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*October 2004*
Dear Reader,

In this issue, we have two responses: to Neal Bras's "Writing Without Confidence," in Correspondences Four, Ros Rosenmeier proceeds by way of problematizing "confidence" in a rather different setting—a theological seminary. An adult student of typology and the long-lived effects of such habits of thought on Wallace Stevens and H.L. Ross is alert to what E.A. Richards calls "comparison fields" as she knows how settings and purposes can change and how some commonality can remain. She shows how to help students discover the heuristic energy that comes in defining what it is they are doing.

Phyllis Lasmer offers comment from James Britten and D.W. Winnicott (who are brothers-in-law, by the way) and her own views about the problematics of teaching roles. The kind of analysis we have here is crucially important, I think, if we are to understand the dialectics of personal knowledge and the social construction of knowledge.

"Confidence" is, of course, a notoriously problematic concept and the word reflects that complexity. So far as I can see, Neal, Ros and Phyllis are using it to refer to different ideas. Neal puts "lack of confidence" in quotation marks to signal that this is the way students put it—and went on to explore what it is often is, when students come to colleges and universities from environments situations, cultures, circumstances) where such ventures are suspect.

Ros shows us how unfamiliarity, misconceptions, and theoretical ignorances aren't properly thought of as matters of confidence; and Phyllis, in talking about teaching roles, is warning us about unattainable hopes and certainty in our expectations. Her recommendations are consonant with what C.S. Peirce sees as a consequence of taking triadicity seriously. Peirce notes that since our knowledge is necessarily partial, we must "cultivate a contrite fallibility." As we think about how the theory and practice of interpretation (hermeneutics) are constrained by the way we think about signification (semiotics), we will be establishing philosophical perspectives in which to consider this way we teach reading and writing (pedagogy).

In future issues this year, Correspondences will feature Susan Wells joining the dialogue between Jim Zehrovski and Nancy Mack who appeared in our last issue; Donna Kaye on the politics of textbook publishing; essays by John Ramage and Renee Watkins on humanism and literacy. Send me your comments and contributions, especially on the dialogue in Correspondences Seven.

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Migrating with Uncertainty

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The chance to sit across the table from an adult who is writing "something" that is giving some kind of "trouble" offers, I have found, a window on the world for writing that apprentice writers inhabit. The one-on-one conversation reveals gaps and continuities, duplications and contradictions in the writing experiences of adults, in school and out. It helps us to see more of the wholeness of the adult's encounter with writing than the classroom experience allows. Although the "office hour" is not suited to teaching, it is, nevertheless, suited to another kind of activity, which is not, on the other hand, counseling. I would like to try to set down here a view of the issues Neal Bras raises in "Correspondences Five" about lack of confidence among his older students.

I wholeheartedly agree with Neal's statement that "to be an interpreter, to espouse, to argue, to sway, to persuade, to question, to question the personal life, and especially to be the student's therapist is not appropriate..." Furthermore, that role is not the one that my students, who range in age from thirty to eighty, want me to play; they do not seek help from the likes of me with issues that lodge at that depth or level of personal experience. To be sure, psychical continuity, like an underground river, roots beneath the surface somewhere, but my binoculars are trained on the surface features of the landscape the apprentice writer is traveling. My metaphor for the relationship between us, and for the task the writer faces, is the crossing of a foreign terrain. I help the apprentice to map out, predict and make guesses about the terra incognita to which he or she has been placed. The adult, quite pragmatically, quite candidly, requests help with getting, simply, from here to there over the ground, not under it.

For purposes of illustration, I am going to use my experience tutoring one-on-one at theological school, where my students face what I consider to be the quintessential writing situation for adult students. The modern minister writes in several worlds. Training for ministry means training for a number of roles: teacher, counselor, preacher, pastor, business-person, scholar, urban planner, history-writer, critic/editor, and more. Some of this training takes place in the seminary classroom, some in internships, and some occurs, like so much of an adult's education, simply "around the edges," or "along the way.

Each of these potential roles will involve the minister in
distinctly different kind of writing: prose and the conditions that shape the writing task will differ from one role to another.

Seminar instructors must not prepare for a variety of professional applications of their colleague, they come from a variety of backgrounds. The call to ministry can come in the middle of any life at any adult age or stage. Seminarians are active during or after a divorce, a health crisis, a bereavement. They come, as resistant clients, as elders. Sometimes they enter immediately after graduation from college, but their college preparation has taken place in another country, or in an equally "isolated" context of his or her own. A business seminar may enable one student to attend the "luxury" of following, in effect, a second career. For others, studying for the ministry may mean a considerable burden of debt and the necessity of a part-time job. Students come to the systematic study of religions from every academic preparation and from every denominational background. They arrive with the sound of very diverse church experiences ringing in their ears.

