

Doing It Here: Observing *Young Scholars in Writing* Building a Legacy of Writers Helping Writers



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The dictionary defines *observe* as to “carefully [attend] to a practice or ritual diligently and routinely.” This article examines the way *Young Scholars in Writing* (YSW) observes the practice of mentorship and scholarship through the perspective of an author turned peer reviewer turned composition instructor. The author discusses the ways her interaction with YSW has influenced her teaching practice.

In celebration of the tenth anniversary of *Young Scholars in Writing*, writers were asked to consider the concept of observance and what it means to “observe.” The word itself intrigued me. I wanted to unpack it, look closely at the multiple meanings of it. What, I wondered, do we do to “observe” ten years’ worth of the work of an institution like YSW? The first and easiest definition, “to watch,” according to *Collins English Dictionary*, is incomplete—it isn’t enough. “To watch” is inactive while YSW is an active, engaged network of people who are participating in a process in which experienced teachers and writers walk undergraduate writers through the process of producing a published piece of research—the ultimate end product of our trade. Even if a person is only an end consumer, a reader of the journal, his/her interaction is still active and more than just watching.

The next definition, “to celebrate,” felt a little better because celebrating YSW is easy and joyful. As a teacher and writer, I find the value of the work YSW is doing is immediately obvious. YSW is more than just a composition and rhetoric journal. As an institution, it does the work of a modern-day Writers’ Guild. In its cyber halls, novice writers are apprenticed. They do the real work of scholars under the careful guidance of masters of our trade. And this is work close to my own little compositionist/rhetorician heart. As a writer, I believe that beginning writers need a chance to be apprenticed, to work on their trade in real time, experiencing real consequences but surrounded by mentors. As a teacher, I value the writing process as a learning process. So it’s easy to celebrate a journal doing such work, yet the term feels incomplete because it lacks a sense of longevity. To celebrate is short lived, a brief burst of appreciation that momentarily focuses on YSW.

When I came to the definition of “observance” as “carefully attending to a practice or ritual diligently and routinely,” I realized how right this felt. I “observe” this ten-year anniversary not as just a celebration or an act of watching, but as an act of commitment to the continued practice and support of the work that fulfills the goals that Laurie Grobman and Candace Spigelman outlined in the first edition of *Young Scholars in Writing*:

As composition faculty and co-coordinators of a Professional Writing program, we believe that research can and should be a crucial component of rhetorical education. We also believe that undergraduates engaged in research about writing and rhetoric should have opportunities to publish their work as well as to present it and, in this way, to share it with a broader audience of students, scholars, and teachers. . . . We hope that *Young Scholars in Writing* will offer new insights to undergraduate students of writing and rhetoric and that they

will find in these published articles new ways of making sense of the field. . . . We hope that *Young Scholars in Writing* will initiate lively and engaged classroom conversations and written responses by students engaged in similar kinds of work. . . . Finally, we hope the work published here will inspire teachers to encourage their students to likewise engage in serious undergraduate scholarship. (1–3)

To truly observe the work of YSW on this tenth anniversary means joining the guild, becoming a working member of the composition and rhetoric community committed to the process of producing “serious undergraduate scholarship.”

As a onetime contributor to YSW, I can testify to the effectiveness of the process those involved in the journal use to support their undergraduate writers. I was a writer who loved to write but never thought of writing as a subject. It never occurred to me that writing was like history or like biology, in that it has theorists, a historical context, and pivotal discoveries. It never occurred to me that the practice of teaching writing was changeable, that over time it had been shaped by teachers and students engaged in teaching and learning. I had no idea how the practice and study of writing had influenced gender studies, ethnic studies, and queer studies, acting as a vehicle of social justice. I remember being fascinated by the idea that writing could be researched, could be explored in the same ways as we might approach biology or chemistry.

My experience with YSW began with the McNair Scholars, which is a federal TRIO Program. These are outreach and student services programs which are intended to identify and provide services to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. McNair focuses on helping students make the transition from undergraduate to graduate. The program’s students come from families of color and families struggling with poverty; many of the students are first-generation students. I was all three, and I was completely ignorant about the process of getting into graduate school. In fact, joining McNair was a whirlwind moment that changed my life. I learned about McNair right as its application season was closing. I went to a McNair recruiting presentation on a whim, and because of the timing, I had less than forty-eight hours to decide if I even wanted to try to get into graduate school. It was crazy but I decided yes, pulled together the application, and somehow I got in. In two days my whole life plan had changed.

