

# FORUM

A Newsletter of the English Composition Board, University of Michigan



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## About forum

This issue of forum is the last regularly scheduled number of the newsletter which the English Composition Board will publish. As you may imagine, I write this news to you with mixed feelings. On the one hand, the newsletter has served the purpose for which it was conceived at the first in a series of annual workshops for teachers in schools, colleges, and universities in the state of Michigan: It has provided a vehicle for continuing instruction and discussion among those who participated in seminars, workshops, and conferences on theory and practice in the teaching of writing sponsored primarily by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and conducted by the English Composition Board during the 1978-79 academic year.

On the other hand, that dialogue is underway and increasing numbers of teachers are joining into it. As the Mellon Foundation has made it possible for the ECB to reach

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out and offer seminars to teachers in schools beyond the state of Michigan and to invite teachers from across the country to come to Ann Arbor to study with their colleagues in Michigan, fforum has moved beyond Michigan's borders, giving form to the concerns that join teachers and providing a bridge across the distance that has separated them. As theorists, teachers, and researchers who have written for the newsletter have sent it to their colleagues, who, in turn, have sent it to their colleagues, fforum has traveled from Alaska to Australia and Great Britain to Hawaii. The two hundred teachers who originally subscribed to the newsletter have introduced it to more than two thousand others who together form a community created by word of mouth and defined by press of pen, a community which assumes that teachers of literacy at all levels of instruction have much to learn from one another.

I particularly have benefited from being a member of the fforum community, and I particularly shall miss the regular issues of the newsletter. However, I am pleased that I shall not have to miss you, fforum's readers, who have written or telephoned me with comments and suggestions about fforum and, in so doing, have become friends.

I want to take this opportunity to thank those of you, who have written for fforum. You have created the common sense of a community.

And, I particularly want to thank several people who have made special contributions to this newsletter and who have given special gifts to me: to Vicki Davinich and Carol Thiry for typing fforum; to Teri Adams for all kinds of assistance to its editor; to Dorothy LaBarr for arranging its schedules and paying its bills; to David Oliver for its good looks, to Robert Root for the "Resources in the Teaching of Composition" column he has faithfully written for it; to Bob Boynton for

publishing a collection of essays from it; to Bernie Van't Hul for teaching and guiding its editor; and to Dan Fader for supporting and nurturing it.

Patti Stock

## **About fforum: Essays on Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing**

In March, 1983, Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 206 Claremont Avenue, Montclair, New Jersey 07042, (201) 783-3310 will publish a collection of essays from fforum. The book is divided into six sections: On Literacy, On Speaking and Writing, On Reading and Writing, On Writing As A Way of Learning, On Writing and Rhetoric, and a Select Annotated Bibliography. Essays in the collection are written by Lea T. Adams, Richard W. Bailey, Sheridan Baker, Loren S. Barritt, David Bartholomae, Stephen Bernhardt, Ann E. Berthoff, John D. Bransford, James Britton, Wallace L. Chafe, Michael Clark, William E. Coles, Jr., Edward P.J. Corbett, Barbara Couture, Frank D'Angelo, Thomas M. Dunn, Peter Elbow, Daniel Fader, Toby Fulwiler, Donald H. Graves, Jane Hansen, Lee H. Hansen, Patricia Harkin, Winifred B. Horner, Helen Isaacson, C.H. Knoblauch, Barry M. Kroll, Robin T. Lakoff, Janice M. Lauer, Ken Macrorie, Nancy Martin, Jack Meiland, James Middleton, James Moffett, Barbra S. Morris, Donald M. Murray, Lee Odell, Janice C. Redish, John Reiff, Robert Root, Grace Rueter, Jay L. Robinson, Ronald Shook, John H. Siegel, Patricia L. Stock, Sandra Stotsky, Robert J. Tierney, Mike Torbe, Nancy J. Vye, James B. White, Karen K. Wixson, and Art Young.

# About this Issue

In this issue of forum, "On Literacy," teachers of the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the profession of medicine explore the social context within which we teachers of literacy meet our students and do our work. The common sense that emerges from their writing challenges us all to look again, carefully, at what we do and why we do it.

The first eight essayists--Jay L. Robinson, William E. Coles, Jr., Toby Fulwiler, Janice Lauer, Cy Knoblauch, Grace Rueter and Thomas M. Dunn, and John H. Siegel--ask us to re-think our definitions of literacy and, in so doing, to re-evaluate why we teach reading and writing "in the first place."

The next three writers--Donald M. Murray, John Warnoch, and Jean Long--suggest how teachers whose understanding of literacy is broadly conceived may go about teaching writing. In the pair of essays that follows, Michael Clark and Loren S. Barritt remind us that our practices as teachers of literacy must be firmly

rooted in the purposes and settings of our work. Clark maintains that the methods and criteria we use to evaluate our students' literacy--specifically their writing--must grow out of the purposes for which we ask them to write as well as the contexts in which they write, and Barritt urges us to join together to look at those problems of our practice which interest us as teachers of literacy and to let those problems define the research methods we use to study them.

Finally, in the last essay in this issue, I describe the efforts of the faculty of The University of Michigan to develop a comprehensive program for teaching literacy to its students.

Robert Root concludes the number with two pieces--a "Select Bibliography," on the thematic issue of the newsletter and his customary "Resources in the Teaching of Composition" column.

Patti Stock

# The Social Context of Literacy

Jay L. Robinson  
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This essay, like most in the genre, has its roots in experiences--past, past continuous, and even future since anticipation works on one's mind. Past are seven years as an English Department Chairman; past and continuing is my work with the English Composition Board at The University of Michigan helping to develop a writing program for undergraduates; and in my future is a chairmanship of a Ph.D. program in English and Education. All of these, lumped together with reading that a sabbatical has allowed me to do, have provoked me to think about the topics addressed in these pages: how literacy functions (and does not function) in our society; how society influences what we do as learners and teachers of literacy.

It is important to discuss the social context of literacy for several reasons, some of them perfectly obvious. It is obvious, for example, that teaching--any teaching--takes place only in some one or another social context: We teach something to somebody some place at some particular time in some particular society. What we do is influenced not only by the what, but also by the where, when, and to whom. It is also obvious, when we think about it, that the teaching of literacy is especially sensitive to the pressures of social context. Language in all of its uses is an intimate part of human experience: Language is expressive of identity and personality, but it is also socially binding and expressive of collective values. Written language is peculiarly public, more so than speech, and as a consequence its forms are carefully scrutinized; reading and writing are highly valued activities and society monitors their acquisition--as we know from myriad articles in the public media about Johnnies and Janes who can't read or write. We teachers of literacy meet stu-

dents in a charged atmosphere. We need to be sensitive to the prevailing currents, if for no other purpose than to avoid electrocution.

