

A RHETORIC OF REFLECTION

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## PROBLEMATIZING REFLECTION

### *Conflicted Motives in the Writer's Memo*

Jeff Sommers

*Sometimes I think these memos help me as much as they help you.*

—Student comment on the Writer's Memo (Sommers)

#### INTRODUCTION: THE WRITER'S MEMO AS IDYLL

The Writer's Memo is a self-reflective communication from a student writer to an instructor that accompanies a submitted draft. I adapted and developed this concept (see Beaven 1977), and I subsequently published four articles on reflective memos in the 1980s. As we see in this volume and elsewhere, as Michael Neal suggests (this volume), the practice of reflection has grown fairly common in the teaching of composition in the days since then. Indeed, in recent years, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* has published three pieces on reflective writing in first-year composition courses (Harding 2014; Ihara 2014; Parisi 2014). But more than one generation of students has come and gone since I began assigning reflective writing, so I have had the opportunity to reflect on the Writer's Memo. In this essay I want to problematize the genre of the Writer's Memo and examine how recognizing the problematic nature of the genre has necessitated changes in my teaching practice. The student comment in the essay's epigraph actually poses the question I want to tackle: just who is supposed to be "helped" by the Writer's Memo, the student-writer or the teacher-evaluator? That is an important complication, but I cannot claim to have been very cognizant of it in the early days of assigning the Writer's Memo.

Over the years, however, I have recognized that the Writer's Memo, or any similar reflective writing intended to accompany a draft, is an unfamiliar genre to students, one that requires an introduction. I have also realized that the Writer's Memo may in fact have conflicting motivations,

both for me and for student writers: ostensibly, its purpose is to encourage students to become more aware of their composing processes and of the choices they have made and might make in the drafting and revising of a work in progress, based on the premise that a more self-aware writer can become a more effective writer. But there has always been an equally important additional motivation—the memos are intended to assist me in responding productively to the students' drafts so they can produce an improved final product. In short, I want my students to think about their thinking, but I also want them to take an active role in the response process, providing me with insights and questions so I can offer them more helpful feedback on their drafts. I plan to interrogate these multiple motivations out of my concern that the focus on response may in fact overwhelm the hope for metacognition by encouraging a reductive classroom dynamic of the student attempting to please the instructor that trumps the metacognitive activity of writing the memos. And these considerations no doubt make the Writer's Memo a more complex genre that I once believed.

Over the years of assigning students the Writer's Memo, I grew increasingly aware that its results were inconsistent. Recently, Lindsey Harding has expressed her related dissatisfaction with students' reflections, concluding her analysis of a number of end-of-term reflective essays by noting that they "seemed to lack metacognition" and blaming "an inadequacy in the assignment prompt itself to provide students with the opportunity to step back from their writing and think about the thinking they had done throughout the semester" (Harding 2014, 240). Laurel Bower has similarly critiqued portfolio cover letters, concluding that "because metacognition is a complex skill, . . . reflection should be integrated into the classroom from beginning to end, progressing from simple to more complex reflective problem-solving questions" (Bower 2003, 64), and in Rachel Ihara's analysis of portfolio cover letters, she observes that "the general movement in the field . . . seems to be away from a romanticized notion of reflection as something students should be able to do intuitively and on their own to an understanding of reflection as socially situated, dependent on particular ways of writing about writing that must be practiced and honed" (Ihara 2014, 223–24). These assessments are congruent with the argument advanced by Sarah Ash and Patti Clayton that add a "critical reflection process that generates, deepens, and documents learning does not occur automatically—rather, it must be carefully and intentionally designed" (Ash and Clayton 2009, 28). I must confess now that my earliest work on the Writer's Memo, in retrospect, does seem to

present a somewhat "romanticized notion of reflection," as a review of my own published work on the Writer's Memo substantiates.

