

The Newsletter

Conference on Basic Writing Skills

A special interest group of CCCC



Volume I Number 1

Winter 1982

A Note on CBWS

The Conference on Basic Writing Skills is a new professional organization for people who are interested in the fundamentals of writing and especially in teaching those fundamentals on the post-secondary level. Our primary objective is to make the nature and results of our work better known to each other and to the larger academic community of which we are a part.

Through our special session at the CCCC annual conventions and through our newsletters, questionnaires, and membership lists you will have an opportunity to find out who your basic writing colleagues are and where they are working; to learn about other basic writing programs around the country; to share ideas and teaching strategies with other members; to keep abreast of conventions, seminars, and conferences; and to contribute to the body of scholarly knowledge now emerging on basic writing and literacy.

Although we have been in existence for scarcely more than a year, we have already grown to a solid, broadly based organization with over 160 members from thirty-eight states and Canada. With this base and with our designation as a special interest group of CCCC, we have a strong foundation to build from. What we eventually become will be determined by the scope of our vision and our willingness to work together to achieve the goals we set. Right now, more than anything, we need your participation. Please take the time to fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return it along with the membership form. We want to learn more about you, and we want you to learn more about us.

EDITORIAL STAFF

Charles Guilford	Jay King
Karen Thomas	Susan Hudson
Rick Leahy	Roy Fox

An Interview

with Sondra Perl

The Conference on Basic Writing Skills decided we would like to interview Sondra Perl for our inaugural issue of The Newsletter. Sondra was gracious enough to invite me (Karen Thomas of Boise State University) over to her Riverside Drive apartment in New York. It was two days before Christmas. We curled up with mugs of steaming coffee, and as we talked I noticed the river flowing several stories beneath us. What follows is an excerpt from that conversation.

Karen: You have just been given unlimited funds, personnel, and facilities to set up an ideal basic writing program. What kind of program would you set up?

Sondra: That's a great question. I've been influenced heavily by having run a number of summer institutes on the teaching of writing, and they follow a Bay Area model. In a Bay Area project everybody writes and everybody reads his or her writing in writing groups. In addition, we've evolved a number of our own notions, which I will call a "process approach" to the teaching of writing.

We've developed the model over four summers. I've worked with teachers from first grade through college, and I would not treat basic writers very different from the way I treat any other writers. I don't know if that will astound people but I think they [basic writers] need the same thing everybody else needs, which is an environment in which writing occurs and where it's taken seriously. From that, there are a number of things you can do. I'll tell you a little bit about the principles of the process and my approach to the teaching of writing.

My first premise is people learn to write from writing. I have no doubt about the truth of that statement whether you are talking about first graders or non-traditional college students. You have to do it in order to learn how to do it better. So I always start every class with the act of writing, not with talking about the act of writing.

A second principle is that all writers have composing processes. First graders have a composing process. Basic writers have a composing process. We may not know how the process operates for a given individual, but there is a process anyone will engage in when he or she writes. I'd want part of my class to focus on how the writer writes.

Karen: The individual writer?

Sondra: Yeah. So that each person is studying himself or herself as a writer. We do this by keeping a process journal.

Third is, to understand writing you need to write from many different points of view and in many different modes of discourse or

genre. I would not teach basic writing strictly based on the expository essay. In order to understand the expository essay, you need to write a poem or a play or a short story. You only understand form when you can see the strengths and weaknesses of different forms against others. You understand what an essay can do if you know what a short story does. So I would open up the options available for students to write about. And I would also argue that the expository essay represents a shift in point of view. If you have a narrative and you're talking about yourself and your experience, and if you then begin to think about how someone else would view the experience, or how someone outside the experience would view it, you change the point of view and you begin to have more distance. The expository essay often requires that we stand back and view our subject from a distance.

Karen: Do you set up assignments that use different points of view, then, as a way into genre?

Sondra: All the time. I frequently ask students to rewrite papers from new perspectives

The fourth thing is, writers need to have an audience, and the most available, immediate, and probably the most important audience consists of peers. It is absurd for us not to build upon the social interaction of the classroom. I mean, if the teacher's the only audience, writing becomes a "here-it-is, tell-me-what-you-think, give-it-back-to-me" communication. It goes in only one direction. If writing consists of adapting your point of view or making something clear to an audience, what we ought to do is use the classroom as audience and get feedback constantly from many directions. I have my students read their writing to each other, first in pairs, and then in trios and finally in groups of four.

I learned something else though from working with writing groups. When teachers first went to writing groups or when students went to writing groups, the only thing they knew how to do was to criticize. It's the only model we've seen. We say, "Oh, well, you've missed a comma." Or "You spelled something wrong." Generally our

way to look at writing is to say what's wrong about it or what we didn't understand. And this, as far as I know, is where we've evolved something new in our project.

