

# Writing in the Disciplines

## Education Interview: Karen Day

**Dr. Will Garrett-Petts:** Let me welcome you today to the fifth in our series of interviews on "Writing in the Disciplines." We are joined today by Dr. Karen Day, from the Faculty of Education, and Sherry Newdorf, a student currently enrolled in the program, plus members of the 303 class. Let start things off with a question to Karen about the Education Program's view of writing. How important are strong writing skills for students entering into the Education Program?

**Professor Day:** I think they're very important. We think that writing well is thinking well, and to think clearly you must write clearly. We think that's important for teachers and for students--and for younger elementary students as well.

**Garrett-Petts:** One of the prerequisites for entry into Education is English 308 or English 309 (Advanced Writing)?

**Day:** Yes. I didn't look at the requirements before coming here today, but I think we'd like six units of upper-level English, and we prefer them in Composition.

**Garrett-Petts:** And how well, Sherry, has that prepared you for the kind of writing you are doing right now in the program?

**Newdorf:** I have to be honest with you, I never took that--the third-year composition.

**Garrett-Petts:** Then how did you get into the program! [Laughter]

**Newdorf:** I had a lot of experience with children, so that's basically what pushed me in. I had all the prerequisites. I had all my upper-level English, but the Composition, in particular, I did not have. I wish I had, though, because right now my writing is...well, I slide by with my writing and I don't feel as confident with it as I'd like to. Though right now I'm feeling much more confident than I did in September of last year.

**Garrett-Petts:** So you're in the second year right now?

**Newdorf:** I'm in the first year.

**Garrett-Petts:** First year if the Elementary Ed Program?

**Newdorf:** Yes.

**Garrett-Petts:** Give us an idea, a snapshot of the kind of writing you do within the program. What kind of assignments are given? What do you feel the expectations are? And then I'll turn to Karen and see if there's a match between your experience and what the program (ideally) demands.

**Newdorf:** Every class has some form of a writing assignment, whether it be a paper or a report. The majority of assignments, though, concentrate on you as a person: you take an idea and go with it and think about it, put your thoughts in it, add a little bit of research and write it into a formal paper. Right now, in Karen's course, we're doing a lot of reflective writing: thinking about ourselves and how we view ourselves in Education. We're not writing the formal papers you might write in a course like Geography, which are pretty formal. A lot of the writing we do in Education is based on your own thoughts, your own personal reflections.

**Garrett-Petts:** You're making a pretty clear distinction here between formal papers, formal writing and what you're calling reflective writing. Perhaps that's akin to the sort of things that we've been discussing elsewhere in this series of interviews, where we've been talking about more personal writing--or about investing "the personal" into the rhetorical situation. How important do you think it is for Education students to gain confidence writing reflectively about their own experiences? And I take it that they are writing personally, rather than in a detached, third person voice?

**Day:** What we like to have our students do is look at the current theories and practices in the school, and through writing, find a place for those theories and practices in their own teaching and learning--in their own education. Or in their experiences as volunteers. These students have to have a lot of hours as volunteers with young children, so they've had some experience with children and with writing and with learning themselves to write and to read. We want them to look at that relationship between theory and practice, and then using those two pieces of data, project to the future what they would like to do. We find that if students don't look at their own experiences they're not willing to change. If students do not reflect on such matters, what happens is that they go into a classroom and they do exactly what they did when they were in school as elementary students, rather than incorporating the more recent research and more current practices. So if we can get them to look at those practices in relationship to the way they learn, then we have a chance of having them see what's important and what the differences might or might not be. We want to encourage them to incorporate all that into a personal philosophy of their own.

**Garrett-Petts:** Which is something that they have to articulate within the program.

**Day:** Yes, they do.

**Garrett-Petts:** [To Ms. Newdorf] Have you had to do that?

**Newdorf:** Yes, I did my own personal philosophy.

**Garrett-Petts:** What does that look like, sound like?

**Newdorf:** It's very personal. It's the "I feel, I believe, my duty is", and there's no right or wrong. It's about how you feel children should be learning and how the whole education system should work.