When I review those publications, designed to encourage others to adopt the strategy, I see a relatively idealized version of the memos being described. The language I used in writing about the memos is at once both assertive and definite, presenting a rather uncomplicated teaching strategy: "My job has become easier simply because I am listening . . . no tears, no threats, no shouts—just listening and communicating. The great mysteries about how my students manage to produce their papers also tend to dissolve if I listen to the . . . memos" (Sommers 1984, 30). Later in this same essay, I claimed that "one of the most important values of listening to students [is that] the more I listen, the more they talk" (33). Apparently no scaffolding was needed to introduce students to reflection. I simply presented the concept once, assigned the questions, and watched the reflections proliferate. In retrospect, I think the novelty of the strategy, and my enthusiasm about sharing it with colleagues, resulted in a rather "romanticized" (Ihara 2014, 223) representation of this reflective activity. In reality, of course, not all students talked more, and not all memos were as revealing as I would have wished.

My later published work on the Writer's Memo continued to rely upon direct statements that admitted of no problems or complications. Note my use of the verb *compel*: "Questions about pre-writing, organizing, and projected re-writing compel each student to explore her composing process, a new experience for many students" (Sommers 1988, 78). Of course, I have since learned that the memo assignment does not *compel* students to explore their composing process so much as it *invites* them to do so. Completing the assignment may take the students "behind the paper" (77), but it does not guarantee they will discover anything significant unless they believe the activity has value for them. But in those days I simply assumed my classes would recognize the memos' value once I had provided an explanation and assigned them. I also seemed oblivious to the competing motivations behind the memos and how they might make the students' task in writing them more challenging.

I persisted in later publications in avoiding any nuance at all in presenting the strategy. I made the argument that encouraging metacognition would lead students to develop their own voices and to write "reader-based prose," harking back to Linda Flower's research on the writing process (Flower 1981, 62). I discussed the kinds of questions I asked students to answer and described the impact of those questions, using the verb *compel* again to describe the power of the questions to induce reflection. Later I asserted that the students' metacognition

"leads to discovery" (Sommers 1989, 180) rather than noting that it *might lead to discovery*. This definitive diction continued as I claimed that "in writing their memos, students *become* real writers writing to a real audience" (182; my emphasis) as if there were an automatic cause-effect relationship involved. The same confident tone appears a few pages later: "Since the memos vividly present the authentic voices of student writers, they invite the teacher to respond in his or her own authentic voice as a reader, editor, fellow writer. The interchange of purposeful comments between real people keeps the memos alive for both student and teacher, preventing them from becoming a dry, automatic activity akin to marking off boxes on some master checklist for revision" (184).

What I see myself doing here is describing the Writer's Memo in its ideal form: "Here's what it does when it works the way it's been designed to work." I recall being asked once by a participant at a workshop where I was presenting the Writer's Memo if the student examples I had presented were "typical." I was forthright in responding that I had selected really strong examples in order to convince the conference goers that the strategy was useful. Even then, I was well aware that not every Writer's Memo was equally insightful, but my 1989 essay was confident without qualification in the memos' effectiveness. In retrospect, the whole process seems positively idyllic.

#### CONFLICTING MOTIVES AND THE WRITER'S MEMO

But almost from its inception, the Writer's Memo had more than one intended function. Although I had not read Mary Beaven's work before I started assigning the Writer's Memo, when I subsequently read her article, I found it in a book devoted to evaluation and bearing a title that emphasized evaluation: "Individualized Goal Setting, Self-Evaluation, and Peer Evaluation" (Beaven 1977). One of my four 1980s publications about the memos was entitled "Enlisting the Writer's Participation in the Evaluation Process," making clear that whatever else they might do, Writer's Memos were intended to be a part of the teacher's response process. That essay focused primarily on how the memos could assist the instructor in responding. I wrote, "With the information provided by the student, the instructor need no longer be a 'dumb reader' [citing Walker Gibson]. The instructor becomes less likely to push the student into writing an essay the instructor wants instead of writing what the student wants" (Sommers 1985, 97), and a few pages later, I concluded that "the . . . memo allows instructors to ward off such comments [i.e., "I didn't know what you wanted"] by providing the insights necessary to

offer useful commentary on student writing. Actually, as readers of student texts, writing instructors could just as often say to their students, 'I didn't know what you wanted me to respond to'" (102). The theme of memo as formative assessment tool has thus been present from the beginning of my work with reflection. I do not mean to suggest that there is anything wrong with asking students to participate in the formative evaluation of their own texts, but I do wonder how well asking students to focus on *my* response meshes with the idea of self-reflection about process and choices.