We teach deliberately from the first day of the project a technique called "active listening." We teach teachers and students how to respond to each other's writing so that they look for the meaning. They look for what the writer's trying to say. They don't try to figure out what the writer's done wrong.

For example, if you wrote a paper and you're in my writing group, and you read it to me out loud, what I would do next is say, "Oh, Karen, it looks to me like what you're trying to write about is, umm--writing labs? And you're sort of interested in how writing classrooms function?" I would say back to you in a questioning tone what I think the gist is of your paper and then you, as the author, have room to say, "Oh, yeah, that's exactly what I was talking about." The whole thing about listening is you need to watch someone do it.

Karen: Do you demonstrate it, then?

Sondra: All the time. The first day of the project we demonstrate it, and you have to demonstrate it frequently with students. Most of the teachers in elementary or high school call it "say-back." You say back what you hear. It's not enough just to put students in groups; it's teaching them how to respond to a piece of writing that works. There are very few people who have studied that in the field.

Most people who teach writing were trained to read a work of literature and analyze it. We're good at analyzing finished products, and we bring that skill to writing. But analyzing finished products is very different from trying to teach someone how to create one. We're good at analyzing but we're not necessarily good at showing people how to create.

Listening is based on the understanding that the meaning isn't always down on the paper; you have some words down, but the meaning isn't all there yet. Listening takes what's there and gives it back to the writer and says, "Oh? Is this what you're trying to do?" And normally what happens is, if you

In San Francisco...

The CBWS special interest session will be held on Thursday at 4:45 in Embarcadero Room A. Our featured speakers--Patrick Hartwell of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Christopher G. Hayes of Ohio State University, and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner of University of Washington--will be talking about their institutions' graduate programs in basic writing. The program should be very worthwhile for anyone interested in establishing such a program or entering one as a student. In addition, because this is the last session of the day, we should have ample opportunity for informal discussion and conversation before departing.

say it back, capturing what the writer was trying to do, she says, "Oh, yeah, that's really what I was trying to say! and" and she normally creates the next piece of discourse--it just comes out. Or she says, "Oh, that really wasn't exactly it. You know, what I really wanted to say was . . . da-da-da" Either way, writers usually go forward, and what they say is the next thing that needs to go down on the paper.

The assumption is that much of the meaning is present, but not fully in words yet. Writers have a sense of what they want to say, and listeners give back a little bit. This allows the writers to deviate further. It's like helping them shape it--as opposed to looking at the work and saying, "Oh, this wasn't clear," with that kind of a comment you want to give up or at least basic writers do. Listening is crucial--learning how to listen to someone else's writing for meaning and learning how to make room for the writer to go forward and not assuming that what's down on the first draft is what's going to stay there. It's even premature to fix it up (edit) because there's much more writing that needs to be done, so I wouldn't pay attention to errors so early in the process. I would just go for the heart of it.

Continued on page 7

Continuing Resources in Basic
Writing: A Personal Reading List

Compiled by Barry S. Kwalick, Instructional
Resource Center, The City University of
New York

Bay Area Writing Project. Curriculum Publica-
tion Series. Tolman Hall, University of
California, Berkeley, 94720.

Center for Applied Linguistics, publications
of. P.O. Box 37422, Washington, D.C. 20013.

College Composition and Communication. Four
issues a year: \$8.00. NCTE, 1111 Kenyon
Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

Composition and Teaching. One issue a year:
\$5.00 for 3 years. Department of English,
Goucher College, Towson, MD 21204.

Exercise Exchange. Two issues a year.
Department of English, University of
Vermont, Burlington 05401. Writing
Exercises from "Exercise Exchange,"
edited by Littleton Long (NCTE, 1976)
offers many of the journal's best.



Forum: A Newsletter of the English Composi-
tion Board, University of Michigan. Three
issues a year. 1025 Angell Hall, Ann
Arbor 48109.

Freshman English News. Three issues a year:
\$2.00. Department of English, Texas
Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129.

Freshman English Resource Notes. Four issues
a year. Department of English, University
of Nevada at Las Vegas 89154.

Journal of Basic Writing. Two issues a year:
\$5.00. Instructional Resource Center, CUNY,
535 East 80th Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10021.

NCTE. Classroom Practices in Teaching English
Series. One volume each year. 1111 Kenyon
Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

Resource: Newsletter of the Instructional
Resource Center. Four issues a year. CUNY,
535 East 80th Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10021.

Teaching English in the Two-Year College.
Three issues a year: \$3.00. Department of
English, East Carolina University, Green-
ville, NC 27834.

WLA Newsletter. WLA is Writing as a Liberating
Activity. English Department, Findlay
College, Findlay, OH 45840.

The Writing Center Journal. Two issues a
year: \$5.00. Department of English,
SUNY-Albany, Albany, NY 12222.

