

Chapter 17. First Steps in Academic Publishing: Bringing My Writing into the Published World

Despite my commitment to teaching writing, in order to gain tenure in my department I needed to publish on traditional literary topics. I delivered literary papers at my campus and regional conferences and managed to publish one article on Kurosawa's film adaptation of *Macbeth* (1977b). That paper relied on the trope of order and disorder I had been interested in since undergraduate years, but here realized in cinematic terms. Other than the challenge of analyzing filmic images and tempos, this was by now for me familiar turf. I also spent far too much time writing for literary critical collections that never appeared, though my individual chapters had been accepted by the editors. The main lesson I learned from these attempts was never to write for a collection unless I had solid assurances that the book would appear. One project that never reached publication because the collection collapsed, however, stretched me as a writer. My task was to place Nabokov's late novel *Lolita* within the development of his entire corpus, in particular showing how his fictional structure and authorial stance emerged in its mature form; I was later to return to such lifespan corpus analysis when I looked at the writings of Joseph Priestley, Adam Smith, and Thomas Edison—and then in recent years as I made lifespan development of writing and its relationship to consciousness formation a focal issue.

The one kind of literary writing I found most engaging and from which I learned the most was a series of eight book reviews for *The Nation* magazine (1972-1975). This made me think much more about the needs of the reader and the purpose of my evaluations. I had the good fortune of the editorship of Emile Capouya who was my colleague at Baruch as well as publisher of *The Nation*; he had a long and successful career as an editor at a number of progressive publishers including New Directions. He gave me wide latitude in selecting books to review and encouragement in developing my point of view—a welcome freedom from the pressures I had felt from undergraduate days to avoid criticizing works prized by the instructors, which usually meant the texts they assigned to write about. Now I was free to like what I liked and even more to dislike what I didn't. His editorial suggestions were mostly directed toward the pacing of my articles, to make my dense prose “breathe a bit,” as he said. At one point we collaborated on a proposal for a textbook on critical reading, though we could not find a publisher. He taught me a lot, and publishing in the journal gave me confidence to express challenging views to wider audiences (though the magazine's readership was still a pretty rarified, educated, progressive group).

Writing about Writing

I was, however, more enthusiastic about sharing ideas about teaching writing among similarly interested colleagues. In addition to conference presentations, I wrote a few short minor pieces, some published, that expressed my early views on the teaching of writing. One early unpublished essay (which seems to have been written no later than 1973, my second year of teaching college writing) was a kind of credo. “Simple Writing” was a series of short epigrammatic, sometimes enigmatic sentences, appearing to be influenced by Cunningham and perhaps the later Wittgenstein and Nietzsche. All the statements were presented as skeptical, self-assured, and transgressive, with the rhythm and format of my recent poems, which I was still writing, but which soon ceased. I was trying to develop an authoritative professional voice that focused on student needs and dynamics in learning to realize their expressive intentions, finding their words from within. Although I still was caught in literary ideologies of expressivism, individuality, anti-specialization, and skepticism of expertise, some ideas explored issues that I would expand later as I gained experience and developed research. I, however, was not yet paying attention to larger social systems, nor understanding the classroom itself as a specialized communicative system.

In a short joint statement from CAWS on standardized testing which was published in *College Composition and Communication* (1976b), I started to learn to collaborate with colleagues and come to agreement on principles. I was also learning collaboration on other documents that circulated locally. Skills of coming to shared language that mediates differing viewpoints to create shared commitments are important for institutional agreement. Such skills of finding shared language turn out also to be important for singly-authored work, where one needs to craft findings and ideas in ways that will enlist readers of varying perspectives while still staying true to what one has found. Making strong statements while avoiding misunderstandings and distractions, being careful with terms that some may find volatile, avoiding non-essential quarrels and other potential landmines—all these require thought and developed skill, and are not always successful. At the same time, I began to learn how to recognize the limits of what was possible to get agreement on, how to limit claims to potential areas of agreement, and how to calibrate potential audiences in terms of where agreement is possible. This knowledge of the complex socio-ideological landscape one is speaking to is something that continues to grow with wider experiences and is one of the later developing areas of skill (see Beaufort, 1999).