My early essays also employ language that focuses on the teacher's role as responder. Earlier I quoted this comment: "*My job* has become easier simply because I am listening" (Sommers 1984, 30; emphasis added). Other similar comments appear in my writing about the memos.

- "Students can be asked to *provide the instructor with needed assistance* in effectively responding to the draft" (1989, 176; emphasis added).
- "In short, the writer's memo *helps teachers to adopt a productive role as responders to student writing*" (180; emphasis added).
- "[Students] seek real results: *useful editorial comments from their reader*" (182; emphasis added).

I now see that the potential for conflict I am tracing was there from the outset. Initially, I named these reflections *Student-Teacher Memos*. One editor subsequently objected that the title suggested preservice teachers' writing notes during their student-teaching days, so I changed the name to *Writer's Memo*. The original label was intended to emphasize the transaction between student-writer and teacher-reader; the newer name makes the activity seem to be intended mostly for the writer alone, but the original name may actually be more accurate in its emphasis. Writer's Memos were never intended to be written by authors to themselves; they were never to be ruminations and insights of the sort kept in a writer's daybook. The very name *student-teacher memo* made clear that this writing assignment was to be a performance, a communication about a draft in progress between a writer and reader, not a writer to the self.

Where then is the conflict I have cited? Here is an excerpt from a student's memo about his personal observation of a high-school classroom discussion at his former high school; Mitchell, the student, is responding to this prompt: "What is the main focus of your draft? What is the most important thing you learned about the class you observed? Why?" Mitchell writes, "The point of my paper is to illustrate the fact that behavior is relative. Observing the class from an objective standpoint was really interesting because it made clear to me many of the points

that [linguist Deborah] Tannen posits, especially those about quieter students. It also forced me to examine my own previous behavior in the class (Valery really reminded me of myself in that class), and try to figure out what it was that made me feel/ act in certain ways." As Mitchell explains that his interest was piqued as an observer when he recognized his own previous behavior in that same class, he is, I argue, engaged in metacognition, not only thinking about his observation as part of the invention phase of his project, but also reflecting on the causes of the observed student behavior, present and past, and thus perhaps gaining insight into his own writing experience in terms of generating ideas through observation and analysis. Later he concludes his memo by responding to another prompt asking him to pose questions for me as his responder. Mitchell writes, "Is my language consistently formal? Are any of my sentences awkward, and if so, where? Is the paper well structured, and do the subtitles effectively section the paper? If not, where, and what do you recommend?" In responding to the second prompt, Mitchell is no longer engaged, I contend, in reflection but instead is an author asking for feedback. Of course, that's a productive writerly behavior, but this behavior is not as much about reflection as it is about assessment, both by the student himself and subsequently by the teacher. What concerns me, then, is whether the Writer's Memo positions students in a much more complicated writing situation than it may seem at first glance. The question I am posing is, how compatible is helping the teacher with reflecting on one's own learning? I am troubled that the different purposes might at some point work against one another, reducing the possibilities that students will reflect in the way I hope they will because of interference from their understandable desire to produce an improved next draft, a draft that will please their evaluator.

#### A POTENTIAL RECONCILIATION

I believe Sarah Ash, Pati Clayton, and Maxine Atkinson's three-part model for effective reflection (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson 2005) offers a reconciliation of the conflicting motives I have described. Their goal is to document learning in service-learning situations, and they begin by contending that "it is through careful reflection that service-learning—indeed any form of experiential education—generates meaningful learning" (50). I argue that first-year composition, too, is a form of "experiential education" in that students are asked to *do something by producing written artifacts*, whatever theoretical grounding may provide the course's curricular approach. Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson design a

three-part reflection model that culminates in "articulated learnings" (51) or AL, as they call it. Their students regularly engage in "reflection sessions" designed to encourage them to describe their experiences and then to analyze them, using "a reflection framework, which is a series of questions designed to support students in *describing* (stage 1) and then *analyzing* (stage 2) their service experiences" (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson 2005, 51). The goal of these sessions is to foster learning congruent with the course's stated learning objectives.