A compelling reason for talking about the social context for literacy is that our profession has usually avoided the subject in spite of its importance, leaving it to sociologists, sociolinguists, and social historians. Let me cite just one example, borrowed from an essay by Frank D'Angelo (forthcoming). Richard Ohmann, when he was Editor of College English, requested manuscripts for a special issue on the publicly proclaimed literacy crisis. This was his challenge to his colleagues:

Is there a decline in literacy? in writing ability?

If so, what are its causes? To what extent is it accountable to changes in schooling? To changes in American society? What can--or should--college English teachers be doing about it? Are there college programs that successfully make up deficits in verbal skills? Is "bonehead English" an idea whose time has come again? Do competency requirements for graduation help? Should this be a problem of the English department, or the whole college or university? Can we distinguish between the traditional basics--spelling, usage, etc.--and some others that have more to do with intellectual competence? Can English teachers usefully shape the national concern with verbal competence, rather than simply respond to needs expressed by pundits, legislators, regents, and businessmen?

If, on the other hand, there has been no significant decline in read-

ing or writing ability among college students, what explains the outcry? What can English teachers do to correct public misconceptions? Is our responsibility confined to the classroom, or does it include social and political action? (Ohmann, 1976, p. 819).

Ohmann asked us to look at the social dimensions of the literacy crisis and at the social meaning of the public's concern; to decide whether or not a crisis existed and to discover its causes; and only then to reach decisions about how to deal with it. But when the special issue of College English appeared, Ohmann published his disappointment with the contributions:

A large proportion merely reiterated the public concerns and in terms very similar to those employed by the media. Others devoted most of their energy to suggesting better ways to teach writing. We might infer from these facts that the profession accepts not only the public assessment of the literacy "crisis" but also the blame for it. Our original call queries whether in fact there has been a significant decline in reading and writing ability among students. Yet not one contribution reviewed and analyzed in any detail the assumptions, methods, and statistics of the testing on which so much of the public outcry seems to be based. Are these assumptions, methods, and statistics as invulnerable to criticism as our professional silence suggests? (Ohmann, 1977, p. 44).

Nastier questions than Ohmann's last can be put: Does our profession's silence on such topics suggest that we are willing to let others tell us what to do and then develop methods for getting it done better or more efficiently? Does our silence imply contentment with the status quo? The world may well need a better rat trap, but does it really need a better sentence combiner?

A fact of life in our world is that the possession of literacy correlates almost

perfectly with the possession of power and wealth. And in general, the more literacy one has or can control, the more power one can exercise--real power, not something metaphorical like the power of self-expression. Now I intend no causative implication in the statement; to achieve literacy does not necessarily earn one power, as we well know. But the powerful are usually themselves literate, or if not, they can purchase the services of those who are.

Another fact of life in our world is that the profession of literacy, as contrasted with its possession, correlates not with power and wealth but with relative powerlessness and relative poverty. English teachers do not exert much influence in the world of raw power, even though they live and work in it. The humanities, when compared with the sciences, the social sciences, or professional schools, are under-funded both within their own institutions and nationally, and humanists are under-represented both in academic governance and in government.

These facts of our own social existence are more than unpleasant, they are dangerous. The danger is not to our persons, yours and mine, nor even to our sense of personal worth. I for one get all kinds of mileage from claiming moral superiority over my greedy medical school colleagues--smooth driving mileage because I get paid a salary that keeps me quite comfortable. The danger is rather to our profession--to our collective sense of endeavor and to the ethics we apply in the teaching of literacy. We have or can claim to have two things useful to those who possess power--namely, the ability to make students literate and squatting rights in classrooms where literacy is assumed to be taught. But as poor cousins, we are particularly vulnerable both to the temptations of utility (we call it service), and to the temptations of the money that pays for our services. Methods can be endlessly adjusted to ends and aims, to the ends and aims of others as easily as to our own. And what if our academic discipline does not enjoy intellectual prestige? We can always try

to achieve status by borrowing prestigious theory and adapting it to the demand for new methods. But when we do, does the right brain always know what the left brain is doing?

I am oversimplifying and being facetious, and with issues that are neither simple nor funny. We do have a responsibility to the society that sustains us, and at least equal responsibility to students whose pragmatic needs must be met. But we can meet these responsibilities only if we understand at least something of the social context in which literacy presently functions.

What kinds of things constitute the social context of literacy in our time? More than I can mention, of course, but I will touch on these four: First, on inherited conceptions of literacy and the values we attach to them; second, on real and socially perceived needs for literacy; third, on ideal and ethnically conceived needs for literacy; and fourth, on some few of our institutions for the fostering of literacy.

#### (1) Inherited Concepts and Values

Practice is always rooted in concepts even when the concepts are unstated or even unstatable; and what we practice most energetically is that which we value most highly. The concept of literacy is highly valued in our own as in other western and westernized industrial societies. Historians, recognizing this special phenomenon, are now writing about "a literacy myth"--a configuration of generally held and privileged notions about literacy and about its functions in modern society. Harvey J. Graff, for example:

The rise of literacy and its dissemination to the popular classes is associated with the triumph of light over darkness, of liberalism, democracy, and of universal unbridled progress. In social thought, therefore, these elements relate to ideas of linear evolution and progression; literacy here takes its place among the other successes of modernity and

rationality. In theory and in empirical investigation, literacy is conceptualized--often in stark and simple fashion--as an important part of the larger parcel of factors that account for the evolution of modern societies and states (Graff, p. xv).

With its wide acceptance, the literacy myth benefits us poor cousins, of course. Foundations fund our programs, deans find money for English departments, enlightened school boards reduce loads for writing teachers (though rarely), and in general our public and professional stock rises. In the short run, we prosper; but we might be better off in the longer run if we try to find out how much truth the myth contains and then act on that. What we inherit is not always to our good.

Robert Disch, in his introduction to The Future of Literacy writes that:

The twentieth century inherited a mystique of literacy born out of...two tendencies. One, essentially utilitarian, was committed to the functional uses of literacy as a medium for the spread of practical information that could lead to individual and social progress; the other, essentially aesthetic and spiritual, was committed to the uses of literacy for salvaging the drooping spirit of Western man from the death of religion and the ravages of progress (Disch, p. 3).

