

At the Bar

THE NON-THREATENING APPROACH

Susanna Defever

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Writing reveals the writer. It is a highly personal action, and, to many students, a threatening one. Teaching students how to write has been the subject for discussions, analyses, theories, workshops, and countless books. Yet we remain plagued by the uneasy knowledge that illiteracy, once confined primarily

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to the uneducated, can be found in recognizable form on all levels of education.

Peter Elbow and Kenneth Macrorie approach the problem by encouraging student-centered, self-revealing activities for the purpose of discovery and exploration before writing. The prewriting approach can alleviate threatening fears and stimulate learning. It can reveal writing to the writer.

It was in the 1960's that the significance of prewriting experiences began to be emphasized. During a speech to two-year college English teachers in the mid-sixties, Dr. Clinton S. Burhans, MSU, spoke of the benefits of prewriting, especially for students who do not like to write, who find writing difficult, who think it is unimportant for them or just dull routine. There and in his book, The Would-Be Writer, he stressed "freeing the student from what too often seem to be conditioned responses to writing assignments." Today, almost fifteen years later, prewriting activities are still used with notable results. Discovery by design leads to writing with rewards.

Prewriting discovery sessions identify the student as the center in his writing,

THE NEED FOR DIVERSE APPROACHES

Stephen A. Bernhardt

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I have no difficulties with the pedagogical suggestions of Ken Macrorie or Peter Elbow. Free writing exercises can help procrastinators and agonizingly careful self-editors get something on the page, a beginning at least. This kind of help can be extended by appealing to the developing writer's sense of honesty, by instilling confidence in pursuit of a personal voice and thus discouraging vague, boring, Engfishy prose. Directing writing to an audience of peers for comments and suggestions helps writers hear their voices and perceive the effects of their writing on others. My quarrel is not with teachers who choose to use these methods, but with those who choose them to the exclusion of other sound methods.

Teachers of composition cannot be reminded too frequently of the individual nature of writing--each student is different and no single method will meet the needs of all. Though freewriting gets the juices flowing in some, for others it is a waste of time. Certainly there are writers whose anxiety about producing "perfect" copy prevents them from producing any at all. For other writers, however, the problem is not an overactive self-editor, but confusion about what is expected on an assignment, an unclear notion of the audience, a lack of something to say, or an absence of motivation. Still other writers can't begin because they don't know where they are going. A sense of structure may get these students underway with confidence: an outline, a list of major points, or a broad and extremely general sense of the divisions of a piece. Freewriting exercises help only some students solve the varied problems of producing a sufficient quantity of acceptable prose within a reasonable amount of time.

Not only is freewriting supposed to get writers underway; it is also meant to help them discover both what it is they want to say and a personal, honest voice for saying it. All of Macrorie's examples of Telling Writing feature a

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not the instructor. In "A Method for Teaching Writing" (College English, 1968), Elbow recommends de-emphasizing content and style while encouraging the student to consider his audience and the effect he would like his writing to produce. This shift in focus from teacher to audience requires the student to be more personally involved in subject choice, selection, and arrangement of words and ideas. Eventually he discovers, with classmates, what constitutes good, or effective, writing. This change in focus can lead from prewriting exercises to rewriting experiences. Both strengthen the total writing process.

Prewriting re-establishes the authority of the self, of the writer, and relegates the teacher to the role of reader. This is not only less threatening to the student, it is more comfortable and rewarding for the teacher. Macrorie states in Telling Writing (1970): "Most English teachers have been trained to correct students' writing, not to read it." One reward of the prewriting approach is that student essays are often more interesting and better written. A student who discovers his own topic, his own voice, his own uniqueness through prewriting often makes fewer mechanical errors.