In stage 3, students are asked to consider four questions.

- What did I learn?
- How, specifically, did I learn it?
- Why does this learning matter? . . .
- In what ways will I use this learning? (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson 2005, 51)

Answering these questions, Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson (2005) argue, leads to "articulated learning," the goal of the entire activity. These four questions are quite relevant to my deliberate use of the Writer's Memo: I would like my students to be able to articulate meaningful answers to these questions.

The Writer's Memo encourages both *describing* and *analyzing* through many of the questions it asks, as the emphasis on these two mental activities demonstrates in the following samples of Writer's Memo prompts (table 13.1).

Additional prompts ask the students to both describe *and* analyze: "What, specifically, did you change as a result of what you learned from our class workshop? What did you learn from reading the other rough drafts?" and the prompt to which Mitchell responded, "How did your observations of another class either surprise you or confirm your expectations? How was your reaction related to your own experiences in class discussions? In what ways did it resemble what you have experienced? In what ways was it different?"

Because the Writer's Memos are written in the heat of the moment, so to speak, while the composing is still in process, it seems to me unreasonable to expect students to manifest articulated learnings. The students are engaged at times in *describing* their writing processes and at other times in *analyzing* the shortcomings—and achievements—of their drafts in progress while keeping an eye on the future outcome of the drafting process. In other words, I think it unwise to expect the Writer's Memos themselves to lead the students through all three stages of the Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson model.

Table 13.1. Writer's Memo prompts and required mental activity

Description	Analysis
Describe how you went about analyzing the magazine issue you chose. What did you examine? Count? Notice? Question?	What was the biggest challenge in writing this draft? Why?
Describe how you decided on an effective organization for your paper. Why are the separate sections of the essay in this sequence?	Who is the ideal reader for your paper? If you could describe the kind of person who would get the most out of this paper, what would that person be like?
How did you select your pair of readings to synthesize in this assigned paper?	Have you done anything here to go beyond the ordinary on this paper?
Describe how you met the additional source requirement. How did you find a source? How did you evaluate that source to make sure it was reliable? What value did this additional perspective add to your draft? Why?	Remember that you are now part of the academic discourse community, and that will influence your writing decisions. Why did you choose this way to present your paper? (e.g., have you used subheadings or not? First-person writing or not?) What's the logic behind your organization—why are things in this order?

What is needed, I think, is a culminating activity that will afford the students an opportunity to reach the third stage in Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson's (2005) model: articulated learnings. So I now afford the students that opportunity in the redesigned portfolio-letter I require at the end of the term.<sup>1</sup> The portfolio letter prompt reads in part: "Please write a letter in which you look back on your semester of writing in college. The point of writing this letter is to give you an opportunity to think about the writing you've done this term and reflect on its significance. I'd encourage you to write about what you're thinking currently that will be useful to you in the future as you look ahead to the rest of your career at West Chester." The encouragement to look ahead draws upon Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson's (2005) fourth question ("In what ways will I use this learning?"). I have argued that the Writer's Memos "create an ongoing semester-long conversation about their reflections on specific drafts, a conversation that forms a backdrop to the course experience for the students" (Sommers 2011, 60), so I am not surprised when students use their memos as a source for explaining in their final reflective assignments what they have experienced. In a recent semester, for example, 20 percent of my students referenced or quoted their own memos in their portfolio letter. One student wrote that the "writer's memos helped her to evaluate herself," and then related an anecdote about how she had come to see that at times she was articulating her ideas and arguments with more clarity and force in her memos, at which point she would substitute those reflections for "fuzzier phrasing in her drafts" (Sommers 2011, 72).

In passages such as this one, I can see that the student's *description* and *analysis* allow her to reflect upon her experiences. But I also see her *articulated learnings* in her recognition that what she wrote in her memos could inform her revision process. In addition, she seems to recognize the self-evaluation component in the memo writing, and it is also important to note that she never defers to the instructor's evaluation of her revision: she just asserts that she has replaced unclear writing with clear, forceful writing.

