman’s passion for linking his work with undergraduates to community engagement.

Brown: You have characterized much of your work, Don, as “aspiring to realize the promise of literacy to enhance democracy.” What kind of “democracy” do you have in mind, and how does the teaching of writing help teachers and students “to participate more fully in civic life?”

Rothman: I have a particular interest in those aspects of democracy that require us to be aware of and conscientious about the nature of persuasion. To the extent that democracy expresses our aspirations to sustain public discourse for the purpose of enhancing the public good, its health depends on nurturing certain habits of mind and skills. Over three decades of teaching writing, I have come to see quite vividly literacy’s potential to enhance democracy, especially around the intellectual and social practices that make nonviolent persuasion possible. Literacy, of course, doesn’t guarantee freedom of expression, but writing, in particular, offers opportunities for people to counter alienation, isolation, and selfishness that undermine democracy. Too bad it isn’t usually taught with this in mind.

My students, for the most part, think of persuasion as coercion and, therefore, are reluctant to embrace the challenge to write persuasively. Like the rest of us, they have been bombarded by advertising and many do not want to intrude on others’ spaces in an effort to change their minds or urge them to act in certain ways. It’s as though persuasion is an ugly word that reveals a desire to abuse others rather than an act of social responsibility that can be performed with respect, even love. I try to direct students’ attention to the humane aspects of persuasion.
Brown: Could you say more about the role of persuasion in your teaching?

Rothman: I’ve been trying to understand teaching as an effort in noncoercive persuasion. As I now see it, I want to persuade students, mostly by example, to embrace the value of generative questions and not insist only on definitive answers. I want them to think about how a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, and it often feels as though their willingness to explore this possibility depends on something like persuasion, which I keep trying to shape in the form of invitation. I want to persuade them to notice the pleasure in moving between the poles of personal experience and public discourse; the pleasure that comes from thinking with other people whose ideas fill your brain like dreams. I’ve come to assume that my students need new ways of thinking about themselves as learners in order to become more fully, thoughtful makers of the world. It’s their resistance to this, I suppose, that makes persuasion a recurring aspect of my teaching.

One widespread belief regarding persuasion is that one should never weaken one’s position by devoting much space to the other side. I can’t tell you how often my students register surprise when I suggest that compelling essays mostly focus on issues about which thoughtful people disagree, and that the substance of that disagreement should be evident in their essays. During class conversations, we often notice how our political leaders rarely express respect for others’ views that have shaped their own, and they avoid like the plague describing how they have been persuaded to change their minds by others’ arguments. To be strong, it seems, is to be constantly resolute. (Othello’s disastrous version of this: “To be once in doubt is to be resolved.”) We have almost no public models revealing how persuasion based on logic and reason can be integral to elevating our collective intelligence about crucial issues. It’s no wonder that persuasion is seen by so many as bad manners. It seems to me that democracy requires a kind of patience to listen to what others have to say and to work toward policies that are informed by diverse thinking. That means learning how to sustain other people’s thinking and not just one’s own. Writing can be really good for that.

To teach writing to enhance students’ participation in civic life is to create a space in which we reclaim the role of persuasion in our public discourse. This involves motivating students to take certain kinds of risks and making sure that they understand how
much is actually at stake in their learning to sustain conversation on issues about which we disagree. It involves a self-consciousness about how we inadvertently silence other people when we really need their insights. It also involves helping university students to reflect on how rhetoric, so often dismissed as hot air, can also be understood as the art of persuasion, which has a great deal to do with the sort of society we want to live in. The writing classroom, I’d say, is a fine laboratory for certain aspects of democracy, especially those that require us to honor individual intelligence and preference in the context of determining and protecting the larger good.

**Brown:** I have been interested in your own writing as well. You have said that “writing offers us a nonviolent way to negotiate difference, to sustain dialogue, and to honor our capacity to persuade without coercion,” and that writing gives people an opportunity “to explore what they weren’t altogether ready to say.” Does that mean that democratic deliberation centered on dialogue, not writing, is inadequate?

**Rothman:** Dialogue is always at the center of writing, so far as I am concerned. Whether we are writing to ourselves and imagining a self that urges us on, or to others, whom we also have to imagine as we compose, we write within relationships. What I have learned is that writing can be the result of generative dialogue and it can lead us back to dialogue. So many of my students are not practiced at talking in class, but they are, obviously, talking on cell phones and to friends all day. The classroom (like other public forums) has not always been a safe place to talk, and it certainly has not been a safe place to write. Many of them find that writing, especially their notes in response to readings, their in-class responses to each other’s ideas written during a five-minute pause in the conversation, and their more formal essays prepare them to more effectively enter classroom conversation. If a class works, students leave motivated to continue the dialogue both in conversation and in writing. I have to make sure to stay out of the way when they return to class expecting to share what they’ve done with these ideas since we last met. Through my open letters to the class, I make sure that my musings about our recent conversations are also available to them.