Some students seek my help on their own; some are referred, personally from the writing class or writing workshop. I think I can say that, without exception, students do not come for an office hour from "lack of confidence." The hour is requested for help with a usually self-diagnosed writing problem, not for a personal problem. One student discovered she could not "outlive"; she did not know what outlining was, and, although she had done quite a bit of writing, she, in her knowledge, never outlined. Another complained that he could not "see" to "give the professor what he wants." Another wondered why her papers were returned frequently with the comment, "unclear writing." Another did not know what "sentence fragment" was. Another had doubts about his ability to write idiomatic English. My students feed some sense of themselves to me too. But it is a writing crisis, and it is expressed as much.

The request is usually specific. The text and the task have discrete domains. The writing counselor is logged in to his visits with a mental patient; a student is present in the central office of the demonstration, sending a newsletter, which he helps write, to a membership of clerical and lay members. Important levers of confidence, congratulations, refusal, or advice have to be written. And the same week includes a seminar at "school writing" tasks a critical reflection, an interview with a perhaps an attorney, or the first chapter of the Dissertation. Any one of these tasks can prove to be a "problem" for the apprentice minister. Even the experienced writer, who in a day's work must move from one to another of these writing tasks, is faced with the problem of writing for a diversity of audiences and purposes.

The office hour allows as a chance to talk together about just these sorts of problems. By writing, audiences of readers, and how diverse, how different from one another these can be. The conversation can quite profitably turn to personal experiences: not to symptoms, defenses, auto-ideas, splits, dreams and other Freudian matters, but to a review of all the worlds of discourse this adult has inhabited prior to the present world. This kind of assessment or review can be accomplished quickly, or it can be allowed to take some time, but adults do like to talk about their schooling (how "long ago" it was), about jobs they have held, about attitudes toward language and learning in their families of origin, about speaking and reading. My students easily respond to the idea that language habits are habits, and that assumptions about purpose and audience are imbedded in all our communications. They accept the idea that these, at once and at the same time, are what need to be examined and serve as well as in the present situation. The seminar who comes from a career in business faces the year-end business report for their parish with equanimity: the Organization paper is another matter. When I remind the former nurse that she wrote nursing notes in her former life, she is suddenly aware that theological reflection is a very different breed of discourse.

The more experienced the writer, the more automatic will be the manner of expression. The idea that serviceable habits have to be it, if unlearned, at least set aside as modified, is disconcerting. Writers whose grammar is at least adequate for other kinds of writing sometimes find that spelling and punctuation can found in a new and previously untried application. The encounter with a new kind of writing feels like migration to a new found land. It is the quality of the experience, in my view, that makes for unconfidence in adult writers, even when the adult has written apparently without trouble on other, often earlier, occasions.

The office hour is no place to introduce, in effect, to teach, all the skills of the tongue, or even all structures of the English sentence; but it is a place to help the writer achieve a sense of perspective on the fact that different genres serve different purposes. That sense serves to introduce a picture of what the adult student faces: the need to migrate from one world to another. Becoming a native of the new world will take some getting used. New skills will have to form. One needs to be patient with this process. I have some of the conclusion that "lack of confidence" (not quite the right phrase) is not a pathology; it is an apt symptom of adult apprentice writing. There is a necessity, an automatic effect of adjusting to a new environment, a new way of way of thinking and acting with words.

In several respects class assignments present adult writers with a special situation, one that they do not face elsewhere in their lives when they write. That circumstance and its dislocating effects on adult writers deserve comment. The present/same situation, whether the person wrote to her peer and to the doctors, knew why she was writing and to whom. She understood the uses to which her information, recorded on the patient's chart, would be put. She is used to thinking of her purpose as writing to sell someone something they need to know. In order areas of her life, she writes to share family news, to promote her gas bill, to
Most adult students do not take map in hand and head at once across the new terrain. They are more cautious; they make forays first. They need a few trial runs, some testing time. Furthermore, since I have not written some of the kinds of texts they bring in to review, I have to ask questions about the circumstances for writing. The minister of an unprepossessing parish, working in the area of low-income housing, has to write proposals, rally the parish, and perhaps the neighborhood, and go before the Planning Board. There is writing at every stage, and each text belongs to a writing social world, as well as to a world of writing. The minister cannot stop to take a course in building specifications and how to write and read them. Nor does he or she have time to study the proposal writer's tenets, or the chapter on persuasive writing. The minister has to have some ready sense of how to gauge these texts.