The utilitarian benefits of literacy, so goes the myth, are economic, social, and intellectual. Economic benefits include enhanced access to employment and to information leading to a better life (for example, information about birth control or about sanitation). Social benefits include a broadening of personal perspective beyond the tribal or local; acquisition of societal norms and values leading to public spiritedness; participation in democratic means of governance. Claims for the intellectual benefits of literacy have gone beyond the obvious ones of access to stored knowledge to stronger ones

asserting a causal relation between literacy and general learning as well as between literacy and full cognitive development.<sup>1</sup> How many of these claims correspond to established fact?

In fact, we do not know, but in some few cases we are beginning to find out. And what we are discovering, when the myth is tested, is that it proves to be mythical. For only one example, consider the following results of historical research into the correlations of literacy with liberalized social attitudes and with expanded economic opportunity. In a study of literacy in Colonial New England, Kenneth A. Lockridge (1974) found that Protestantism was a stronger impetus to literacy than secular school laws; that schools were dominated by conservative, not progressive, educational impulses; and that when literacy became nearly universal in New England near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, attitudes toward society and the larger world were not discernibly modified. In another study, treating some 19th century Canadian cities, Harvey Graff found that:

...literacy—a phenomenon suggestive of equality—contributed regularly as an element of the structure of inequality, reinforcing the steep ridges of stratification, and also as a force for order and integration. It also served as a symbolic focus of other forces of inequality: ethnicity, class, sex, and age. Literacy, then, did not universally serve to benefit all who had attained it, but neither did it disadvantage all those who had not (Graff, p. 19).

Graff does not claim that literacy holds no potential for liberalization; rather he demonstrates that powerful, deeply embedded social forces can override its potential. Literacy can be an effective means of social control, when educational institutions use it for this purpose; or it can be a means of social liberation, when individuals are encouraged to think, read and write for themselves. Ohmann presses the pertinent question: Where do we stand as teachers when we emphasize means over ends or methods over pur-

poses? In answering the question, we do well to be mindful that ours is a society that has sanctioned a back-to-basics movement, that is enamoured with competency testing, and that presently values vocational over liberal education. Few vocations in our society encourage an exercise of literacy that is liberalizing and liberating.

Even if all of our students were to achieve literacy, not all would benefit unless allowed and encouraged by society to put their competencies to use. Our aims and especially our methods have to accommodate to this brute fact of social reality. We need to know much more than we now do about the forces and institutions in our society that constrain literacy: Both those that inhibit its exercise and those that make it serve as an instrument of unconscious socialization to mores and values we would not endorse. Without such knowledge, we could well help create a reality more malignant than that figured in the literacy myth.

#### (2) Real and Socially Perceived Needs for Literacy

So far I have been talking about literacy as a "buzz word"--as a concept or a symbol incorporating notions of aspiration and value. Now I want to define the term, or at least to limit its reference. Let literacy mean functional literacy; and let functional literacy, for the moment, mean only this: the ability to read and write well enough to compete for economic sufficiency. Such literacy is essential for all students and for all citizens, and in so far as we are able and in so far as social circumstances will allow, we must help provide it. I quote some experts on the demographics of literacy:

Ralph W. Tyler: In 1800, the unskilled in all categories [of employment] comprised more than 80 percent of the labor force; in 1900 they made up 60 percent and in 1980, about 6 percent. The rapid development of employment in the various services...has largely taken place since 1948. Now, jobs requiring no school-



ing are few in number while tasks requiring at least a high school education make up nearly two thirds of employment opportunities (Tyler, forthcoming).

**Paul A. Strassmann:** Since the 1950's our country has become predominantly occupied with the creation, distribution, and administration of information. By 1990 about fifty percent of the workforce will not be producing food or manufacturing objects; instead the workforce will occupy most of its time just communicating (Strassmann, forthcoming).

**Arthur M. Cohen and Florence B. Brawer:** Literacy is certainly related to success in nearly all community college programs: transfer courses demand proficiency in reading, writing and/or mathematics, and licensure examinations admitting students to practice after completing a technological program typically demand the same. Many community college programs are closed to students who cannot pass an entrance examination that is based on literacy (Cohen and Brawer, forthcoming).

**Robben W. Fleming:** Meanwhile, it is estimated that there may be as many as 57 million adult illiterates in the United States (Fleming, forthcoming).

**John Oxenham:** In 1971, some 780 million people over the age of fifteen all over the world were classed as illiterate...by 1980 they will total perhaps 820 million (Oxenham, p. 2).

Functional illiteracy does correlate with poverty and powerlessness; the problem of illiteracy is as urgent as any in our society.

But ironically, the needs of the poor could well be forgotten because recently we have discovered other needs among the better off and the more influential. We have discovered that middle-class students don't write very well, not even

those who enroll in prestigious schools; that businessmen don't write very well, or at least don't think that they do; that bureaucrats and lawyers write even worse; that the new information society requires a new kind of literacy--in software, rather than in ordinary printed language. The influential public is now more often asking "Why can't Johnny write?" than it is "Why can't Johnny read?" Yet as Edward Corbett so accurately points out, reading is far more important for economic sufficiency (even for survival) than is writing:

...writing will never be as crucial a skill for surviving or thriving in our society as reading is. Functional illiterates who cannot even write their names may suffer embarrassment because of their deficiency but they somehow manage to subsist in our technological society. But those functional illiterates who cannot even read street signs and simple directions are so severely handicapped that it is questionable whether they can survive, much less thrive, in our society. Thirdly, only a minuscule portion of the total population will regularly have to compose important, influential documents. The majority of literate people have to do some writing occasionally--letters, notes, fill-in-the-blanks forms--but only a minority have to write regularly and seriously in connection with their jobs (Corbett, p. 47).

The present emphasis upon writing over reading doubtless reflects a bias in favor of the upper of our social classes, where needs take precedence. Such an emphasis, if not restrained or balanced against the need for reading, could well contribute to a widening of the gulf between rich and poor that now seems so permanent a feature of our national topography. As Richard Hendrix writes:

The emphasis on writing clarifies the gap between a commitment in principle to universal opportunity and the fact of unequal opportunity. Writing ability is unevenly distributed in

our society along class lines. Indeed, writing and access to writing improvement is as good an indicator of the difference between, say, white collar and blue collar career tracks as we are likely to find (Hendrix, p. 53).