Nonetheless, my initial statements on writing were fairly conventional within the writing community and my first major collaboration was a traditional classroom handbook, with a few specific innovations. I met my co-author Harvey Wiener through CAWS where he was one of the founding co-chairs and I was secretary. He invited me to join with him on a project he had already had a contract for: an *English Skills Handbook*, which combined principles for both

reading and writing (1978b). That combination was one of the book's major innovations, contrasting with the traditional focus of handbooks only on writing. The other was to present principles in as direct and simple a way as possible for a basic writing student, minimizing technical language and avoiding barriers to understanding.

Combining reading and writing was Harvey's idea and the basis for the contract. He initially brought me on to write the writing skills component. I reviewed all the extant handbooks, identified the topics covered, and made the presentations and examples as easily understood as possible. However, in reviewing the handbooks, I found at that time very little on writing processes (which was just emerging as a research topic and pedagogic priority), so I added a section on this. Additionally, I added a brief chapter on essay examinations, a common form of writing students needed to address. For me working on this book was an introduction to the world of textbooks, and simplifying the formal suggestions of a handbook to be appropriate for a basic writing audience challenged me to adopt an even clearer style and careful selection of what was essential. The book also got me thinking about the relationship between reading and writing and the limitations of the then current ways of making that connection.

From a marketing point of view, combining reading and writing in a single book turned out to be not such a good idea, since courses in the two were largely separate at the time, and often taught in separate departments. Speaking as directly as possible to basic writing students, however, was much needed. So, we separated the two parts and went through many editions and versions of each half (a total of 27 books by the end). The last spin-off appeared in 2006, almost thirty years since the first book appeared. As this series of books continued to sell, I became attuned to how textbooks were used in classes and how teachers used these books for various purposes. I started to think of textbooks as creating activity structures fitting within the activity structures of classes. I continued to work on making the books speak more directly to students, although presses made publication decisions and teachers and committees made adoption decisions. I had to learn to wend my way through complicated audience structures, with numerous levels of choice makers and users. Failure at one level could then lead to failure at others. Sometimes I was more successful at this than others. Even if books were contracted, if editors and salespeople did not understand them, editing and marketing could distort projects and lead to unsellable books. If the committees and teachers could not imagine how the book would fit with appropriate courses, it would not be adopted. If the book didn't work with students, adopters would not renew and publishers would be disappointed—and most importantly students would not benefit. Consequently, I learned to pay attention to the reaction and reviews at each level, even if I did not always agree with the suggestions. Each complaint flagged a problem in reaching the audience, even if it didn't clearly diagnose or resolve the issue. Each complaint indicated something I still had to work on.



Figure 17.1. Some Textbooks

In revised editions of the *Writing Skills Handbook*, I reorganized and elaborated key parts to emphasize the process of composition and how to write about sources, moving beyond the traditional narrow focus on citation form. I included a section on the research paper, as I started to understand its role in teaching skills of writing about reading, through fostering closer reading, response, and evaluation, despite the obvious artifice of the assignment. Mina Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations* (1977) had made some brief, unelaborated comments on academic writing and use of sources. From my experience as a student, I saw academic writing as going beyond matters of form and convention to deeper issues of intellectual development and elaboration of thoughts. I began exploring what was to be the pedagogy of *The Informed Writer*, discussed in the next chapter.