**Garrett-Petts:** Have you noted any difficulty, then, if somebody were to come into the program with expectations of writing highly formal papers in a detached, third person stance--"This report found that..." sort of voice--when they are now being asked to write up their own personal creed?

**Newdorf:** That's how I learned to write (in the more formal style), and it wasn't until last semester that I realized that's not how I was expected to write in Education. So I ran into a lot of difficulties with that. Before, it was all grammar, spelling and red marks all over my papers. I had no confidence in my writing at all. So then to be asked to write something that is a personal philosophy, that's not structured in any way, is pretty demanding....so I actually did and it took a while and it took a lot of looking at myself and writing a lot of notes and trying to sit down and going, "ok, what do I believe?" It is a big change from what I'm used to. It is a big change and it takes a lot to get used to the challenge of writing more personally, but you do feel like a better person when you have accomplished something like that.

**Garrett-Petts:** Now this is one assignment among many, presumably. There's a range of writing styles that you have to adapt to? Or are all your writing assignments in this personal vein?

**Newdorf:** Some of them will make more formal demands, but none of them are completely formal. Not like we're used to writing outside the Education program--they're not formal like that. They have a bit of the formal in them, but a lot the writing we do is about how you feel, how you would adapt this to your teaching. Is it important to you? how can you critique this? Those are the kind of questions we address. A lot of it is, "Give me something and let's talk about it." And you talk about it in...most of the papers; actually all of them will have that in them. We have our journals as well, and there too we write in a personal voice.

**Garrett-Petts:** So you have personal diaries, logs, journals, they go by many names. Would journal writing be a part of all areas in the field of Education? There is a split, is there not, between experimental studies within education and then more narrative (or ethnographic) studies?

**Day:** I'm not sure I know what you mean. But I think that educational psychologists in general are more quantitative in their approach, while most elementary teachers, I think, are looking more reflectively. There's a big emphasis in our field on the "teacher as a researcher." What we are trying to encourage teachers to do is to take command of their own classrooms, to look at the problems and pose research questions for themselves. To do the research in their classroom and make decisions for themselves. Our writing reflects this. We encourage using writing as a tool to document and reflect.

**Garrett-Petts:** In terms of preparation, ideally what would you like students coming into the program, to be able to do when it comes to writing? To be able to have some experience with writing personal narratives of one kind or another?

**Day:** Actually, I can tell the students that have taken third-year writing courses: they are more comfortable...

**Garrett-Petts:** Good or bad?

**Day:** Good! ...they are comfortable with saying "I" and not distancing themselves. They are more comfortable with giving their opinion and sharing their opinions with others. So, yes, we can tell a difference. For those people who have had nothing but instruction and practice in the formal kind of essay--they're initially suspicious of what we want them to do. We teach our students the process of writing just as we teach it in elementary school, and our students work in writing groups and pairs. Many students have never done that. Now if they've been in intermediate or senior-level writing classes, they've had that experience. That helps a great deal.

**Garrett-Petts:** Sherry, you hadn't done group writing before?

**Newdorf:** If I did, it was still checking the sentences, checking the spelling, checking the grammar. It was never sitting there and, as we are doing now, reading. I would never have read a reflective paper, or anything like that, to my peers; but I feel comfortable now doing that.

**Garrett-Petts:** How often do you workshop your writing?

**Newdorf:** We're never forced to. But I find myself asking for feedback outside the classroom. A lot of times, even I'm writing a paper now, I read it to my girlfriend over the phone. It's become a habit now and you feel good about it because you learn about the content; you feel good about the content and then once you felt good about that, the rest of it will fall in too after.

**Garrett-Petts:** [To Professor Day] You encourage collaboration then?

**Day:** Yes, and we do that in class as well. We give class time for doing that. They have set writing groups, so that they begin to trust and know what to expect from each other. After a while, they learn they can revise and help each other with the content.