**Brown:** Open letters? How do they work?
Rothman: For many years I have written three or four letters to my class per term, usually responding to unfinished discussions or representing my own after-class meanderings that I want to share. I make copies of these letters and encourage students to write back. When they do, especially if they read their responses aloud or distribute copies of their letters, we often expand our sense of community, however temporary it is. Moreover, we get to talk about how reading and hearing letters addressed to the class enable us to listen to one another differently and to notice how we tune into each other’s writing voices. Reading aloud enables one to try on different voices and to hear oneself in the context of a group. It’s a little like catching a glimpse of yourself reflected unfamiliarly in the window of a parked car as you walk by. “That’s also me.” Students often observe that hearing someone read her prose aloud deepens their appreciation for that person and creates a bit of solidarity around how hard it can be to write what you mean. Most important, what we write shapes what we talk about, and we recognize that the texts we’re reading emerge from someone’s impulse to communicate, something I cannot assume that students have already discovered.

Brown: Please go on…

Rothman: Disagreement is always on my mind as a teacher of writing because so many of my students, for cultural, class, personal, and gender-related reasons, are afraid to disagree, especially with authorities. This means that they have to learn to resist a text, to challenge teachers, and to reject ideas that emerge during class discussions. Unpracticed at disagreeing in the classroom (surely not in their lives elsewhere!) they have to learn the codes for disagreement in the university and decide which of them they will try out. As newcomers to university culture, the task is daunting, since fluency, vocabulary, cadence, all seem to have exaggerated importance to beginners. Writing slows things down and by doing so enables students to gather their thoughts, select appropriate words, and assess what is at stake in expressing their views. Spontaneous conversation is important, but it’s clear to me that writing in the midst of a heated conversation allows many more voices to be heard in the long run.
I think of my classes as places where students can learn, with the help of writing, supportive disagreement (that sustains the conversation) and critical agreement (that links agreement to further analysis rather than simply head nodding). I have a story that illustrates one dimension of this. A deaf student in my class let me know by TTY, a machine that allows a deaf person to type a message that can be responded to in real time, that her interpreter was ill and wouldn’t be in class. What to do? We wrote back and forth until we came up with a solution. We asked class members to take turns writing on the chalkboard tracing the trajectory of the conversation. Of course, this slowed the conversation down, since we respected our scribe’s struggles to keep up. It did something else, as well. Students who had barely spoken entered the conversation. When I asked them about it they told us that they usually felt as though they were a few moments behind everyone else, and while they had plenty to say, their timing was off. On this day, the pacing and rhythm made room for their voices. Writing slowed us all down, and we benefited by having access to everyone’s intelligence. By attending to the needs of someone who is deaf, we also, quite wonderfully, helped others.

One more thing about writing and nonviolent persuasion. Most of my students remember being told that the opening line of an essay should “hook” the reader. But they never recall being taught anything about how to sustain a reader’s interest, how to invite a reader to think together with you, and how to acknowledge that something important is at stake in a piece of writing. As we explore the many possible relationships one can try to create with one’s reader, we discover how much we actually know about persuasion. As children, we are experts at using what we know about our parents’ relationship with each other to get what we want. As writers, trying to persuade readers to take their ideas seriously, students need to consult what they know about their readers, often but not always their professors. They realize that while raising their voices may persuade a younger brother to take out the garbage, or the threat of violence may work in some other context, persuasion often requires us to exercise our capacity to walk in another’s shoes.

Brown: That’s important … learning to walk in another’s shoes.
Rothman: It means being able to describe quite accurately what you disagree with, presenting respectfully the logic of a misguided argument. This is news to my students, and it transforms their understanding of citation conventions, which they come to appreciate as evidence of how ideas build on other ideas, and how nurturing our capacity to sustain inquiry sometimes requires attention to how and what other people think.

These are intellectual strategies that are alternatives to screaming, bombing, threatening, and humiliating. This is what I mean when I say that writing can enhance the effectiveness of negotiations among warring nations and hostile diplomats. When I consulted for the Kellogg Foundation and led writing workshops for Kellogg Fellows, we had a chance to explore the role of writing in community organizing, health policy management, and medical practice. Unfortunately, writing is rarely taught in schools as a tool for nonviolent persuasion or as a multifaceted activity whose effectiveness often requires us to enhance our empathy. It is rarely taught as a tool for exploring ways to live together.