The reading skills books went through even more editions and versions than the writing skills book, addressing different skill levels and different focuses, including reading textbooks and cross-cultural readings. I began to take shared responsibility for these books, developing my writing in two specific ways. First, I worked on selecting materials that would engage students and would practice the kinds of skills we were targeting. I had been doing this since I had started teaching, but here the challenges were higher and the audiences larger and more widespread. Harvey and I spent many hours looking at candidate selections, developing criteria, evaluating choices, considering the contribution of each selection to the whole ensemble of each collection, and sequencing readings. The second area of work was to construct study questions. While the questions were standard in format for previewing, skimming, content comprehension, inference, and evaluation, I soon realized these questions could be more than random: they could serve as sequential paths to a deeper reading and understanding of each selection. Framing sequences of questions to move the students beyond a superficial “correct” reading became my major challenge. This sequencing of questions helped make more explicit for me what was involved in more subtle and sophisticated reading of even apparently simple texts.

Learning About My Own Writing from Teaching

My teaching of writing started to influence my own writing practices. The first impact grew from what I had been learning while teaching early grades, about keeping my students' understanding, engagement, and practice activities in mind. In preparing materials for developmental students at the university, I became explicit and clear in what I presented and asked for; at the same time, I sought ways to engage students' feelings, experiences, and complexities of thinking as young adults in a rich urban world, whatever their level of achievement in academic literacies. As a student I had grown most rapidly in the presence of teachers who engaged my concerns and were receptive to the ideas I was trying to formulate. As a teacher, I needed to follow the students' perceptions, interests, and needs, and then to show how what we read and wrote about would help them pursue their compelling concerns.

The simplicity, focus, and explicitness of style for my teaching materials continued as writing goals while I engaged less familiar and more complex materials in my pedagogy, research, and theory. I tried to make difficult topics as clear and simple as I could, without distorting or over-simplifying the materials and issues at hand. When first working through my ideas I used the terms most meaningful for me, but then would revise what I finally came to in terms intelligible and meaningful for the intended audiences. This was a process Linda Flower was memorably to call transforming writer-based prose to reader-based prose (Flower, 1979).

As part of setting out a clearer path for my readers, I started to incorporate a practice I learned from textbook publishing: using subheadings and other text organizers to help the reader through the different sections and to make the logic of reasoning and exposition more visible. This had the added benefit of making the logic more explicit to myself, leading me recursively to elaborate some of the connections and transitions in my reasoning. These subheadings are now sometimes integrated into my planning, though sometimes I create them in revision, bringing out the logic and continuity of material I had been creating. This is related to another practice I now use and sometimes recommend to students of creating an outline when I am part way through a draft, to uncover the logic of the emergent reasoning.

Becoming Mindful About Process

As I was teaching in the early years of the process movement, I tried to incorporate more drafting and revision in my classes. This made me more conscious of my own processes, more planful, and more energetic in the emergence of my drafts and revision. Since my first year of college, although I had regularly reworked my creative writing, my writing of academic papers had largely been done in a single draft. While I may have done a lot of mental work beforehand, by the time I

started to sketch out some brief notes and then type a draft, the writing was pretty much in final form, followed usually only by brief (and often inadequate) proof-reading. Even if I had written out a draft by hand on yellow legal pads, I revised little as I typed it out, perhaps fiddling with a few words and phrases. I had actually been proud of how much work I was able to do in my head, thinking it a sign of how clever I was, but when I saw the effect of a process approach on my students' writing, it dawned on me that I might start practicing what I preached. This was a great revelation to me as I discovered my texts improved, and I could focus on different levels of the work at different moments, without having to worry about everything all at once. I didn't have to worry about keeping my syntax simple and correct when I was first articulating or connecting ideas, nor did I have to elaborate examples fully when I was feeling the forward press of my argument.

I noticed, however, that I was quite attached to my first formulations and found them hard to revise. They seemed to capture what was on my mind, and I felt great relief at finding a way to express my thoughts. In order to see the text fresh, I began to assign myself a main question or task to carry out with each revision, although when I noticed other things, I still jumped levels. These new procedures coordinated well with the standard advice at that time of setting aside the text for a day or two, or having someone else read it and give some feedback. Each of those could give me a fresh eye and identify issues for me to formulate as revision questions.