**Student Panelist:** It's still like the student having to re-learn all over again in a way because a lot of the academic subjects, your instructors in undergraduate work are telling you, keep that personal out and make everything very objective--and I would still think it would be uncomfortable for even me, someone who has taken this writing course, to go in and suddenly go start working on my own journal? It must take a little bit of work. I can see why it must be a transitional period in that first semester.

**Newdorf:** It's an easy transition, though.

**Garrett-Petts:** Is it?

**Newdorf:** Once you've spent a couple months doing journals and doing these types of more personal papers, where you have to have an opinion and you have to put that forth--it comes to you, it really does. And you can notice a difference within the first couple months. I did, and I was one of those tied to the formalized, structured, topic-centred writing. So, you'll learn it.

**Garrett-Petts:** Are there other reservations here about this process? It does sound like a real transition? As we've been discussing how to write a history paper, sociology paper, geography paper, English paper, we've noted that, while no one discipline speaks with a single voice--and there is certainly room to negotiate a kind of a personal engagement with the subject matter even in the most objective sounding of disciplines--that the personal isn't privileged quite as much as it sounds like it is within Education.

**Student Panelist:** Sounds like it's the opposite ends of the pencil.

**Day:** I think it is. One way we bridge this gap is when students start writing journals. They know that journals are not graded. They're read and responded to but they are not graded and that's a revelation. You know when people don't trust you to not grade at first because their writing is very stiff. Then my hope is that people start writing for themselves, asking their own questions, posing answers for themselves. Once that happens I feel like we've accomplished what we're trying to do. But you're right, there is a mistrust at first because we're so used to that "red devil" going all over the page.

**Garrett-Petts:** I don't always use a red pen. [Laughter] Are there always other reservations about this kind of writing? [To the student panel] What do you make of the difference between writing in Education and writing in various other disciplines? Do you think that your training has prepared you to enter into a field like Education if you wanted to? Dan, what do you think?

**Student Panelist:** I do. Yes. It seems like we've been working on this since, I think, September. Our first assignment was a highly personal assignment, so I certainly feel more prepared now that I've done some of that writing. Yes.

**Garrett-Petts:** Then there really is a full range of writing styles out there and it strikes me that what you're representing is a professional writing area: you're training students, many who are graduates with training in another field, for specialized professional writing tasks. So there must be some attitude change that you hope will take place with the kind of writing assignments that you're asking for.

**Day:** Yes, we are hoping for change. But it happens through other ways than just the writing. The students begin the semester as first-year students with a two-week course in communications. They practically live and eat and breath together for two weeks. During that time they become very close and supportive of one another. We build a trusting close relationship among the students, one that we work very hard to establish during those first two weeks. That then sets the stage for us to be doing other things. I also want to say that what we're saying is very true of a couple courses. The Ed psych course does critique journal articles in a more formal way, one that is perhaps more familiar to you. But still there's a personal element that's allowed there, so there is a range. What I'm representing is more of what I do in my class and a few others--but there's a range, and in Education you are likely to do much more personal writing than any writing you've done before.

**Student Panelist:** Is this fairly standard? I mean, is this emphasis on the personal just one style of building teachers.

**Garrett-Petts:** There are other programs of course. There's Simon Fraser's program, UVic's program, or University of Alberta--all within shouting distance of UCC. Are they similar?

**Day:** I don't have enough experience to answer that question very well. UBC follows the same program as we do--and we do a lot of journal writing during the practicum as well as during class time. I know the U of A does a lot of journaling--I've taught there, but I don't know about Simon Fraser.

**Student Panelist:** I would think that you would have to practice this type of a personal writing in order to be teachers because, if you can't think about why you're doing something, if you can't personalize it, then how are you going to "see" yourself in the classroom? Then how are you going to be able to look at how your children are thinking, if you can't reflect upon your own practice? So learning to be a reflective teacher would have to be an aspect of every program in Education?

**Day:** I think other programs try to do it. I certainly know at the U of A, where there are classes of 240, it doesn't work as well as it does here.