In the institutes that I have led for teachers, we test writing’s capacity to help us pay attention to each other. By reading aloud unpolished and polished writing, we often learn something about how being useful to each other as individuals empowers us as professionals to make our ideas more public and to explore leadership possibilities in our communities. Teachers who write with each other during a four-week summer institute often try to re-create this space with colleagues during faculty meetings. When they can count on principals to support them, teacher-writers have led writing workshops for parents of their students and, of course, the children benefit from membership in a community that has writing on its mind.

Brown: Is it writing itself or what happens in certain writing classes that can enhance people’s involvement in democratic process?

Rothman: If I think of my beginning students at the university, I notice that they think of writing as a test. It is designed by teachers to assess their learning. (In graduate school, I dreamed that John Milton and my father were, alternately, sitting on a throne. As I approached him/them to talk, Milton handed me a list of words and said I’d be punished if I used any words that weren’t on that list. I grew very agitated and screamed out that if language were this kind of prison I’d go crazy. When I awoke, I realized that for my middle
class students at UC Berkeley and for my working-class community college night students, many Vietnam vets, writing was using someone else's words and fearing that one would be punished for getting it wrong.) These students come to see that while writing will probably continue to be a test in some contexts, it is also a way to think, to discover new ideas, to explore feelings and, importantly, to enter a public space, the marketplace of ideas.

If one thinks of writing both as a way of accessing one's inner life and of entering public life, then it can enhance our engagement with democracy. This is complicated, and I can't claim to understand it clearly enough, but sometimes we write to explore an idea or an experience that is bothering us, that requires sorting out. In the process, we discover that we need to know what others think or we are compelled to let them know what we have discovered. Mostly, we talk to friends, colleagues, and family in such cases. But at times we write our way from the personal to the public, and we produce a letter to the editor, an op-ed piece, an article for a newsletter or journal. The momentum of writing for oneself carries us out into the world. Regrettably, many teachers are, like my students, reluctant to do this sort of writing, so they are eerily silent in our public discussion about educational reform.

I want my students and the teachers with whom I work to experience that momentum from the inner to the outer. I design my classes and institutes to encourage precisely this trajectory.

Brown: What else do you want them to experience?

Rothman: I also want them to experience the momentum of going from the public to the private, to ask themselves not only, “What am I inspired to write today?” but also, “What does the world/my community need me to write today?” This, I think, is very important and very neglected in the teaching of writing, which has (understandably) focused a great deal of attention on encouraging students to narrate what is most immediately important in their personal lives. It makes sense to start with the familiar. It may also make sense to start with the narrative. But if motivation is the issue, then we shouldn’t neglect being useful in our efforts to teach writing, for being useful to others is surely motivating.

If I’m right that most students think of writing as a form of testing, then we can understand why so many high school and college graduates hate to write, and why connecting writing to democracy might seem off the wall.
Brown: I like very much something you wrote about your “authority” as a teacher:

To help them become stronger writers, indeed, involved citizens, I want them to become authorities as well. Whether I like it or even notice it, however, students have permission on their minds. Like other teachers, I want to use my authority to help them claim theirs.

How do you do that in the classroom?

Rothman: Many of my students are the first in their families to attend college. While they may be underprepared when they arrive, they work hard and often see themselves as scouts for younger brothers, sisters, and cousins, and as redemption for moms and dads in their quest to succeed. Many have chosen to major in science because they are under the misapprehension that they will not have to write in Biology or Chemistry. They know racism and poverty, but they assume that what they know will not be appreciated at the university. They assume that the areas in which they can claim some authority by virtue of 18 years of survival will be of little value in higher education.

My effort to help them become stronger writers engages a host of contradictions. I want them to use what they know about the world to illuminate our class inquiry, and I want them to become passionate researchers of others’ scholarly work at the same time. I want them to claim a level of authority as writers, and I want them to step out of the way to engage others’ work. This is a difficult dance.

Brown: Difficult dance … well put.

Rothman: Consider the student in my class on censorship who announced on the first day that she had to write something about her parents kicking her out of the house because she refused to attend church with them. She asked if she could make that her first paper instead of doing whatever I had assigned. Not wanting to get in her way, I agreed, and she submitted a long, thoughtful narrative of her rocky senior year in high school. Proudly handing it to me she said, “Now I’m ready to start your class!”