As illustrated in the previous example, the capstone reflective piece can provide evidence of articulated learnings through a student's reflections on the reflective nature of the Writer's Memos. In another capstone piece, a student, Ashleigh, claims she has learned a new appreciation for genuine revision and explains that

the biggest reason for this adjustment would have to be the memos you assigned us to do. . . . At first I assumed these memos were just more busy work attached to an already lengthy paper. Yet, once I started answering the questions, I began to see the point. The questions allowed me to understand what I was writing about. If I couldn't figure it out, how was the reader supposed to? In addition, sometimes when I answered these questions, I figured out a whole new point I didn't even realize I had made. It was a type of revising I had never heard or seen before. (Sommers 2011, 64)

In Ashleigh's commentary I can see that she has moved into the third stage of reflection by articulating what she has learned. In this case, the learning has been facilitated by the previous description and analysis she has employed in writing her memos, interestingly, in the service of revising—that is, improving—her draft. She seems to be experiencing no apparent tension between her need to reflect in the memos and her desire to improve a specific piece of writing.

Similarly, another student, Joyce, refers to the process of memo writing in her capstone piece, which she recognizes as a related reflective genre: "This entire letter is really just a memo in a letter's disguise, or a masked-meta-memo-cognitive piece of writing, if you will (cause I always will!). I am reflecting in writing about my thinking about my writing, all sandwiched between a salutation and closing. Only instead of one assignment that addresses the whole semester, I find that I have learned a great deal and had a great deal of fun doing it" (Sommers 2011, 63).

Joyce, in her playful way, demonstrates what she has learned about writing the memos, understanding the value of their metacognitive demands. Has she also demonstrated such learning in the memos themselves? Perhaps, perhaps not. The point she makes is that the reflections

about her writing in which she engaged, even while perhaps focusing at times on the evaluation of her drafts, have been productive for her.

At this point, I accept that there is probably some tension caused by the design of the memos, setting up a potential conflict between questions that ask students to think about their writing process and questions that ask them to evaluate their own writing and, in a sense, focus on the impact it is likely to have on its evaluator, namely me. But perhaps that tension is not necessarily obstructive. The second motivation—improving the draft with the hope of raising its final grade—may fade away when the students take a retrospective look at their work as the term comes to a conclusion because the revisions are already complete. What may be left is the recollection of reflecting, of describing and analyzing their own writing processes, and that recollection can provide the students with evidence to substantiate their claims in their capstone reflections on the semester.

#### SCAFFOLDING THE WRITER'S MEMO

If the Writer's Memo, then, can serve both an immediate purpose as a student works on a specific writing project and a larger, semester-long purpose that will culminate in a richer portfolio letter, the question becomes one of how to prepare the students to write rich Writer's Memos worth rereading at the conclusion of the semester. Rachel Ihara (2014) suggests that an inadequate preparation for reflection may be the root cause of disappointing reflections, a point I now agree with: scaffolding is required to prepare students to write reflectively. In my own work on the Writer's Memo, I have always been aware that students require some preparation before making the best use of the opportunities afforded by the memos. Even my earliest presentations of the memos acknowledged the need for preparation; for example, I suggested that an analogue to the Writer's Memo is the consultation in which many writers engage by composing notes (or e-mails) to colleagues requesting feedback on a draft (Sommers 1989, 183–85). I provided a sample of a letter written by an author to her editor to illustrate how the Writer's Memo works (177), and I counseled that “two approaches . . . [that] . . . can stimulate students to write memos of substance are to write your own sample memos and to share provocative student memos with the class” (Sommers 1988, 79). Comments such as these, however, were hardly central in my publications at that time, nor in my classroom.

However, I have become much more strategic in my efforts to prepare my first-year composition students to write effective Writer's Memos (see Sommers 2011). I introduce the concept in the syllabus, and explain it

more fully on the first assignment sheet for an essay in which they are to write about a memorable teacher. The description on the assignment sheet reads,

Every time you submit a draft to me, I'll be asking you to complete a memo about that draft. I don't grade these, but I do expect you to complete them (it's part of earning credit for handing in a completed assignment on time.) Don't worry about your grammar/spelling, etc. You certainly shouldn't be writing a “rough draft” of a memo. Just free-write whatever comes to mind that answers the questions. Why am I asking you to do this? Is it just busy work? Actually, these memos can be very valuable in a couple of ways: To write a memo, you'll have to reflect on what you have written. Thinking about what we do after we do it is the beginning of self-awareness and self-evaluation. (That's why athletes watch game films and why performers watch videotaped performances.)