Our problems are made more difficult to solve because just when we begin to recognize the number and complexity of them, the public develops an aversion to taxation and politicians a preference for bombs over books. How, then, are we to react to the perfectly legitimate demands placed upon us in our social role as teachers of literacy when we know that resources will be limited--perhaps severely.

We could, of course, take battlefield medicine as our model and practice triage on some principle of social utility, fitting our teaching to present social realities and comforting ourselves with some resigned but basically optimistic notion of social inevitability. Maybe only a minority do need to learn to write; maybe the masses need only to learn to read, and then only marginally; and maybe, because of technology, the masses don't even need to read. And maybe the socially disintegrating effects of such specialization could be avoided if some such vision of social interdependence as John Oxenham's is an accurate one:

[F]or the masses to enjoy literature without literacy, a minority would need to be highly literate. The paradox evokes two reflections on technological change. One is that, as science and technology introduce new changes in production and services, a growing majority with decreasing skills seems to become increasingly dependent on a highly skilled but shrinking minority. The trend appears to lead to a dictatorship of technocrats. On the other hand, while a necessary consequence of the extension of specialisation may well be the dependence of majorities upon minorities, oppressive technology is not the necessary end. The reason is simply that the prolifera-

tion of specializations generates a net of interdependence and a homeostatic distribution of power (Oxenham, p. 131).

Perhaps a stable and healthy interdependence can result from a planned distribution of the assets of literacy. Perhaps we can focus our attention and concentrate our resources upon training a fully literate elite without oppressing the masses. Perhaps that is what we are doing anyway, without much thought for the masses.

There is nothing of the conditional in these two assertions: Resources will be limited as we seek to meet needs for literacy; priorities will be set--either by us or by others, either by intention or through thoughtless inertia. Policy should be at least as well-planned as good writing. Right now we need good policy more than we need better lesson plans.

### (3) Ideals and Ethics

In June, 1980, the English Composition Board of The University of Michigan sponsored a conference on Literacy in the 1980's. A variety of experts from various occupations and professions were invited to the conference and asked to respond to this question: "What will be the needs for literacy in your field as we look from now toward the end of the century?" As I review the conference, two presentations stand out: one by a lawyer and professor of law; another by a scientist who is also Manager of the Central Research Division of the Mobil Research and Development Corporation. These two impressed me because they called not for more emphasis upon utilitarian writing (and reading), but for a more expansive and humane literacy.

James White, Professor of Law at The University of Chicago and the author of a distinguished book on lawyers' use of language, described what he calls "the invisible discourse of the law":

unstated conventions by which the language [of law] operates;...expect-

tations that do not find explicit expression anywhere but are part of the legal culture that the surface language simply assumes (White, forthcoming).

But White did more than describe. First, he enriched existing definitions of (functional) literacy:

I start with the idea that literacy is not merely the capacity to understand the conceptual content of writings and utterances, but the ability to participate fully in a set of social and intellectual practices. It is not passive but active; not imitative but creative, for participation in the speaking and writing of language includes participation in the activities it makes possible (White, forthcoming).

Then he described a course in writing and reading that he teaches in The University of Chicago, which invites such participation. White helps his students to perceive how rule and procedure constitute social organization and govern social cooperation; how language is the means of such constitution; and how law is related to everyday social behavior. In so doing he demystifies the law, making it more subject both to lay understanding and to personal control. According to White:

All this [can] be done with materials from the students' own life, without the use of legal terms or technicalities. It need not even be done in Standard English: the students' writing...should indeed reflect the way people actually speak in their own world. And one important lesson for us all might be the discovery that it is not only in the law, or only in the language of the white middle class, that community is constituted or that argument about justice proceeds (White, forthcoming).

Paul Weisz, a scientist and a businessman, called for clarity and broad comprehensibility in scientific language: for the development and use in science of a common language enabling more citizens

"to benefit from the knowledge which abounds around us"; a language that will also serve to combat the socially and intellectually fragmenting effects of specialization. He sees the need as essential:

The relationship between division of knowledge in our society and presence of social tension is clear. As knowledge and activity become more sophisticated, the bridges of understanding and interaction grow weaker and weaker. Now, more than ever before, such bridges are needed for both social and psychological survival (Weisz, forthcoming).

Weisz's concern echoes that expressed in the recent report of the Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities:

Our citizens need to become literate in a multiple sense. We all need to understand the characteristics of scientific inquiry and the repercussions of scientific research. We must all learn something about the use of the media and of new technologies for storing, transmitting, and expanding knowledge. Without this sort of literacy, our society as a whole will be less able to apply science and technology to humanistic needs, less able to measure the human effects of scientific achievements, less able to judge the information we produce and receive (The Humanities, pp. 18-19).

Our profession has begun to recognize that its own notions about needs for literacy do not always match day-to-day needs outside the classroom. But most who have argued for adjustment to the real world have addressed only economic needs. White and Weisz, both practitioners in the world of work, suggest other ways: White by linking language use with social behavior and to intellectual activity rooted in social practices; Weisz by linking the aims of writing to a democracy's needs for information and knowledge essential for the solution of human problems. Both programs are ethical in conception.

Caesar exacts his due, but we need not pay the tax-master so unthinkingly as to leave in his control all decisions about what social reality ought to be. Societies exist in the mind as well as in fact, in ethical standards for behavior as well as in behavior patterns. It is our particular obligation as teachers of literacy to recognize this, and with our students' help to frame ideals constructive of a world we would willingly inhabit. Ideals and ethics find their most permanent expression in public language.

(4) Institutions: Who teaches the what to whom?

Existing institutions, like inherited concepts and values, are part of the social context for literacy. As things are now established we English teachers are the ones customarily assumed to be responsible for teaching literacy (along with elementary school teachers, who can do anything). But given existing and shifting needs for literacy, it is not at all clear that we will continue to be held responsible or considered responsible enough to be so held.

In an article in a volume containing the proceedings of a conference sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Richard Hendrix--who, we should note, is associated with the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education--asks this question: "Who is responsible for improving writing?" He says this about English departments:

Writing instruction was for years a stepchild of English departments, who have always dominated it. As recently as fifteen years ago many colleges dropped composition altogether--partly on the basis that the high schools were handling the job, and mainly to give still greater emphasis to literary study. That development should make us hesitate about trusting that English departments, as they are presently constituted, will solve the problem.