I was a creative writer. My plan was to get my BA in English and maybe teach high school. It wasn’t a well-developed plan. So when I was told that as a McNair scholar I would need to design a research project in my field, carry it out, and write an article about it, I was completely lost. The idea of research was baffling. I didn’t even know where to start. What does it even mean to shape a research project as a writer, a creative writer? I went to a prominent member of the creative writing faculty and asked, “How do creative writers do research, what kind of research are the writers in the department doing, and what kind of project can I do?”

And she responded, “We don’t do that here. Either you shouldn’t be in creative writing or you shouldn’t be in the McNair Program.” I was blown away. She completely dismissed writing as a researchable subject, instead arguing that it was an art—a mystic something that people either created or attempted to teach—but not something that we researched. I cried a little, then went to the coordinator of the McNair Program, Helen Barnes—a member of the composition and rhetoric field. She listened to my fears and gave me great advice, including suggesting that I consider composition and rhetoric research instead of creative writing research. It was through this experience that I found my way to the field.

McNair helped me establish a relationship with faculty mentors Dr. Heidi Estrem, the director of the Boise State University First-Year Writing Program, and Dr. Bruce Ballenger. They both suggested I take some classes in composition and rhetoric. It was love at first class—I had found my home. It was Heidi who eventually suggested I send my work to YSW. The review process at YSW

was pivotal in my own development as a writer and as a teacher. Working through the process with a mentor showed me how valuable the one-to-one relationship is, and it showed me that writing isn't a streamlined linear process—it's messy. It showed me how frustrating and rewarding, sometimes in very same moment, research can be. Eventually my article, "Cupping the Spark in Our Hands: Developing a Better Understanding of the Research Question in Inquiry-Based Writing," was published by *YSW* in volume 7. It was also accepted for presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. And it was my writing sample for all of my graduate school applications. I could not have done it without my McNair cohort, the McNair staff, my faculty mentors, and my faculty advising editor, Amy Robillard at *YSW*. Working with *YSW* was one of the most meaningful experiences of my education. This is why I became a peer reviewer with *YSW*. It's why, as a composition and rhetoric teaching assistant in my PhD program, I'm constantly looking for ways to observe the work *YSW* does in my own classroom.

Later, when I reexamined my conversation with the prominent creative writing faculty member, I realized that most of it was miscommunication. I was unable to properly articulate what I meant by research, and the faculty member must have been insulted by my clumsy request. But her answer stuck with me. *We don't do that here*. And I wondered why. Why is writing still so often considered either a mystic art or a skill set and why don't we do more undergraduate research? As a teacher I believe that research is a pivotal, vibrant part of every field, every discipline. We all "do that here." If I could speak to my younger self and answer my own question about how creative writers research, I would say, "We do so much research. We do historical research to write character, we do qualitative research like interviews and observing people in their own environments, we research how our craft actually happens, and we research to better understand why people write the amazing things they write. We do all of that here."

But I understand why my professor responded the way she did because I also struggle to define what I teach, what I write about, and what I research. Our field is deeply complex, and it can be hard to map because members of the field and entities like *YSW* are continually redefining what we do and how we do it. And as a student I lacked the language to phrase my question in way that opened up a dialogue about our writing practices. Unlike chemistry and biology, philosophy and history, the field of composition and rhetoric has no 101 equivalent. Composition 101 or First-Year Writing (FYW) is rarely the same thing as English Studies 101 or Writing Studies 101 or Introduction to Composition and Rhetoric. Most students have a chance to explore composition and rhetoric only after they have decided to major in literature or writing or maybe communication, and they still come to it in a roundabout way, usually taking a 200- or 300-level class to fulfill the requirements of their major. Because of this I often find myself struggling to define what I do in my own FYW classroom. Should I be teaching college writing or should I be teaching an introduction composition studies class or should I be teaching a bit of both? I just know I want to teach writing, and I often find myself thinking back on my experience as a writer for *YSW*. That experience stands in contrast to the arguments that say I should focus on comma splices and topic sentences. That process made me a better writer and scholar in ways that none of my other writing classes did. *It showed me the writing process at work*.

Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle argue in favor of reconfiguring FYW in "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" They write,

[W]hen we continue to pursue the goal of teaching students "how to write in college" . . .—despite the fact that our own scholarship extensively calls this possibility into question—we silently support the misconceptions that writing is not a real subject, . . . [does] not require expert instructors, and that rhetoric and composition are not genuine research areas or legitimate intellectual pursuits. (553)

Downs and Wardle make a passionate plea to change the way we think about the first-year composition classroom.

I had a chance to test those theories in the spring of 2012 when I was assigned to teach ENG 150: Writing and Inquiry. My initial concern about the class was: inquiry into what? I felt that in order to teach inquiry I would need to ask my students to engage in inquiry, and I wanted to find a common focus for my class as a discourse community. I decided to make that common focus writing since I'm a writer and my students are writers: no matter what else we would or wouldn't have in common, we would belong to a common community of writers. I went searching for teaching materials and found Downs and Wardle's article and eventually their book, *Writing about Writing*, on the same subject. I took their challenge to heart and designed my course as an introduction to writing course. In planning my class, I realized that I had never thought much about what it means to teach *about writing*, instead trying to teach my students *how to write* in a variety of rhetorical situations, or to write some kind of academic discourse.

Planning the class quickly became its own inquiry project, and I was soon concerned that I was setting myself up for failure. I wondered: Can my students do this? Can I make them care about writing as a subject? Can I even get them to shift their view of writing as a skill set to seeing writing as a vibrant, rich subject complete with a history and discourse community? Where would I find model texts to support my writing projects? How could I show them this kind of writing happening in the real world? This process of thinking about how I was going plan the class got me thinking about my time as both a contributor and a peer reviewer for *YSW* and considering the way the process affected me. So in order to prepare for teaching my inquiry class I went back through the journals, and there I found student articles which focus on writing as a subject. "Can Writing Be Taught Without Actually Writing?" by Tanja Christiansen in volume 2 models both learning through research and writing, and the creation of new knowledge. "Writing What Matters: A Student's Struggle to Bridge the Academic/Personal Divide" by Emily Strasser in volume 5 struggles with the same pedagogical questions that many researchers and writers have contended with. It was clear that it was possible for undergraduates and FYW students to do this kind of work. I just needed to set up the right support system, and because *YSW* has acted as a trailblazer for the very shift in thinking Downs and Wardle propose, I had access to model texts, examples, and a real-world venue where students could see the work I was asking them to do in action.

My course description eventually read:

This class will explore writing as a subject as we inquire into the question *Why do we write?* And *Why should we write?* To better navigate the discourse of writing (discourse is the academic conversation taking place around a subject matter), we will use the following focusing questions:

1. *Who writes and why do they write?*
2. *How does writing function in our community?*
3. *Who should write and why?*

We will begin by exploring the diverse reasons people write and then shift to exploring our own literacy histories. Each of us has a rich literacy history. We each have memories, experiences, beliefs, and concerns about writing and reading. In this class we will delve into those histories in a concentrated effort to better understand ourselves as writers. We'll use those histories as a way to *step into* writing discourse and explore the ways in which scholars write about writing. Next we'll also explore our local literacy scene in an effort to discover who writes in Lincoln, Nebraska, who is reading in Lincoln, Nebraska, in what ways are members of our community complicating or changing the way we think about writing. Finally we'll attempt to answer the question *Why should we write?*

My students began with a literacy narrative, exploring how they understood the act of writing. I found that most of them viewed writing as a chore, a frustration, or a place of failure. Several students wrote about how much they hated writing. As they explored the subject further, many of them began to understand that they used to like to write, but their experiences in the classroom affected that, in both good and bad ways. Next, we explored the theories and practices that shaped their writing experiences as students. Then we wrote about the way writing impacts our local community, and my students began to see how writing shapes the world they live in. Finally, they researched and wrote on the topics about writing that they found important. I got essays arguing against the way society defines the term *literacy*, essays defending the rights of students to write in their own languages, essays arguing against the standardized test environment, and essays that were trying to answer some of the very same questions I had asked myself when I designed the class—questions about how we balance the freedoms writers need to get messy, to work in process, with the demands of a college system that, as many of my students pointed out, often cares more about mechanics than content.