The next class meeting I returned her paper with the proposal that she delve into the scholarly work that might help her place her story against academic theory, in this case child development and religion. By accepting my challenge, she discovered, as so many university students do, that what she first thought of as only her story also belongs to a larger world, one that scholars
study and write about. When she presented her findings to the class, she also discovered peers whose experience resembled hers and who were grateful to know about the research.

I remember a young man in another class who was dumbfounded when he heard someone use the expression “blaming the victim” after we’d read Death of a Salesman. When he finally was able to speak, he explained that for most of his childhood he’d blamed his mother for allowing his father to beat her. “I never knew that others experienced that … that it even had a name,” he said. His paper on the role of tragedy in the education of a doctor reminds me that being able to see one’s experience as part of historical, economic, and social realities is a major step in taking responsibility for shaping those realities. It is also a way to claim some authority as an author without succumbing to solipsism.

In my classes, students are invited to contribute to our collective intelligence about crucial issues. They give copies of their essays to others in class; they present their research findings on subjects that have emerged from our discussions; and they struggle to retain their personal integrity as academic and scholarly conventions tug at them. We have a lot of fun asking, “Why would anyone invent a semicolon?” and “How often in the next week can you find a passive construction behind which someone is trying to hide?” But we also ask, “How can these essays that I am writing be useful to someone other than me?”

Brown: What evidence do you have that it carries over to their public lives outside the classroom?

Rothman: I don’t want this to sound quite so easy. Sure, some of my first-year students sign up to do community service and a few are active in student government. A few read daily newspapers and make sure that classmates know about rallies and teach-ins on campus. But, for the most part, when I meet these frosh, they are quite limited in their awareness of public life beyond the importance of voting. I see them as beginners, not only as writers certainly, but as citizens. I would like the ten weeks that they spend with me in a writing class to awaken their imaginations about who they are in the context of exploring who we are and can be collectively. When I ask, “How would our society be different if everyone could write with some degree of pleasure and satisfaction?” I am hoping to bridge the huge gap separating the personal from the public. When I ask students to speculate about how the essays they are writing constitute not only chapters of
their autobiographies but also chapters of our collective history, I am doing the same. It is in this spirit that I also ask why a country that prides itself on freedom of the press and freedom of speech educates so many people to be allergic to writing.

It’s difficult, of course, for me to know the real impact of my classes, but students credit their change of major to these discussions and come back years later to say how the writing class changed them.

Brown: You have expressed surprise by what you learn “working in the margins of young people’s prose….” Could you share a few examples of what you have learned?

Rothman: I have resided in the margins of students’ writing for 35 years. From this narrow perch I have learned a great deal about how powerfully marginalia can prompt students to grow and take risks and how easy it is to inadvertently discourage them. When I resort primarily to correcting errors, some of my students will thank me for paying attention to what they think is their major weakness. When I respond to the substance of their ideas, however, mostly asking questions, suggesting other ways to think and to organize their discussion, urging them to share what they’ve written in class, something much more important happens. If I write, “Our class really needs to hear this provocative idea,” or “This really helps me understand what Baldwin is getting at, and I’m grateful to you for explaining it so clearly,” something happens that often emboldens students to speak in class for the first time or ask to meet with me to continue what feels to them like a conversation.

The margins of student papers become a site for teaching. Committed to respecting how difficult it is for beginners to enter scholarly conversations, I have to confront my impatience as I scribble responses. In the margins and at the end of their essays, I try to sustain a relationship that will keep them writing and encourage them to put their ideas out in the world beyond me.

In the margins of student writing I have the chance to engage in something more than editing, something more like midwifery or coaching. From the margins I constantly confront my impulse to take over a student’s work, to shape it in the image of my interests. It’s the most humbling aspect of my job because it reveals where I am not yet adept at enacting what I aspire to as a teacher. I tell students, “You must help me to respond usefully to your writing by directing my responses, for if this isn’t a partnership I may unknowingly get in your way.”
I am also intrigued by the element of persuasion that is embedded in my teaching, as I said earlier. Committed to honoring students’ intellectual growth, which requires them to take risks, I also try to persuade them to enter spaces in which premature certainty is dangerous and expertise difficult or impossible to come by. My marginalia are most useful, I’d say, when they pose authentic questions, answers to which I can’t wait to hear.

Brown: You have asked your students over the years whether “beauty and justice should be in the same conversation” and speculated that “the desire to share beauty awakens an appetite to create justice.” Could you say more about this connection and how it might help students to participate more fully in civic life?