Having a focused task for each level of revision helped me also develop criteria for identifying spots that needed work and for having adequately addressed each trouble spot, whether it was to establish coherence and sequences of thought, to provide concrete examples, or to straighten out the rhythms, sentence organization, and forward motion of the text. When, after systematic examination, the revision had met the criteria for that level, I could move on to the next issue. Once I had answered all my questions and taken all the perspectives that occurred to me, I would have no more leverage on the text, nothing that would suggest further change. I then knew when I had finished revising (at least until I got comments back, which might have given me new issues and perspectives to work on).

This systematic revision also gave me greater confidence when I received questions about the difficulty of some of my writing. I would check that my sentences weren't too long or involuted, my vocabulary was not obscure, my text was organized with enough logic and transition markers, I gave sufficient examples to allow readers to identify what I am talking about, and so on. If all such issues passed muster, I could then surmise the difficulty came from the unfamiliarity of content or perspective, or objections readers may have that led them to resist going down the path I laid out, or some other intellectual differences.

This revision process, of course, was aided as I moved to word processing, with my first home computer in 1983—an early Kaypro II, which the manufacturers optimistically claimed was portable, but which had the look and weight of WWII military field equipment. It pretty much stayed on my desktop. For a

while I still used legal pads for early drafts and sketches, but when I began a draft in earnest I moved to the computer. Now I use handwriting only occasionally for early notes and jottings, and I have closet shelves filled with aging stacks of stockpiled legal pads and boxes of crisp color-coded manila file folders (along with some sheets of unused carbon paper and corrugated bond). My son found it funny as an adolescent that he had inherited my pleasure in haunting the aisles of office supply stores.

Working with my students on time management and deadlines also made me more intentional in setting interim goals and deadlines, in order to let the work evolve and grow. I noticed that one of the biggest reasons for subpar work from students was that they left their assignments to the last minute. As I started to assign interim process tasks, they began working on their writing earlier and returning to it over an extended period. They had more time on task, time for ideas to cook, and time to address each part of the process. This stretching of the timeline improved the quality of writing greatly. Even such a basic thing as asking students to write a sentence or two with preliminary ideas about how they would address an assignment, and then revisiting their plans in later classes would give them the space and time to let the project evolve, apart from any feedback or discussion that might come from me or peers.

In my own writing I began planning the kinds of interim documents I would need and setting time lines for accomplishing stages of the work. I would then recognize that all these interim tasks meant that projects would take time to ripen. As an undergraduate I was somewhat predisposed to this, as I would keep up with readings and discussion throughout the term. I looked on with dismayed wonder as some of my classmates crammed all their reading into the closing week of the term, while I was able to review quickly what I had done and get a good rest before exams. I, nonetheless, was addicted to last-minute all-night writing of papers despite turning over ideas in my head and reading relevant texts for days or weeks. After teaching for a while, however, I had internalized more complex time management. I was able to work on multiple projects at the same time, each at different stages. I could let some lie fallow while others moved forward, and I could vary the level of work so as to not burn out my cognitive resources—perhaps in one day doing some deep early planning on one project, then proofreading on another, then taking notes and marking up analysis for another. So, each project could ripen, while all kept moving forward.

Further, as I became more explicit about how students needed to report on, analyze, respond to, synthesize and integrate their sources, I also became more aware and self-conscious about these activities myself, incorporating some of my own advice, particularly elaborating what the reader is to get from the quoted material and being explicit on my comment or analysis of it.

This interaction between my teaching and my own writing was to continue throughout my career, as my understanding of writing grew. I was soon to add research into this interaction, as teaching and writing presented puzzles for

me to explore and insights to confirm and elaborate. The research fed back into my teaching and writing practice, as well as led to theoretical elaborations at all levels. Organizational experiences and international teaching then extended my opportunities to experience and observe more, further expanding the resources I was able to bring to teaching, writing, researching and theorizing.

Finally, teaching and writing textbooks led me to reflectively codify what I knew about writing, in order to share it. In those days I thought about this sharing as a socially radical project of making available what I had learned through my elite education to those who had not had those opportunities—“spilling the beans” as I thought about it then.