Now there has been a resurgence of active involvement by English faculty along with others. Writing instruction could be a boon for underemployed humanists, a large and influential group. But teachers trained in literature may not necessarily be well situated to work with beginning students, nor to prepare students for the kinds of writing tasks they will likely face after school. English professors are not even necessarily good writers themselves, and their commitment to specialization has been at least as strong as any other discipline's (Hendrix, p. 56).

There are grounds for Hendrix's suspicion. They exist in the prevailing attitudes of most college and many high school English teachers toward the teaching of writing; in the way composition teachers are treated in their own departments; and in the way composition programs are funded, staffed, and managed. And in the meantime societal needs are not being met, neither by instructional programs that address vocational needs nor by research programs that address the need for better understanding of the relations of literacy to society, to learning, and to the determination of value. Can and will English departments change enough to meet such needs? My own experiences as a teacher of writing, as a program planner, and as an English department chairman, give me grounds for doubt at least as strong as that expressed by Hendrix.

The trouble with literacy is that it enters all aspects of human life in literate societies. The trouble with questions about literacy is that the important ones are general in their application to human discourse and its functions. The trouble with our answers, when we are English teachers, is that we are all specialists. And it is possible--at the least arguable--that a specialization in literature is less adaptable than many to a broad understanding of literacy.

Raymond Williams, in a challenging critique of dominant trends in literary study, reminds us that the term litera-

ture once applied more broadly than to imaginative works of a certain kind and quality. In one of its earlier usages, "it was often close to the sense of modern literacy"; its reference was to "a condition of reading: of being able to read and of having read" (Williams, pp. 45-54). Histories, biographies, works of philosophy, political and scientific treatises were once all works of literature. In his argument, Williams traces the specialization of the term to the domain of "creative" or "imaginative" works, and the development of literature departments in academies as units concerned exclusively with this narrowed domain and with the practice of criticism.

The problem arising from this development is that it invites us, as inheritors of the tradition, to equate "literacy" with knowledge of a special kind of literature, without recognizing that such an equation is a socially privileged and economically self-serving one: more a matter of status and value than of fact. The study of imaginative literature may well contribute to the complex of abilities, capacities, and attitudes that function in good reading and good writing; but to claim that it necessarily and sufficiently does is patently absurd.

If departments of English continue to define themselves as departments of literature and mean by that term imaginative works only; if English teachers restrict themselves to reading only such works and commentaries on them, then there is need for new kinds of departments just as there is for differently prepared teachers. Harvey Graff gets to the heart of the problem:

Discussions of literacy are confused and ambiguous—an ironic, and even startling, phenomenon, which contrasts sharply with the high value we assign to the skills of reading and writing. Vagueness pervades virtually all efforts to discern the meaning of literacy; moreover, there is surprisingly little agreement on or special evidence for the benefits of literacy, whether socially or individually, economically or culturally. Rather, assumptions preempt criticism and investigation, and agencies and specialists whose business it is to promote literacy shrink from asking fundamental questions in their campaigns to disseminate skills (Graff, 1979, p. 3).

Certain questions cannot be avoided any longer. Serious research is needed into literacy and its place in our present social context; such research should take precedence over concern with method. There is little profit in trying to do better what cannot or should not be done.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>These last claims are now much in the literature, especially the literature justifying writing programs. Before believing them completely, teachers and administrators should read the very important book by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, The Psychology of Literacy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

# The Literacy Crisis: A Challenge How? <sup>1</sup>

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When Robert Benchley, some years back, was doing "Talk of the Town" for The New Yorker, he happened, as will happen, to fill in a glancing reference he was making to Mozart's musical precocity by saying that the composer had written his first music at the age of 3. To judge from the outraged letter of rebuke that the president of The New York Mozart Society sent Benchley, it was the sort of chance the man had spent most of his life waiting for. He marshalled his evidence as though he were moving a phalanx. First, of course, came the Authorities, the hallowed and hyphenated names, then the rumble of quotations in several languages, followed by the clattering clean up of supplementary bibliographical references--the whole of which proved unequivocally, undeniably, and absolutely that Mozart's first musical composition had not been written until he was 5. The tone of the president's valediction in the letter, delivered as though from a knoll, was predictable. One would have thought that at least with The New Yorker, at least with a man of Benchley's prestige and pretensions to sophistication, and on and on. In his next column Benchley printed the letter and then he himself began the scholarship game: the citations of authenticating correspondence, transcripts of conversations, holograph musical scores offered in evidence, unimpeachable personal testimony--all documenting beyond question that Mozart had indeed written music at the age of 3 just as Benchley had originally claimed--that is his Mozart had, one Sam Mozart of 196th Street, New York City, New York. The only possible explanation

of the confusion here so far as he could see, Benchley concluded by saying, was that the president of the Mozart Society must have had some other Mozart in mind. And how was he, Benchley, to have known there were two.

For a Mozart which had been bled of life and music, a name become a label, made the instrument of meanness, Benchley returned a Mozart transcendent, the composer recomposed as the composer plus. Much of the talk of the literacy crisis confronting teachers of writing, I would argue, is analagous to what Benchley found himself facing with that president's letter. And, I want to suggest, I think we as he did can do better in the face of the prevailing criticism than feeling obliged to come up with an apology, a hand grenade, or a small traveling bag.

There's not much question that there's an issue, though the problem, or rather the problems, are another thing again. The Newsweek article published in 1976, "Why Johnny Can't Write," certainly the most highly publicized instance of the current consumer revolt, is a case in point. The argument is familiar; the details may be filled in: the decline of verbal aptitudes across the board across the nation, inadequate grounding in something called the basics, the creeping cancer of television, reading comprehension plummeting, standards acrumble, bad news from Berkeley, things gone to hell in Georgia, at Michigan State, Temple frantic, even Harvard gravely concerned--in the face of which of course, the sacred cows--namely the professional societies, the Universities, the public school systems--are said to be monumentally indifferent. Sacred cows with crumpled horns who in the placid, cud-chewing way--the follow-up pieces have been legion--simply refuse to kick the dog into worrying the cat to

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<sup>1</sup>Portions of this article appeared in another form in The AAUP Bulletin, Autumn, 1963, and also in Issues in English, March, 1978.

