I have to admit that when I was handed a copy of Richard Light’s book *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, I was prepared to find it a dry tome filled with countless survey results and pie charts. But I was pleasantly surprised. Light interviewed college students about their experiences and then presented his findings in a very approachable manner, filled with quotations by student respondents. In several instances, what he reported justified what I attempt in my own courses, even though my reasons for doing so are largely intuitive. For instance, Light (2001: 55) found when analyzing students’ level of engagement with specific courses that the relationship between the amount of writing required of students in a course and their engagement with that course is “stronger than the relationship between students’ engagement and any other course characteristic.” All teachers toiling over a stack of papers should take heart from that one.

But I also took from the book some teaching tips based on what students told him. The one that most intrigued—and terrified—me was the concept of the one-minute paper written by students at the end of class as an immediate assessment of how well they grasped what the professor was striving to communicate in the class. Light’s idea is to give the students a couple of minutes at the end of class to write, anonymously, answers to two questions:

1. What is the big point, the main idea that you learned in class today?
2. What is the main unanswered question you leave class with today? What is the muddiest point? (66)

The thought of actually finding out after class what the students got out of that day’s class did indeed cause a shiver to run down my spine, particularly when I recollected those days where I could be accused of caring more about entertaining than educating, but I decided that I wanted to try the method to gain a better sense of what my students were taking from my classes.

At the time, I was teaching two courses, a junior-level course in American women writers and Introduction to Literature. The first was composed
of English majors and other self-selecting individuals, many of whom had taken other classes from me. It was a very comfortable atmosphere, and the students were a very bright and highly motivated group. The other course was composed of incoming first-year students, none of whom were English majors and all of whom were there only because the course is a university requirement. Combine their newness to my classroom, the university, and the course with the fact that the class met at 8:10 in the morning, and one can readily understand why they were not a very talkative group.

After a couple of attempts at getting information from the junior-level class by way of the one-minute paper, I realized that most of what I was reading after class I had already heard expressed in class. The format did not offer that much insight into the day’s work, since those students were very willing to express themselves and/or ask questions during the class period, so after a few times, I stopped employing it.

But the results from the introductory class were quite another story. Even though it was a small class, this group was reticent to answer my questions unless I called on specific individuals. Moreover, given their general insecurity, they rarely asked a question of me and almost never asked me for clarification of a point or concept. But they were willing to ask those questions on the one-minute papers. A common comment from the start of the semester was, “I am still struggling with how to figure out the theme of a story.” On almost any day that we introduced a new literary term or concept—types of irony in this instance—a student would write, “I don’t really understand the different types of irony and how to tell them apart.” This information provided me a sense of what I needed to review in the following class.

I also found that students would ask questions, oftentimes very perceptive ones, that they were too shy to ask in class. On a day when we discussed Stephen Crane’s “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” a student asked a great question about the character Scratchy Wilson that I wish had been voiced in class: “Is it possible for a character to start off flat and become round?” Again, the questions provided me a springboard for the start of the next class. I felt, and I believe students did too, that I was actually teaching to their level of understanding rather than blindly pursuing an agenda with no feedback from the very people I hoped to engage.

An interesting added benefit that I had not expected was that I gained confirmation that good classes had been good for all parties. All teachers have had the experience of leaving a class thinking that it was a particularly
good one but having no means to find out what the students got out of it. The one-minute paper provides that means. On a day when I spent far more time than I normally do going very slowly and thoroughly through Shakespeare’s “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day” and “My Mistress’ Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun,” I asked them to write a one-minute paper. I left class that day excited about what a productive experience I thought had just occurred. Their papers confirmed that it had indeed been productive.

One student wrote, “It’s amazing how deep meanings are in the poems that we don’t see from the first few readings. Poetry really needs to be critically read and reread to be understood. I also realized how important a dictionary is.” Another commented, “I have never enjoyed poetry before this last week. However, after going through each of these poems in detail, I see how much is hidden and can be revealed as you read and really try to understand.” One student noted, “The point that I got out of today was how Shakespeare was an absolute genius.” Perhaps the best comment — certainly the most youthfully grandiose — was from the student whose closing comment was, “Everything makes sense in the world now, or seems to, because I’ve had the greatest epiphany.” Needless to say, I was extremely happy to learn that my slowing down helped the students to gain a better understanding of the material at hand.

I decided at the end of the semester to apply one more step in the process by asking the students to provide feedback on whether they thought the one-minute papers were useful additions to the course and their learning. Ten students said they were helpful; four said that they were sometimes helpful; three said that they were not helpful. Most of the people who found the process helpful provided responses similar to that of one student who said, “It presented an opportunity to ask and tell you about the things we found confusing and unclear.” Several noted the connection between reflecting and writing about the class and the clarification that resulted. One student put it this way, “Sometimes I didn’t know what the stories or poems were about, but after I wrote the quick response questions I had a better grasp of the main or recurring themes.”

One caveat: this immediate assessment can potentially slow down a course, since one learns that concepts, terms, and analyses must occasionally be revisited if students are going to grasp them. Because my Introduction to Literature course was only one of multiple sections, all of which were expected to cover certain core concepts, I felt torn between returning too often to previously covered material and continuing to push through at a
faster pace to cover all that was on the syllabus. Perhaps the larger lesson I learned was that I try to cram too much into the semester.

That said, as I write this at the beginning of a new school year, I am again meeting with a group of fresh-faced first-year students at 8:10 in the morning, and I have begun employing the one-minute paper to find out what they are learning. I know that, even if I don’t use this method in my talkative, upper-division course, my entry-level students will benefit from the chance to respond to the class regularly in a format that is safe and nonthreatening. And I suspect that they will learn more about literature as a result.

**Connecting Reading and Writing**

*in the Literature Classroom*

*Phoebe Jackson*

Several semesters ago, I was surprised to learn that my Introduction to Literature course would be held in a computer classroom, a room dominated by the cold and impersonal hardware of computer terminals, despite my course objectives: to develop “the student’s appreciation and enjoyment of selected works in fiction, drama, and poetry.” It quickly became evident that giving short lectures and having large/small discussion groups would have to be held to a minimum. Of necessity, the physical makeup of the classroom and the constant humming of the computers made my usual teaching practices less workable. As a result, much of the work of teaching and learning about literature would have to be done on the computer. To do so, I incorporated into my daily curriculum multiple “low-stakes writing” assignments, which Peter Elbow (1996: 286) defines as writing that is “supplementary and experimental” and not necessarily graded.

Compositionists (Horner 1983, McQuade 1992, Elbow 2002) have long discussed both the institutional and pedagogical split between literature and composition that sees writing and reading as opposed activities. However, influenced by new theoretical approaches to literature, especially reader-response theory, some critics (Bizzell 1986, Elbow 1996, Schroeder 1999) have tried to stress the linkage between reading and writing, which


**Works Cited for From the Classroom**