The kind of advice Cy Kofahl of the SUNY, Albany, English Department, gave to teachers of writing across the curriculum at the recent MLA meeting in New York is useful as we try to help this busy seminary face the writing tasks included in the urban-planning project. Cy, following Foucault, said, "Discourse is a practice—...not a structure; an activity, not a container or encapsulator; it has form but it is not a form; it is momentarily regular, but not a system of precise or timeless rules; it exists within history, it is a site, shaped by phenomenological, shifting conditions, not a model or code..." It is unwise to try to adjust one's footing, keep one's balance, and learn to assess the shifting conditions for writing, especially when one is in the habit of traveling a familiar landscape where one does not have to write for the unforeseen.

A sense of alienation, disorientation, unconfidence, at times outright panic in the writer/writer-father is to be expected. What cannot be anticipated, predicted, even in the seminar, is the trip we take. How many trials run? How much writing, consulting, rehearsing will be involved as the apprentice writer assesses and practices and finally masters the new writing task? There are countless factors in the seminarian's life that interrupt the process of learning to write. Neat's list of "motives" shared by students who "acquire confidence" helps us to see some of these factors. But, in my view, such matters as a family's lack of support, or a lack of personal confidence, or clarity of direction, are not to be confused with the underlying condition which I have described as traveling across untrod ground. There are personal dilemmas which my students have to attend to, one way or another—some do seek counseling or therapy for their health and finances keep the student writer preoccupied, at the very least. Sometimes attention to these matters can necessitate a semester off. There are countless pressures on adults, in school, not visible to those who teach, and not our responsibility to try to help with, either. But these affect length and duration of time spent at the task. These prove distracting, but they do not have the same effect as the experience of constructing a new kind of writing.
Teaching Without Confidence
Phyllis Lasnier
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Neal Bruns, in Correspondence Fine, addresses a problem faced by many writing teachers: the "frightened" nature of their students who say that their basic problem is that they lack "confidence" and who never fulfill their promise. Bruns approaches this problem from a psychodynamic perspective and suggests ways that teachers might try to help students feel more confident. In this essay, Bruns addresses the issue of confidence and its relation to writing, and he argues that students' lack of confidence stems from their experience of being misunderstood and rejected by others. He suggests that teachers should focus on helping students develop a sense of self-worth and self-confidence, which will in turn help them to become more successful writers.
Transactional writing develops only as students can move confidently away from their dependence on the teacher's empathic support. As writers become competent, they become independent by internalizing support and making it their own. They learn to write to an unknown audience as they come to recognize the safe distance between their egos and that of their teachers.

Embedded in Britton's model are psychoanalytic assumptions formulated by D.W. Winnicott, the British child psychoanalyst. Winnicott concluded from clinical observations that "maturation processes" require a facilitating environment where young children develop a sense of their capacities for learning from symbiotic with a "good enough mother" or caregiver who supports the child's need for dependence while encouraging the need for separation and individuation. (P 11. 55) Painfully ambivalent about leaving the one on whom competence seems to depend, children create images of the caregiver each step that they move away. In this "transitional space," children substitute artifacts for the caregiver until the "transitional object" becomes a sign leading to independent work.

Just as Britton observed children internalizing rules of language, Winnicott saw how they master rules of social interaction. The good teacher, like the "good enough mother," creates a facilitating environment in which competent writing can develop. As Britton observes: "Whether we write or speak, expressive language is associated with a relationship of mutual confidence and trust and is therefore a form of discourse that encourages us to take risks, to try out ideas we are not sure of, in a way we would not dare to do, in say, making a public speech. I am not suggesting that teachers assume the role of mother or therapist, but that elements of nurture and support are necessary to make an active adaptation to the writer's needs. Then, as the student gains mastery and is able, in Winnicott's terms, to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration, they may lessen. In short, according to Britton, the teacher represents a stage in differentiation between self and other, between expressive and transitional language, "as a sympathetic and interested adult, rather than specifically as a teacher." This stage is enacted out of "shared interest and expertise" and in "an accumulating shared context." (Development, 118).

This stage and space are parallel to Winnicott's "potential space," where a need to separate from the caregiver is replaced by the need for independence. In the writing classroom, the instructor facilitates separation and independence by not rejecting the student's need for help, support, and criticism. In turn, the student cannot become autonomous unless the instructor is prepared to let go. As such, according to Britton, becoming an "internalized other"—as the reznder that this first draft will be rewritten and that rewriting means discovering problems and implications that are now recognizable. (Development, 119) Recognition takes place in the potential space where, Winnicott tells us, "there develops a use of symbols that stand at one and the same time for external world phenomena and for phenomena of the individual person." and, I add, person writing. (P 121)

Teaching writing involves both teacher and learner in affective interaction where both are vulnerable. If we are to be good-enough teachers, we must understand how we feel and behave in relation to our students. In her pioneering studies of teacher-student relationships, Elizabeth Richardson, the British educator, observed this vulnerability in the form of mutually shared unconscious need, a dynamic which can be compared to the processes of transference and countertransference in psychoanalysis. Effective teaching would then require a recognition of the transfer of unconscious feeling flowing back and forth between teacher and student. Through her writing at London's Tavistock Psychoanalytic Clinic and Institute for Human Development, Richardson feels that, in a teacher that can both facilitate and hinder teaching and learning.