**Garrett-Petts:** So how big are your classes?

**Day:** 20, 22, 25.

**Newdorf:** It's very nice.

**Garrett-Petts:** And that initial orientation session that Karen was speaking about where you become very close very quickly, does it actually work?

**Newdorf:** Oh, you do get close. Within the first three days you've got everybody's name and you're comfortable. You're very comfortable. You can get right up in the class after about the third day and start speaking.

**Garrett-Petts:** Running around as animals?

**Day:** We do a lot of silly things.

**Garrett-Petts:** But presumably this adds to that whole collaborative sense that you were referring to earlier when you ask people to engage, or encourage people to engage in collaborative writing, giving them feedback and that sort of thing. That kind of experience gives the sense of trust that allows for comfortable communication?

**Newdorf:** You can express your feelings a lot easier and you become a better person for that too when you're able to share.

**Garrett-Petts:** We've been talking about preparation for the program, we've been talking about what goes on in the program with special reference to the kind of writing, what about when you graduate from the program? As a practicing teacher, what kind of writing do teachers do, and are they well prepared when they leave?

**Day:** I'd say they're fairly comfortable with the day-to-day writing that teachers must do on the job. During the second year, after this initial writing experience, our students go for a 13-week practicum, and during that time they engage with their school associates in writing report cards, doing parent-teacher conferences within the school--so they have those experiences and we have seminars during that time, and we brainstorm ideas for phrases and ideas that people can use to write report cards. So I think they do feel fairly comfortable.

**Garrett-Petts:** That's one of most intimidating tasks isn't it, for a new teacher?

**Day:** Yes it is. A lot of them try writing newsletters home to parents during their practicum times, so I think they get a fair amount of experience and I hope they feel fairly comfortable.

**Garrett-Petts:** When you say writing a newsletter home, do you mean literally putting together a newsletter?

**Day:** Putting a newsletter together to send home to parents of the elementary children in their classroom.

**Garrett-Petts:** Using a word processor, using desktop publishing? All of that?

**Day:** Yes. That's usually available in the schools.

**Garrett-Petts:** Is that all part of what you're learning in the Education program as well? How to do that?

**Newdorf:** Not yet. We're learning the basic writing and that but as to...

**Garrett-Petts:** The technological expertise?

**Newdorf:** ...everybody has some of that prior to their entry into the program.

**Garrett-Petts:** Or if they don't maybe they should think about it?

**Newdorf:** Well, we have computers available to us right between the two rooms, and I think next semester there's actually a computer course to help.

**Day:** There's a computer option for second-year students after they come back from their practicum. We can't squeeze it in before, but many students have acquired word processing skills at this point.

**Garrett-Petts:** Again, that's something that you're looking for as good preparation coming into the program.

**Day:** Yes it is.

**Garrett-Petts:** And then you build on it within the program. Let's turn back to the student panel. What sorts of things are we missing here when it comes to talking about writing and education in terms of expectations, questions that you might have in the last couple of minutes. [Silence] We've covered it all! [Laughter]

**Day:** Another thing that we do is have our students write in the ways that they will ask their students to write. So we write poetry, and we write fables--and other modes that probably you haven't written in quite some time. Very often I get students who've not written anything in that form ever. There's a fair amount of creative writing. In in the language arts class you submit a portfolio of your writing.

**Garrett-Petts:** Doesn't one of your assignments ask your students to write and illustrate a children's book?

**Day:** If they take the second year option of Children's Literature.

**Garrett-Petts:** So they have to put together their own images, their own text and make them all work somehow together.

**Day:** And they do, and they are wonderful. It's quite exciting.

**Garrett-Petts:** So you're really teaching writing and various aspects of writing from the inside out as well. Not only knowing about, but knowing how?

**Day:** We're trying to. We endeavour to do that.

**Garrett-Petts:** Well I want to thank Karen and Sherry for joining us here today, and thanks to the student panel. You've offered us some genuine insights into the role of writing in an Education program.