Rothman: Encouraged by Elaine Scarry’s provocative little book, On Beauty and Being Just, and by my presence on one of the most beautiful campuses in the world, I’ve been asking my students to consider whether beauty and justice belong in the same conversation.

My campus is full of deer. As I walk through the redwood forest I often come upon does and fawns. I usually stop to admire them, whispering, “How beautiful” to myself. A stranger comes up the path, slows as she sees why I have stopped. She walks closer to me, both of us transfixed by the presence of these lovely, delicate, agile creatures. Smiling and making eye contact, one of us says to the other, “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

Or, I am standing watching the sun set. The sky is brushed with familiar yet breathtaking, impossible reds, yellows, and blues. I whisper to myself. A stranger comes close. One of us speaks.

I recount these stories to my students. I ask them if they would feel intruded on by the stranger entering this sacred space. No, they say. It’s even better to share it. I agree.

Scarry tells us that in the presence of beauty we are de-centered. We abandon the illusion that we are the center of the universe, and we seek to protect the objects or people in whose presence we experience generosity. In the act of sharing what is beautiful, it may occur to me that everyone has an equal claim
to this experience. Like Scarry, my students and I wonder if built into the smallest experiences of beauty is an impulse to notice the absence of symmetry in its availability. I ask: Can poverty or environmental degradation be distributed democratically? Some students choose to pursue projects that emerge from a question like this, including research on how decisions are made regarding public art like murals; the role of music in the Civil Rights movement; the influence of sexist advertising on women. We keep asking each other, “What are you learning about whether beauty and justice belong in the same conversation?”

This sort of inquiry doesn’t lead to proofs. Rather, it honors speculation about the meaning of our encounters with deer and sunsets in the presence of strangers. If we agree that our impulse to share beauty with strangers is worth mulling over, then perhaps asking if justice can enter the conversation makes sense. Surely, this isn’t the sort of inquiry that will attract everyone. But I’ve taught this class for three years now, reading Scarry, Robert Adams on photography and the revelation of form, Maxine Greene on educating the imagination for democracy, Jane Kramer on contested public art, Plato, Santayana, Freud, and Nancy Etcoff. Students have produced remarkably interesting writing and nurtured a classroom space that honors the possibility that what moves us most as individuals can also shape our engagement with societal issues, including justice. Students continue to connect the beauty found in nature and in works of art and the impulse to pay attention to economic and social imbalances.

My writing class on beauty and justice is largely an invitation to sustain inquiry around the possibility that our experience of beauty can lead us to recognize and perhaps struggle against injustice. Writing becomes a way to keep thinking, and as papers circulate among class members we come to appreciate how much we need each other in order to think. In fact, after we listen to each other read our writing aloud, we look at each other differently, and I continue to see that curiosity and, often, generosity as stepping stones on the path to a more engaged public life.

Brown: We’ve talked a lot about your work with students, but before we close, how does your biography and personal journey help to explain your work?

Rothman: I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1950s and early 1960s, on the cusp of profound social and political change. Many of my teachers had been activists whose lives were
transformed by the McCarthy era. They encouraged us cautiously to get involved in the civil rights and antinuclear weapons movements; they made sure that we knew about the power of writing to transform the world. Some of them taught as if the health of our society depended on our knowing this. My father raged against diverse forms of injustice and insisted on the power of books to improve the world.

As a child, I wrote to accompany myself, to make palpable the hauntings of my imagination. The adults in my life, my father especially, encouraged me to imagine a world that didn't exist. I learned the power of asking “What if…?” and “What if not…?” and in college I was drawn to literature and philosophy in order to find others with the same passion. I was thrilled by James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, mostly because he, like Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Danilo Dolci, with whom I conversed years later, didn’t allow uncertainty and risk to obstruct his commitment to expose injustice. I was fortunate to have teachers who didn’t hide their passion for discovery and who expected students to be creators of meaning.

In graduate school in the 1960s I studied renaissance prerrevo-
olutionary revenge tragedies, plays in which those responsible for maintaining justice were committing atrocious crimes, and I wondered if the antiwar protests and the organizing of the Black Panthers on the campuses where I studied and first taught were harbingers of revolution. I taught writing and post office test-preparation classes in churches and community centers, and many of my first students were black Vietnam vets who hoped that writing could help them put their lives back together. Much of my teaching has evolved from where I started. Since 1973, I have had the privilege of collaborating to build Oakes College at UC Santa Cruz and, until last year, to direct the Central California Writing Project. I am grateful to my UCSC Writing Program colleagues who are committed to helping students make writing the world as important as writing the word.

**Brown:** Thank you, Don.