kill the rat that's eating the malt that lies in the house that Westing built. Nothing less than the culture, or more pregnantly, in Newsweekese, "a culture's ideas, values, and goals," is said to be at stake. Which is to say that IBM are not amused. Hence, "literacy crisis"--the label was as inevitable as it is ironically appropriate--on the analogy of "energy crisis" or the sort of thing that seems to happen periodically with rivers or in the Middle-East, that which calls for sandbags, or guns, or Quick Henry the Flit Kissinger, or more money for the oil companies: a clear emergency for which the remedy is no less clear. Graveyard talk really. What D. H. Lawrence would have called a vast post-mortem effect. Indeed, the huzzi that has been raised over the issue has obscured the way in which approaches like that of the Newsweek article to what it calls "the literacy crisis" are themselves an example of illiteracy, displaying as they do a blindness to the implications of certain ways of using language that are rooted in either an ignorance of or an indifference to what language is, how it functions, why it is important. The Newsweek analysis, self-styled, of the problem, from another point of view is part of it--a generalization I would extend, by the way, to a great many of the counter-charges against the Newsweek piece that make the mistake of accepting Newsweek's definitions--which is how Richard Ohmann among others at what I would call rock bottom can argue as he did in The Chronicle of Higher Education that we really don't have a problem, a suggestion not that the emperor has no clothes, but that there isn't any emperor. There's a confusion here I think, but it's precisely in this confusion that I see the challenge for us as teachers. The challenge and the chance.

The real trouble with the Newsweek piece, the reason I began by sketching some of the meaner implications of it as a way of talking, is that though the article is not concerned with literacy as a concept, not really, does not in fact deal with the issue of literacy at all, it raises the issue in such a way as to create the illusion that it is dealing with literacy, and as a problem, and as a problem to which the solution is easy because it is so mechanically simple. What Newsweek means by literacy is mechanical correctness, knowing the four rules for the comma and how to apply them, being able to spell acceptably, and so forth. What it means by writing is communication, a matter of product rather than process, the simple mechanical transfer of information, which students can be trained to manage in the same way they can be taught to use adding machines or learn to pour concrete. Hence the activity of writing is totally covered by the use of a term like skill. Writing itself is a tool. Or just a tool.

Given such definitions, of course the solution to the problem is simple. The kind of illiteracy being referred to by Newsweek, an inability to manipulate what the NCTE has called the conventions of edited American English, exists in high schools and at universities because it is tolerated, indeed because it is countenanced. Not for some other reason. Or reasons. We do not, after all, certify accountants who are unable to add or subtract. Failure to understand this, by the way, I think is the main reason that so many of the standard solutions to even the most simplistic definitions of illiteracy--making it synonymous with incorrectness--have worked so badly. A heightened emphasis on what are called "basics" (by which is meant drill in the diagramming of sentences, improving

vocabulary, etc.), the use of teaching machines, even requiring students to take more and still more composition courses--all of these are solutions mentioned by Newsweek and all of them are seemingly reasonable--particularly when they receive the explicit endorsement of organizations such as the MLA. "Whereas college students throughout the country," intones that hoary old mother in her Newsletter of spring a year ago, "exhibit a marked lack of competence in writing, be it resolved that the Modern Language Association recommend the reinstatement of the freshman composition requirement in colleges and universities that had dropped the requirement." Etcetera. Etcetera. But at the level of practice such solutions have the effect of perpetuating precisely the sort of slovenliness they are designed to eliminate, because they all depend upon making literacy--even the simple-minded form of it--the responsibility of a Department, an English Department, a Humanities Department, a Speech Department, some single Department--which is to place the problem in just the kind of academic vacuum that will free a faculty at large, an administration at large, the students at large, and the public at large from having themselves to behave as though they believed correctness were important enough to be worth standing for. For everybody, the problem of correctness, like the hell of Ezra Pound, conveniently becomes someone else's. Hence graduate schools blame the universities, who in turn blame the high schools, who point back to the grammar schools from which we then move to the home, the culture, the zeitgeist--and then what? Fallout? Sunspots? Thus Newsweek's solutions even to the problem of what it is calling the problem of literacy--the same snaky circularity is at the bottom of most of them--buy a sense of Virtue in much the same way the White power structure sought to imagine it was opening the world to Blacks by building Stuyvesant Village. Most of the time a sense of virtue is the most that such solutions buy.

Still, I would maintain that the solution to the problem of correctness is simple.

My standard response to someone who is objecting, say, to bad spelling, with the question of why we don't teach 'em how to write over there in the English Department is: "Why do you make our job so much more difficult than it would have to be by accepting or tolerating what you have a responsibility to refuse to accept, to refuse to tolerate?" I do not say, I said to the Board of Trustees of the University of Pittsburgh in explaining why there is no required course in composition at the university, I do not say that a Professor of Sociology or a member of the faculty of the Law School must him or herself know how to teach a student to improve her ability to write. That is the province of the English Department. But at the level of what is conventionally acceptable, a person does not have to be a carpenter to know a shaky table or to find fault with it for not being stable; and such teachers--the generalization might easily be opened to include the public at large--can put students in a position to recognize the importance of courses in composition to their development, in any event by refusing to read what is not correct, and by penalizing, I mean by failing if they have to, students who will not deal with a deficiency it has to be up to them to remove in the first place. Of course the solution to the problem of correctness would be simple--if anyone gave much of a damn about it--Newsweek's crisis can't notwithstanding. The solution would be as simple as it is in fact impossible.

Thus far I have taken some care, you will notice, to distinguish between what Newsweek calls literacy and what I would call literacy, between what the general public seems to understand by the term and what we understand by it--or what I think we should understand by it. What is this other literacy (our meaning versus theirs), the quality I see the Newsweek piece ironically so deficient in, the quality that I think a certain attention to correctness can retard if not make impossible the growth of, the quality I have referred to negatively as involving an ignorance of or indifference to what language is, how it functions,



why it is important? For I do believe there is a problem with literacy in the United States, a problem far deeper and more complicated than the rhetoric of "crisis" would have us understand. I think I can describe this problem best by means of an example, a negative example, but one that suggests a positive direction for us as teachers.

Not so long ago, close to ten thousand students elected to take the Advanced Placement Test in English, a test devised by the Educational Testing Service to provide an opportunity for those students already admitted to college to demonstrate a particular competence in certain subjects, to show, that is, not simply ability, but excellence. One section of this three hour test, a section designed to examine the students' ability to analyze a prose passage, had the following as its center.