In this process, YSW provided a rich cache of student writing examples written by students who were actively engaged in the study of writing as a subject for us to explore and fall back on throughout the semester. I looked especially closely at the Spotlight on First-Year Writing section. In volume 9 the editors write:

This year, we received an impressive twenty-four submissions and accepted four for publication. . . . The paper topics submitted included:

- the impact of teacher comments on student writing
- the effects of social constructs of community colleges
- the different power hierarchies in the soccer community
- the relationship between literacy and mass media

The sheer number of submissions we received and the broad scope of the articles suggest that faculty are using a writing and rhetoric framework for teaching first-year composition courses and are encouraging students to publish their work for the benefit of the larger scholarly community. (Hanlon-Baker and Ryan 117)

This reminded me that I wasn't alone. I was in pretty good company. Composition teachers nationwide were teaching writing as the content of their classes. I looked very closely at "Where Teachers and Students Meet: Exploring Perceptions in First-Year Composition" by Angelica T. Nava, also in volume 9, because Nava was doing exactly what I hoped my students would do. She was asking questions. Not just questions about her own writing but researchable questions about the ways we understand writing and the ways we teach writing. I used this article as one of my model texts. "Texting and Writing" by Michaela Cullington in volume 8 was another model text.

My experience as a contributor also supported me as a teacher as I began to flesh out my ideas for the class. I knew that peer review was vital to making my ideas work, but I'd had trouble with peer review in the past. So I was nervous. Actually, I was terrified. Most of my attempts to get my students to give good feedback had failed. I'd tried peer review groups—they stared at each other or talked about football. I had tried peer review pairs, but they seemed unsure of their ability to respond to each other's work and scared to offer any kind of critique, so they simply complimented each other—and then sat staring or talking about football. Somehow all my peer review attempts ended in conversations about football. It was disheartening. I don't even like football!

So when I was planning the class, I looked back at some of my most successful peer review moments; working with YSW was one of those moments. Then I looked back at some of my own less than stellar peer review moments as an undergrad. I realized that the difference between them was how I, as a writer, understood my job as a reviewer. As an undergrad I felt a sense of pressure

to evaluate the other students' writing, a job I felt utterly unequal to. I also felt that the other students had no authority to evaluate my work. It made me resistant, and I could see how my own students might feel the same. So I took a day to really think about how to help them understand the value of peer review. I went back and looked over the feedback I had been given by my faculty advising editor, Amy Robillard. I also looked at some of the reviews I had given to other YSW authors.

In the end, I showed my students a draft of my own article, the feedback I received, and then the next draft. They also read the published draft. We talked about how encouraging, how patient, and how supportive Amy had been. Next I showed them an article I had reviewed and asked what they thought about my feedback. Was it as good as Amy's? Then we talked about how good feedback is that which ultimately helps the writer see his or her own work through another's eyes. Finally we negotiated. I offered them several different options for peer review days, including workshop groups, pairs, and anonymous online peer review. They decided they wanted workshop days when they would work in groups of four. In their letters they would discuss something they loved about the paper and why, ask one good question about a section of the paper, and offer up a wish for the manuscript. Their letters would end by telling the writer where the reader thought the paper was in the writing process. Showing my students the way good feedback can shape a paper through the review process I had participated in with YSW really helped them to understand why they were doing peer review and helped them see ways feedback can support a writer. I won't say that this structure magically solved my peer review problems (some groups still ended up talking more football than feedback), but many students really enjoyed their groups, produced good feedback, and their efforts showed in their drafts.

When I look back, it is clear to me that when Laurie Grobman and Candace Spigelman said, "Students become scholars as they confront, engage, and scrutinize the discourses of their discipline," they were talking about the ways contributing to YSW helps students to "become scholars" in writing and rhetoric (2). This is important because it illuminates the more subtle ways YSW has deeply benefited the field of composition and rhetoric through writers turned teachers like me. This legacy of writers helping writers become better writers/scholars/teachers is YSW's contribution to the field of composition and rhetoric. My experience with YSW has shaped the way I teach composition, and hopefully the way I teach will shape the way my students think about writing, and hopefully some of them will eventually find themselves in front of a classroom of novice writers. And as we move forward into YSW's next decade, I believe we can continue to trust the journal to observe the practice of creating space for young scholars to join the conversation—to share their views on how their composition classes should be taught, their views on the significance of the personal in academic writing, their views on the ways teachers' comments affect student writers. Because that is very much what we do here.

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