The Writing Instructor. \$8.00 a year.
Freshman Writing Program, University of
Southern California, Los Angeles,
CA 90007.

The Writing Lab Newsletter. \$3.00 donation.
Department of English, Purdue University,
Lafayette, IN 47907.

Rates are for individuals, not institutions.

Questionnaire

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions. Return this insert to CBWS; the address appears on the back of the newsletter.

[The next CBSW Newsletter will report the results of this questionnaire. Please return it even if the only question answered is #2!]

STUDENT HELP: Recruiting, training, using

This questionnaire concerns only basic writing COURSES, since situations are often so different in a drop-in lab.

1. (optional) Name _____
Institution _____

2. Do you use student help in your BW courses?

always often sometimes no

3. If you do, how important do you consider that help to be?

essential very helpful
somewhat helpful only marginally helpful

RECRUITMENT

4. What is the main source of your student help? Please indicate approximate percentages for the last year or so.

A. Money
Federal work-study programs _____
Other (Please specify) _____

B. Internship or other course credit _____

- (1) English majors _____
(2) Education majors _____
(3) Honors students _____
(4) Communication majors _____
(5) Other (Please specify) _____

C. Partial fulfilment of course requirement

English education course (e.g. teaching writing) _____

Other (Please specify) _____

For items 5 through 10, please respond by writing one of the following symbols in appropriate blanks:

- VI = Very Important
I = Important
SI = Sometimes Important
NI = Not Important
N = NO

5. How do you screen potential student helpers?

- A. Ask for writing sample _____
B. Use colleague recommendations _____
C. Have personal interviews _____
D. Ask for responses to BW samples _____
E. Check grades _____
F. Other (Please Specify) _____

6. Please briefly share any suggestion or opinion you may have about RECRUITMENT of student help.

TRAINING

7. What training methods do you find feasible and helpful?

- A. Regularly scheduled meetings _____
B. Handouts for tutors _____
C. Impromptu demonstrations/directions during classes _____
D. Other (Please specify) _____

8. Please briefly share any suggestion or opinion you may have about TRAINING student help.

Also, do you or does your program have any handouts for tutors, screening materials, or other materials that you would be willing to share? If so, please briefly describe what you have and include your ADDRESS. If your materials are too heavy to send under a 20¢ stamp, please indicate so. We will be sure that CBWSN readers have access to your materials-your reproductions, their postage.

USING

9. How do you use student help:

- A. Individual tutoring during scheduled classes _____
- B. Individual tutoring at OTHER times _____
- C. Small-group guidance _____
- D. Scoring test _____
or marking paper _____
- E. Other (Please specify) _____

10. Please briefly share any suggestion or opinion you may have about USING student help.

We are happy to be a clearing house.
First, may we quote you with attribution?

Without attribution? _____

Sondra Perl (continued)

So far we had writing, process, modes of discourse, groups, listening, and there's one more, which is, the ultimate responsibility for the writing remains with the author. That is, it's not the teacher's job to handle correction. Making this paper presentable for a public audience is the responsibility of the author. The author is the owner of the paper. And once the author cares enough about the topic and has invested herself in it and wants to communicate, then it's up to the author to figure out what needs to happen next: "What do I need to work on?" "Do I know that there are sentences and that I need to work on punctuation or grammar?" Teachers take that responsibility away from students, as though it is our job to correct all these papers. And what we're there as is a resource, and other students in the group are a resource. But somehow, somewhere, we have to remember that it's the writer's responsibility.

* * * *

I'd set up a structure with editing groups, where editing is a part of the process, but it's done as a context of someone's writing and it's up to the writer to figure out, at one point, what he or she needs, even if he or she isn't sure. If the writer comes to me, I'm willing to help. But it's not up to me to correct all the papers, send them back, and then tell them to copy over. That just takes the initiative away from the writer.

So those are six principles that I would call principles of the process approach to the teaching of writing, and from that follow lots of things you can do in the classroom.

Sondra Perl teaches basic writing, peer tutoring, and graduate courses in writing at Herbert H. Lehman College of CUNY. She received the NCTE Promising Researcher Award in 1979 for her study of basic writers. In our next issue, she will discuss the practical consequences of the process approach.

* * * *

Join CBWS.

Use this coupon.



Yes, I'd like to become a member of the Conference on Basic Writing Skills and am enclosing a check for the amount indicated below.

_____ \$7.00 Annual membership dues, including four issues of The Newsletter

_____ \$12.00 Annual membership dues, plus two issues of The Journal of Basic Writing, published by The Instructional Resource Center, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York.

Name _____

Address _____

Please return the coupon and questionnaire to:

CBWS
Department of English
Boise State University
1910 University Drive
Boise, Idaho 83725

_____ Check this box to receive a current membership list. No charge to members.