- Rereading your own memos can help you remember what you were trying to do, which should be useful when you begin to revise your draft, particularly if you have to put work aside so that you can meet your other course obligations. When you return to the draft, the memo is a good place to start.

- Sometimes writing answers to the memo questions actually generates information and ideas you can use in your draft.

- The memos are very helpful to your readers (such as me or tutors at the writing center) because they provide background information. I know that I often feel lost in knowing how to respond to a student draft until I read the memo. Write a full page (250 words). If you only jot down a quick one-sentence answer, you don't get much exercise in reflecting on your own writing: (Short memos are like aerobic workouts that end as soon as you begin to sweat! There's no gain in that.)

Note that the multiple motivations I have analyzed are present here: the first three bullets emphasize the value for the student of the Writer's Memo, and the final bullet shifts to its value for readers (and/or, implicitly, evaluators).

I devote a full class meeting to a discussion of metacognition, scheduling the class for the day before the drafts and memos are due. I begin by projecting the word *metacognition* on the classroom screen along with this definition: “Awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes; thinking about thinking.” At that point I ask the class a series of questions and request that they raise their hands and keep them aloft if they have had an athletic coach or drama teacher or music teacher or band director who has worked with them on developing a particular performance. I then ask how many have watched a recording of their performance and why. The students generally have much to say about the role of reflection in their various activities. That discussion leads to my sharing of Pat Belanoff's comment:

College, the journal I edit for NCTE.<sup>2</sup> In her letters, the professor writes about her revision process and uses sentences such as, "Overall, in this revision, I have tried to accomplish several tasks" and "As I have worked on this essay, I have felt a struggle between the pieces of data." She describes additions she has made to the text and language she either changed or excised. I also show them a two-paragraph e-mail I received from another writer in which she analyzes her attempts to respond to reviewers' critiques. This author concludes by writing, "OK, that's my memo to you." Even though it's an e-mail, her description of it as a "memo" seems to resonate with my students.

Finally, I share some reflective writing of my own. I explain that I had drafted a proposal to teach a seminar, and, being new to the university, I e-mailed it to a senior colleague with a note appended. My e-mail read, "My primary concern is whether I'm presenting the reading list in a suitable manner, and if it looks as if it will pass muster (it's rather eclectic, I'd say)." I then explain to the class that I realized how little my memo had revealed about my experience in writing the piece, so I revised it to read

I've included more than the ten readings required because I don't think my list is perhaps what's expected. Some of the citations are from composition scholars, not literary critics. In fact, there's a pedagogical angle to some of them. I've also included two citations for articles of my own. I was thinking that I wanted to present readings that have impacted my teaching plans for the course. So here's my key question to you: how smart a strategy is that? I could replace some of the more pedagogical references with traditional literary critical material; that might make the list look more like other proposals. But my course is focused less on a literary genre or time period than it is on a way of teaching. What recommendations do you have about my reading list?

I am trying to make the point to the class that reflecting on one's writing has real value, sometimes assisting writers with invention and at other times providing insight into potential revisions. These examples by academic authors and me are focused both on describing and analyzing our own writing process and on eliciting useful feedback from a reader.

