



CHANGING LEARNING AND WRITING

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“They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.”

- Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*

This article is about cognitively recognizing the way you write and the way you learn so you can improve upon your methods. This improvement happens through learning, practicing, and articulating new ideas. To employ better methods is to ensure greater successes as well as consistently good work. You’ve chosen to attend a college that emphasizes your personal development rather than your diploma, and you have the opportunity here at Evergreen to focus deeply on your “processes,” the steps you take in different situations, so you’ll be better at what you want to do.

To consider process is freeing, and this consideration applies all the time in higher education. Let’s imagine that a professor returns a paper to a student and encourages this person to revise it. He or she may be hurt. That’s understandable. If this happens to you, I’d like you to consider that your professor is trying to assist you in your writing process. The response can go from, “Oh no! I’m not done?!” to “Don’t worry, I’m not done.” You’re just not done. You’ve made a draft in the midst of a lot of work that often goes unnoticed when you turn in your final project. I like that many Evergreen professors ask for drafts to be turned in with final portfolios because that practice is another way to serve the lifelong processes that you learn how to cultivate here. I’ll add that I’d hope the message you take when your professor hands back a draft is, “Congratulations, you’re not done.”

I remember revisiting my first college writing project recently; I was disappointed. The poems were not nearly as perfect as I felt they were when I’d written them and turned them in. But here’s the key: In an important way, I was not done. The poems were done, but I was not done articulating what I wanted to express. I now conceive of those poems as draft materials for writing I’ve done since that recent revisit. I am not done writing, and I love it!

Process is empowering. Process brings your self to the unknown, with one foot in the comfort zone and one foot out of it. Your process is organic, homegrown from your own interests and your self. For this reason, “process” resists definition: Each scholar must work consciously to reflect on and improve his or her individual academic methods, to develop better cognitive and physical

“processes” for all aspects of college work. I’m interested in how a person uses his or her processes as tools to engage in the very large tasks of learning and cultivating one’s voice through writing.

In this way, I refer to learning and writing as two separate and comparable “processes.” I encourage you to think about what it means for you to create and strengthen your own processes, and it’s my experience that Evergreen wholeheartedly supports and believes in this kind of thought. In thinking about what “process” means and what yours could look like, I’d like to invite you to draw similarities between the writing and learning processes, and a related process: raising a child. Writing, raising a child, and learning all require you to plan creatively, to remain open to new and unforeseen truths, to recognize how your actions translate into consequences and opportunities for you and your process, and to reflect and be aware of where you are in your process—with the knowledge that previous steps in your process contribute greatly to your current situation at all times.

You cannot and should not expect to know or understand your entire writing or learning processes at the outset of college, just like you can never know how you’ll act on every day of parenthood. For this reason, I want you to keep in mind an openness and an intention to dissect and carefully study your methods from time to time. This way, you’ll have more tools the next time you write a paper, learn a concept, or talk with your child. Writing, learning, and raising a person all have substantial social ramifications, and you need not consider any of these processes to be simple or solitary. In developing processes, you will likely need to consider many aspects of your life, including many things you cannot control. I attempt to think of my own processes in elaborate, complicated, and ever-adapting ways based on what I want to try in my education and in my life. At Evergreen, I hope you work to build skills and practices surrounding the ways you think, act, reflect, and revise that you can use to live more thoughtfully and deliberately.

For both writing and for learning, I encourage you to custom-build processes. Ruminates on your past experience with these two processes. A process is hard to think about all at once! Why? I think it’s hard because the process extends over time, and when I think, I feel like I’m in the middle of that process. So that’s why writing things out is very useful and can help you think: Writing offers a physical and mental experience, followed by a record of that experience. That record could be a draft of a paper or a project that will come later, after revision and research and many more drafts. The drafts offer a multitude of signposts and areas for exploration. The drafts and conversations you have surrounding those drafts will serve to bring your ideas through a necessary series of developmental changes before your writing is ready to be proofread a final time. I say necessary because, whether written or in your head, I hope your ideas, values, and conceptions will go through many changes between the day you come to college and the day you graduate.

When it comes to using process as a tool for self-reflection and change, Evergreen self-evaluations are your opportunity to emphasize to yourself and others that you care about changing for the better. The self-evaluation style of transcript is geared to help you showcase your understanding of your own position and trajectory. Self-evaluations become your story of your undergraduate education. Here’s why I think this is so excellent: First, you can show employers and graduate schools a long history of genuine interest, experience, and exploration in your field of choice. You can refer to your older self-evaluations to think about how you changed over the quarter or the year when

you are writing your next self-evaluations. Best of all, you get to write your own story! Evergreen's evaluation system is light-years more personal than letter grading, and it allows you to talk about your achievements rather than how well you met a professor's expectations. If, over the course of a program, you didn't do everything one of your professors would have liked you to do, you don't need to consider your experience a failure or a waste of time. At Evergreen, you are responsible for your own learning and your own development. At the end of an Evergreen term, you recognize and articulate that you not only learned, you are consciously engaged in your own learning process. Your written self-evaluations become your record of your learning, whatever you decide to learn.

As an Evergreen student, you get to choose what's important for you to learn. This sets you apart from the many people outside this school who don't have the resources and the freedom to create learning processes for themselves. My questions for any Evergreen student considering his or her learning process are, "What have you learned since you wrote your previous self-evaluation? What are you trying to learn? Do you have a plan? What are your next steps?" You can put the answers to those questions in any and every self-evaluation you write, even if your time in a class wasn't what you hoped it would be. Checking in with your decisions, your feelings, and your changes between the beginning of the quarter and the end of the quarter is a good way to think about content for your self-evaluation. You can use your self-evaluation to point out what you want to do next based on the path your mind is taking. You can use your self-evaluation to articulate how you intend to use recent learning to move towards your personal, educational, and career goals—both in the short term and through your life.

Let me once again compare self-evaluations to grades. Grades are rewards that people work to receive. Grades are things; they turn "learning" into a noun. The grading culture makes the act of learning of secondary importance, and in many cases that means zero importance. At Evergreen, "learning" is a verb.

We all need to refine our writing and learning methods now so we will have better methods tomorrow and in coming years. Good products will come naturally if you cultivate practices that ensure that you can continue to get better at exercising your mind. Just as I adjusted my outlook on my "finished" poems from five years ago, you too can steer your priorities away from mainstream America's output-centered consumer society and engage in the scholarly work required to reflect upon and improve your academic processes.

WORKS CITED

Warhol, Andy. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: (From A to B and Back Again)*. United States: Harvest Books, 1977.