Prewriting Techniques

One technique Macrorie and Elbow recommend is free writing. The student writes as fast as possible, without an attempt to control or to shape his ideas. Such free writing is not irresponsible playing with words, nor is it only a spontaneous overflow of feeling which lacks thesis or structure. It is the furrowing of the mind, the overturning and exposing of topics with interest, details for support, and phrasing of words which can give birth to one's own style. A few days, or even one, spent in free writing can awaken student writers to an awareness, too often buried by years of rote learning, that each one's view of the world is different and individual, and although we share common methods for communication, we will differ in our use

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"real" person, writing honestly about some bit of experience for which the author has deep feelings. All go for the emotional jugular vein: the death of Grandfather, the first stirrings of love in an adolescent breast, a moment of supreme embarrassment. Eventually, these examples become no less distressingly recognizable than the sort of dry, committee-composed Engfish which Macrorie finds so odious. Clearly the antidote to Engfish is not another monotonous sort of prose--in this case the searing, exhibitionistic personal narrative. What students need is not simply freedom from one conditioned sort of prose and license to compose in another clichéd style. They must be helped to compose in a variety of registers which reflect varied purposes and audiences. While appropriate enough for his own brand of good writing, Macrorie's prescriptions for personally effective writing--an honest voice, re-creation of experiential immediacy, surprising juxtaposition, active verbs and figurative language--would be largely out of place in most of the writing of most people. Good narrative is one thing, but there are many other types of good writing which exhibit distinctive features. Faithful Macrorie-ites may believe that the skills gained in composing personally effective writing will transfer to other writing tasks. The result is more likely to be inappropriate word choice and unwarranted intrusion of the "real" person when students attempt the impersonal, objective writing of business and academy.

One final difficulty I have with both Macrorie and Elbow is their over-reliance on the peer group forum for responding to student writing. Faith in open honesty, subjective response patterns, and the personally supportive nature of these groups are reminiscent of an earlier enthusiasm for the validity of gut-level feelings in classroom sensitivity groups or encounter sessions. Some students might desire and profit from a degree of such intimacy with peers; others, however, neither want nor expect to make themselves personally vulnerable to it.

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of them. Free writing is subjective and leads inward to the re-discovery of "I." This re-discovery helps the student realize that the "I" is implicit in all writing, even when not expressed. To the inexperienced student, third person writing can be derivative, contrived, dull. There is a need to awaken the inner voice.

From discovery of self as a source for individual expression, the student can more confidently explore his world through observation. Exercise writing in describing objects, persons, or places, in narrating events, in explaining actions or beliefs, extends a writer's skills. He develops his ability to gather, select, and arrange details for effective presentation. Such exploration helps shed indifference to the world.

Two other prewriting activities also effectively involve the student with others and himself. The first necessitates occasional rearrangement of the class into group workshops, where students can gain responses to the potential strengths or weaknesses of their work during preliminary rough drafts. Such group sessions have resulted in the "publication" of "first editions" of student writing. Elbow suggests that all students write on the same topic and read the material of all other students.

Journal-writing is probably the most widely used prewriting technique. Macrorie calls journals "seedbeds" because they provide an opportunity for daily writing, a place to experiment and practice, a casebook for ideas. Good class preparation is needed, however, or journals can deteriorate into dull diaries or catalogues of names and places. Students should be encouraged to write responsively, inquisitively, reacting to themselves and others, to events and thoughts, to studies and plans as well as remembrances. To learn to write competently, one must write often and without fear; the journal satisfies these prerequisites.

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Peer groups should not be the only sort of help provided for student writers, nor should all of them be expected to contribute subjective, emotionally determined responses to the writing of their peers. Just as some students are indisposed to forced subjectivity, so others are admittedly ill-equipped for the cool objectivity of reasoned criticism. There should be a place for both.

Given the variety of writers and kinds of writing, classroom instruction should be various. Not just freewriting, but strategies of structuring, researching, collaboration, and heuristic questioning. Not just personal narrative, but reports, technical descriptions, letters, reviews, advertisements, critiques, abstracts--even drills and exercises. Not just supportive peer groups, but teacher and peer criticism, actual real world tasks and audiences, self-editing--and even handbook instruction. Freewriting, personal narrative, peer groups--all have their place in the classroom. But for too many devotees, these methods become exclusionary. As teachers of writing, we should allow for diverse methods, strategies, materials, or approaches, in the hope that students will find ways to improve the writing they will choose or be expected to do.

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process itself--when they learn that they can just scribble pages full and at the end of the scribbling have perceptions and ideas that are useful--then they will not have such a hard time putting in the sweat necessary to turn the rough mess into an organized finished copy.

Peter Elbow teaches at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. His new book Writing and Power will be published by Oxford University Press in 1980.