The teacher's role as leader of a dependent group can set with all the pains and anxieties as well as the pleasantries of the dependency group. We must ask ourselves whether the teaching and learning situation, too, depends on the ability of teacher and class to use this dependent culture in a sophisticated manner, or whether another kind of relationship must be sought. (EL, 52)

Richardson's work is especially important to our understanding of teaching writing as she identifies "the elusive unconscious mechanisms that we all use in our act of difficulty." (Textor, 25)

Richardson felt that teacher evaluation has to be process parallel to the goals of teaching. That is, if we to teach competence and independence, we must be models of the same, and this can only take as we empower ourselves to be as self-critical and self-supportive as we wish our students to be. This can only come about as we
recognize that, like students, we teachers struggle in our desire for and fear of dependence and autonomy in every relationship following our own infancy. In this way, "echoes from the family situation will be at work, if only at the subconscious levels in every teacher-pupil relationship." (EL, 16) That transference and countertransference are as exposed and vulnerable in the teaching setting invite the teacher to reassess his or her ability to deal with students' emotional involvement and conflicts. Richardson identifies such a conflict between a student's desire for a teacher to be perceived as mature and his or her need to rely on the teacher for support and guidance. (Group Study, 7)

In the intrusive setting of teaching writing we can see how teachers...are peculiarly vulnerable to the unconscious re-awakening of their most primitive feelings as they empathize with students' anxieties about exposing their own limitations in writing that threatens to become a humiliating experience for them. (EL, 179). How often, after all, do we see our students, even as we once were or as we would like to forget we sometimes still are, recognize the value of empathy, however, must not invite a fusion of student and teacher identities. To lose sight of where our needs and the student's begins and ends, would be to risk the critical distance necessary for teaching and learning, Richardson notes that affection must be accompanied by detachment so that we do not invite the kind of dependence upon our students that would invite our unconscious ambivalence about risk-taking. For while we take for granted students' anxieties about evaluation, we tend to forget or ignore that teachers feel their own successes and failures reflected in their assessment of students' work.

This dual anxiety demands dual responsibility to our own personal professionalism and to the student's own personal maturation. We therefore want to encourage "a healthy aggressive relationship between teacher and class that promotes learning through a dialectic of discussion and argument." (EL, 54). Without being benefiting, the interplay of differences between teacher and student fosters individualization which not only prevents the replay of psychical patterns destructive to our autonomy, but produces mutual recognition of individual styles of being, leading to mutual respect. Richardson argues that assessments should be "constructive" in that like the child's ongoing separation from parents in which rules are tested and reestablished in forms consistent with growing self-sufficiency, students accept evaluation as an "integral part of learning and living." (Group Study, 42). Thus, in the writing classroom or the classroom, we must tolerate the tentative, sometimes incoherent expressions of thought on the part of our students in order to support the creation of mature, coherent thinking and writing. At the same time, however, we must not repress patterns of thinking which reflect infantile desires to remain close to the object of nurturance. Out of a need to be loved or feared, to be in control, teachers may feel it necessary to affirmative, ignorant, or even foolish ideas in the guise of validating the student's fragile ego. In fact, such uncritical behavior is multiply damaging. It only affirms dependency on a teacher who is actually no more autonomous than the student, and it reinforces the teacher's need to find validation through shared passivity and compliance.

In order to become self-sustaining while risking our vulnerabilities, we must protect ourselves from collusion with students' projections onto us of their anxieties. We cannot feel and behave as though we are ultimately responsible for students' successes and failures. If we resist the inclination to fuse our own needs with those of the student, we will be in a position to perceive our own behavior and that of the student more objectively. Richardson argues that this dialectic of being close while negotiating distance between ourselves and students is a "drama [which] becomes a metaphor in which to see oneself as others see you." (Teacher, 43). This mutual imaging enables us to recognize those features in our personalities which encourage others to react to us as they do, to identify ourselves with another's personality and to work with an awareness of those differences.

To take care of ourselves, however, does not mean to protect ourselves from evaluation with the rationalization that professional autonomy is threatened by recognition of weaknesses. Real professional autonomy requires knowing more about the dependency patterns that allow us to defend against and weal changes. As intellectuals, we may be only too ready to ignore the power of feeling in our thinking. As Richardson warns:

Too much of our thinking is ineffective because it is divorced from feeling. Conversely, too much of our thinking is destructively because, being unacknowledged, it lies beyond the control of our thinking. (Environment, 12-13)

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