"Who is James K. Polk?" The Whigs promptly began campaigning on that derision, and there were Democrats who repeated it with sick concern. The question eventually got an unequivocal answer. Polk had come up the ladder, he was an orthodox party Democrat. He had been Jackson's mouthpiece and floor leader in the House of Representatives, had managed the anti-Bank legislation, had risen to the Speakership, had been governor of Tennessee. But sometimes the belt line shapes an instrument of use and precision. Polk's mind was rigid, narrow, obstinate, far from first-rate. He sincerely believed that only Democrats were truly American, Whigs being either the dupes or the pensioners of England--more, that not only wisdom and patriotism were Democratic monopolies but honor and breeding as well. "Although a Whig he seems a gentleman" is a not uncommon characterization in his diary. He was pompous, suspicious, and secretive; he had no humor; he could be vindictive; and he saw spooks and villains. He was a representative Southern politician of the second or intermediate period (which expired with his Presidency), when the decline but not the disintegration had begun.

But if his mind was narrow it was also powerful and he had guts. If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel. No one bluffed him, no one moved him with direct or oblique pressure. Furthermore, he knew how to get things done, which is the first necessity of government, and he knew what he wanted done, which is the second. He came into office with clear ideas and a fixed determination and he was to stand by them through as strenuous an administration as any before Lincoln's. Congress had governed the United States for eight years before him. But Polk was to govern the United States from 1845 to 1849. He was to be the only "strong" President between Jackson and Lincoln. He was to fix the mold for the future in America down to 1860, and therefore for a long time afterward. That is who James K. Polk was.

That passage is from an essay by Bernard DeVoto. It is out of context, and as an example of DeVoto's ability as a writer or of his assumptions about government, misrepresentative. But this does not exonerate the passage from an essential dishonesty, from the charge of pretending to an impartiality and objectivity that never amounts to anything more than a gesture. In fact, for all of its journalistic skill, the passage is a good working definition of what I would call illiteracy, the failure of a writer to be responsible to the implications of his language--whether consciously or unconsciously is irrelevant.

The voice which speaks in the passage, for example, is not a voice which is positive so much as it is one trying to sound positive. Note its aggressive, self-defensive tone. This is particularly obvious in the staccato punching of the last few sentences, so notably lacking in any examples of just exactly what James K. Polk's accomplishments were, and in the belligerence of the final, "That is who James K. Polk was." What does one do with those uneasy quotation marks around "strong"; and how explain the jarringly self-conscious

introduction of such honorific slang as "he had guts," and "no one bluffed him" or the Babbittlike praise of "powerful," "his integrity was absolute," "he could not be scared," and so forth? The grassroots America language is a good indication of what DeVoto's sentences are appealing to and on what level, and cannot be explained away simply as racy popularization. The passage is playing upon the most unsophisticated of American prejudices: that energy, strength, and forcefulness are good in themselves because they are ends in themselves. That a man knows "how to get things done" and what he wants done (called the first and second necessities of government!) here overrides the question of the value of what gets done and smothers the possibility that the means may not always justify the ends. That a man "has guts" neutralizes, even discounts, the narrowness of his mind--and this in a sentence the form of which suggests a distinction is being made. A similar bit of smuggling goes on in: "If he was orthodox, his integrity was absolute and he could not be scared, manipulated, or brought to heel," whereby a moral vocabulary is given the appearance of having a moral syntax. Is "integrity" the equivalent of not being "scared"? "Integrity" in that sentence is a trick, a word not that the subject demands but that the writer wants in order to play upon the common notion that integrity automatically means Virtue, is a Good Thing. Finally, the image of Polk's wresting control from Congress and governing the United States alone for four years (seen cozily in the company of Jackson and Lincoln), together with the implication that it was not only in spite of but because of his "limitations" that Polk succeeded as President, points up the entire first paragraph as mere rhetoric in the worst sense of the word, a smoke screen, the language of someone more concerned with appearing than being fair. Prune the passage of its proper nouns and what sort of person is defined by it? How much of the passage would have to be changed to have it apply to Adolf Hitler?

Since the DeVoto passage was chosen for the purpose of testing students' ability to analyze prose, the questions asked about it did not depend on how much the students knew about James K. Polk and were not concerned with whether or not they agreed with DeVoto's estimation of him. Of the several questions asked about the passage, in other words, not one was clearly designed to take the students into the propagandistic nature of DeVoto's prose, let alone into the way language shapes the world of experience--another instance of what I would call illiteracy.

However, an ambiguity in one of the test questions ("Is the passage generally favorable or unfavorable to James K. Polk?") led well above 80% of the students to comment on what they thought of the conception of a United States president offered by the passage, and 94% of this 80% read the passage as being generally favorable to Polk in the sense of approving of the conception of a president offered by it. The following examples of student responses are representative, the illiteracy of which, even at this remove, still has the power to make the blood run cold:

1. Because Polk took over Congress and cut through the red tape of legislation which had hamstrung the presidents before him, he was a great man. It takes a strong man to be a great one, and Polk was strong enough to know how to get what he wanted.
2. When it comes to government, it's not a man's personality that counts but what he does. Polk got things done any way he could. In spite of his faults, he was strong and efficient, a fine President.
3. Polk was prejudiced yes, but he was "sincerely" prejudiced and believed what he was doing was right. That's what America needed in a president and that's what it got.
4. Anyone who can "fix the mold of the future in America" is certainly presented

favorably. Polk had his faults yes, but he made a name for himself. The faults don't matter when you think of what he accomplished.-

There are several things to be noted about such responses, the most obvious of which is the utter unconsciousness on the parts of the writers of them of the implications of DeVoto's point of view. Not for any of the students is there anything strange or objectionable in someone's conceiving of a totalitarian leader as a hero, or in the open admiration of this conception as an ideal. Indeed, the majority of students went even beyond DeVoto, the substance of whose praise of Polk is mainly a matter of drift and innuendo. Second, I want to be sure to emphasize that the examples I have given are by no means the utterances of a crackpot few. They are absolutely representative and they became for those of us who were reading the examinations absolutely predictable. The answers were not all so pointed of course, but with unfailing regularity the bland equations of strength with goodness, of force with greatness, of the efficient with the benign appeared on paper after paper. In fact, so unusual was it for a student to recognize that what DeVoto is saying amounts to praising authoritarianism, to recognize that any exception might be taken to the values exhibited by the passage (the best the students could do with DeVoto's language was to object to some of his phraseology as "slangy" or "in bad taste" without giving any indication of what might be wrong with either or what this wrongness could lead to, and frighteningly enough the closest equivalent to the term "propaganda" was the word "clever")--so unusual was it for a student to take exception to the values of the passage, that when such a paper was discovered by the readers of the examination it was read aloud. I do not remember more than ten papers being read--this out of almost ten thousand examinations. And finally, I think it important to point out that however morally illiterate such remarks may appear, they are not the remarks of

stupid or uneducated people. The students who wrote them know how to put sentences together; they come close to knowing how to read--particularly in Newsweek's terms. What they don't know is how to evaluate what they read, how to see it in terms of who they are and other things they know, how to test on their pulses the real assumptions beneath the ostensible ones. Most of the students, I suppose, would have been ready to condemn totalitarianism if they had seen it. The problem is to get them to recognize it when they see it.