To conclude the class, I ask the students to write a brief anonymous comment on an index card I provide. I pose this question: "If a classmate who missed today's class were to ask you what it was important to know about the class session, what would you say?" I read through these and share a sampling at the next class, after which their first drafts and memos are due. I make sure to include at least one comment that is less than a full endorsement of the memos because there are always a few of those. Some representative comments include

Am I saying that everyone needs to reflect to be educated? Yes, in a way I am—but at the same time I recognize that there are many ways to reflect. Watching a video together of a prior game can provide members of a football team the opportunity to integrate what they see into what's already stored in their heads. . . . Gymnasts study digital models of themselves in action created from videos, reflect on those, and work with their bodies to produce better configurations of their bodies in action. Certain diet plans require participants to keep a list of everything they eat during the day in order to create a record of their eating habits, which they can reflect upon and alter if necessary. Therapists ask patients to reconstruct past experiences and thoughts so they can be reflected on; reflection and discussion (in theory at least) lead to an improved sense of the self and one's relationship to others and to the environment. This (in theory) leads to improved performance and satisfaction. (Belanoff 2001, 416)

The class then engages in a discussion of their own prior experiences with reflection before we turn to an examination of a series of documents as I share a number of student memos with them so we can discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Then I share this excerpt from Barbara's memo, in which she answers a question about her current impressions of her draft: "This draft is not my most creative work, and I am not particularly proud of it. I really struggled to think of some substantial info without any type of primary source. This writing is very different from what I am accustomed to. I think it lacks creativity and is pretty boring. I guess that sounds strange—why wouldn't I just fix it? Well I suppose it has been a struggle to fix since I did not have much substance to begin with—I am really used to structured writing. Reading a novel, and then answering analytical questions about the characters or themes (i.e., *Heart of Darkness*—compare Kurtz and Marlow)." I ask the students why they think Barbara would confess to being so displeased with her own draft. Someone invariably points out that the memo is accompanying a draft, not a final paper to be graded, so the student is not risking her grade by being forthright about the paper's inadequacies. We note the different kinds of reflection Barbara has engaged in:

- She seeks an explanation for her own self-assessment.
- She looks back at her prior experiences as a writer.
- She poses a question for herself to answer.

We also examine reflective pieces written by professors, as I try to make the point that the Writer's Memo is not busy work I am foisting on them, but rather resembles the kind of reflection professional writers employ. I show the students two letters I received from a professor whose manuscript I was evaluating for *Teaching English in the Two-Year*



- I learned that the memos are very crucial to making you a better writer. They allow you to see your strengths and weaknesses. It allows you to ask questions and get specific answers. Also these questions will help you for your writing in the future.
- Today in class I learned the real purpose of a memo. Before I thought that it was just busy work, but now I feel differently. I think it's a good way of asking essential questions that you really want to know the answer to.
- I feel like to be a serious, accomplished, and goal-oriented writer, I should take the memo more seriously and get used to including it on my own. I liked that you shared personal examples.
- I got that the memo is actually a really important part of the writing process and even though I already completed my memo, I thought of some things I would like to add to it.
- During this class we went over different examples of the types of things we should include in our memo. It was helpful to hear this because I had never written one before. However, the process was a bit tedious.

I note that the first two of the student commentaries focus on the memo prompt that invites them to participate in evaluating their drafts, which seems entirely understandable from a student perspective. Some students may focus on the evaluative aspects of the memo, but as long as they are answering all of the Writer's Memo prompts, they are engaging in the designed descriptive and analytical activities.

With about a month left in the course, I devote another day to the Writer's Memo, this time sharing some of the outstandingly detailed memos I have received from their class (with the students' permission, of course) by projecting them on the classroom screen and highlighting insightful moments in the memos. Throughout the term, I stipulate that only memos of at least 250 words earn credit for completion, but the most insightful ones are often much longer, and showing a few of them in class can remind everyone that I expect a serious effort at reflection in the memos. I have been pleased with the effects of these more focused efforts to prepare students to write useful Writer's Memos and to motivate them to continue to do so as the weeks go on. The additional scaffolding thus attempts to deromanticize the act of reflection by situating varied forms of reflection in different contexts and by showing that metacognition requires effort more than inspiration.

All of this preparatory work is designed to convince students that the metacognitive act will be useful to them as writers. When Susan Jarratt et al. recommend that "writing teachers might place more emphasis on preparing for learning, a manner of learning that acknowledges students' pasts . . . and gestures toward their writing futures" (Jarratt et al.

2009, 66), they are echoing the structured questions of Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson's (2005) articulated learnings strategy. Perhaps reflecting on one's thinking and asking a reader for help do conflict in the immediate context of writing a single Writer's Memo. Taking a longer view, however, I think the value of engaging in these regular acts of description and analysis constitutes preparation for learning and is worth any potential dissonance experienced by the student. The memo is something of a hybrid genre, serving multiple purposes at the time of writing. Because I am primarily interested in the students' progress toward articulated learnings, in Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson's (2005) phrase, I can live with the hybridity and the discomfort it might engender because of the rich sources of ideas and thinking that the memos can provide as the students write their culminating portfolio letters. In their study of transfer, Jarratt et al. cite one of their interview subjects as saying, "I think every time I sat down to write a paper, I was thinking about what I learned the last time I sat down to write a paper" (2009, 58). When students complete a Writer's Memo with every draft, they create a record of their experiences as writers in the course so that at the end of the term when they are asked to think about what they have learned, there is a valuable written record available to them.

## CONCLUSION

In the prospectus for this collection, the editor has articulated three purposes for the book:

- to locate our observations about and research on reflection in very specific definitions
- to provide varying portraits of how we have designed reflection into curriculum and/or assessment and to what effect
- to raise the questions regarding reflection that should be researched

As I have written this essay, I have learned that my own definition of reflection in my first-year writing course has become more expansive in that it has grown clearer to me that the in-semester reflection required by the Writer's Memo is different from the end-of-semester reflection required by the capstone reflective letter I assign. The competing motivations of reflecting on their own experiences while also assessing their writing and seeking advice for improvement that define writing the memos seem potentially resolvable as students compose their final reflective pieces because those capstone pieces are, in fact, *final* drafts in a way that the Writer's Memos are not.

As for the book's second purpose, I think Rachel Ihara makes a very wise observation when she writes, "I do not think it makes sense to try to make students more 'reflective,' as if reflection were a singular thing. Nor would I suggest that we promote only one privileged view of self-reflection, whereby the instructor's particular aims and expectations for reflective writing, as evidence-based and thesis-driven, are reiterated and reinforced until students master this particular stance and approach. Instead, I would highlight the *different* ways one might write about writing, in different situations for different purposes and audiences" (Ihara 2014, 234). Those different ways might include Lindsey Harding's (2014) strategy of asking for a multimodal reflective response as a culminating project, or Hope Parisi's (2014) opening the final portfolio letter up to alternate audiences so students do not have to write directly to the instructor, or, perhaps, strategies offered in other pieces in this collection. My essay has attempted to present a narrative of a developing model for presenting reflection to my students, a narrative that has stretched nearly three decades and that continues to develop in response to my own greater understanding of what is happening in my classroom.

Finally, this collection's third purpose seems clear to me in terms of what I have written here. I need to learn more about my students' perception of the Writer's Memo as an assignment. What do they come to believe is its purpose? What considerations do they take into account as they write them? What conflicts do they experience as they compose the Writer's Memo? Rather than asking the students to write more reflections on the writing of the memos, I might employ Ihara's (2014) research methodology, I believe, and interview the students after they have completed the memos. Perhaps a think-aloud protocol would also be useful as students read their own memos and explain what they were thinking. The point, however, would be to learn more about what happens when reflection takes place in the rhetorical situation of the classroom because it has been assigned rather than engaged in voluntarily, as illustrated in the examples by professional writers I have shared with the students.

What I have learned is that the Writer's Memo may not *compel* the kind of reflection I value, but it serves as an affordance to engage in that kind of meaningful reflection. I have realized that the Writer's Memo is not a simple, straightforward assignment but may have its own internal conflicts students must learn to negotiate. Finally, I have learned that although I cannot legislate students' growth as writers just by assigning the Writer's Memo, I can continue to monitor the impact of the Writer's Memo and strive for better ways to prepare my students to take advantage of those multiple opportunities the Writer's Memo provides.

## Notes

1. This genre of reflection is both similar to and somewhat different from Kathleen Blake Yancey's (1998) reflection-in-presentation, both as explained in her *Reflection in the Writing Classroom* and as adapted for the Teaching for Transfer (TFT) composition curriculum: see Kara Taczak and Liane Robertson, this volume.
2. The author was quite willing to grant me permission to share the letters.

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