It is true that the students were under pressure and said not what they thought, but what they thought they ought to say, what they thought their examiners wanted to hear. But is this not even worse?--not simply because it implies that one of the reasons the good student is a good student is that he has learned to feed back "right" answers, but because in this case the "good" student assumes that the "right" answer, the one wanted by his or her teachers, is one that splits public and private life, condones power as an end in itself, supports the doctrine that might is right, endorses efficiency as the ne plus ultra of government, and represents the politically expedient as not only morally justifiable, but necessary. The "right" answer here, in short, on the part of over three-quarters of the best students our high schools and preparatory schools are producing--is authoritarianism.

Such an analysis I have no doubt would horrify the writers of the majority responses enumerated above. "But this is an English test" one can imagine their saying, or "I'm talking about language not politics." And of course that is just the trouble. The responses were partial, written in a vacuum by people who never imagined that language involved more than getting commas in the right places or building a strong vocabulary. The responses are divorced from history, divorced from government, divorced most of all from the students themselves. Because they make no attempt to connect

various areas of their experience, to see Spinoza, the sound of the typewriter, and the smell of cooking as having anything to do with each other (of which their blind and appalling faith in the printed word is one symptom), the students have not in any significant way involved themselves as human beings in what they have read or written. In writing for someone else the way they have, they become less than who they are.

One further thing to be noted about the phenomenology of the student responses I have quoted, perhaps the greatest of the illiteracies here, is that all four of them, and all responses like them, were judged by the examiners--that is, the officials of the Educational Testing Service in conjunction with the actual readers of the examinations, educators drawn from a number of colleges and high schools throughout the country--all such responses were judged as worthy of the top score awarded on the test. Our concern as readers of the examination, we were told, and told rightly I think, was to be neither political nor moral. But we were also told that in spite of its ambiguity, the question we were working with we were to consider as designed solely to test the students' awareness of matters technical and rhetorical. Since the scoring of the responses to the question could be evaluated on that basis, they were therefore going to be evaluated on that basis, and on that basis alone--as though language meant no more than it said, as though the matter of style were no more than a matter of taste. Newsweekese.

Finally, as a way of addressing the question of whether or not there is a "literacy crisis" in the United States, in the sense of there being some brand new fall from some traditional state of Grace, I would like to point out that the situation I have just described occurred in 1962. It would not be particularly difficult to find examples of the same thing a hundred years before that, or to move back from the 1860's to Jonathan Swift's excoriation of madness, to Pope on dullness in the Dunciad.

The situation of the AP examination epitomises what for me is the real literacy problem in the United States and why to conceive of literacy as involving no more than an awareness of conventions, in terms of correctness only, merely perpetuates it. What I would call true literacy, the ability to make sense of what one reads and with what one writes, is really the ability to conceptualize, to build structures, to draw inferences, to see implications, to generalize intelligently--in short to make connections, to make relationships, between words and other words, sentences and other sentences, this idea and that idea, language and experience, what is being said and who one is. But concern with only the appearance of this conceptualizing process, far from being a step on the way to an involvement with it, is really a step in another direction, leads away from involvement in much the same way that sex manuals can lead the loveless even further from love--as the situation of the AP examination demonstrates. What's really appalling about that situation is not that the students should have condemned DeVoto's prose and didn't; I'm much less interested in students being liberal or conservative than I am in their being aware of themselves as liberal or conservative, of what it means for them to be liberal or conservative. What's appalling is that the majority of students had no idea of what they were doing with DeVoto--not any more than did the examiners who made the exam. It's what comes of concern with convention that has no reference to what the convention is about or for.

I want to make very clear--you see how careful ones learns to become in trying to forestall ignorant criticism--I want to make very clear that I am not for a moment suggesting that I think we ought to forget about what Newsweek calls literacy and concern ourselves as teachers of reading and writing with something else instead: social issues, consciousness-raising, entertainment with films or art prints--the fluff of the late 60's. What I am suggesting is the necessity of providing a context for

correctness that will make it possible to insist on in the name of something. This is why I think that language understood in its broadest sense, the means by which we run orders through chaos, shape whatever worlds we live in, and as a consequence give ourselves the identities we have, ought to be the focus of all courses designed to enable students to become literate. For to see writing and reading both as forms of language-using is to be able to suggest that the processes involved in writing and reading--those of selecting, arranging, putting together--are relevant to all disciplines and to any life, whether one's language is chemical symbols or mathematical notation, gestures, colors, notes, or words. It is to be able to suggest to a future physicist, say, that a better understanding of the workings of the English language can enable her to become more conscious of what she is doing as a user of the language of physics--and vice versa. The same goes

for a future historian, mathematician, musician, or anthropologist. And it is to be able to insist that facility with the processes of reading and writing, more than being a requirement for a student to fulfill is the sine qua non of his education. To become alive to the implications of language-using is not, of course, to become free, but it is to have choices that one cannot have without such an awareness. This is what I see the hullabaloo over correctness giving us a chance to shoot for as teachers. There is no reason we cannot use the concern with what are called "mechanics" to introduce our students to an idea of them as much more than that. There is no reason we cannot use concern with the way sentences look to talk with our students about what sentences are, and about what it can mean to read and to write them. There is no reason we can't use their Mozart to talk about ours--pretending, whenever we need to, like Benchley, that neither did we understand there were two.

# Why We Teach Writing in the First Place\*

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## Back to the Basics

Schools exist to teach people to think in some systematic way. At the early grades "reading" and "writing" and "arithmetic" are called basic--what they are basic to, is thinking. Later on, in secondary schools and colleges, these basics become attached to particular disciplines--each characterized by a particular pattern of reasoning--history, biology, literature and so on. Along the way, of course, schools teach other things: citizenship, social manners, athletic skills, and the like. And sometimes these collateral skills so dominate the curriculum that original or primary intentions get lost, and we talk about schools which "socialize" or "train" or "bore" rather than "educate."

But the basics which the public always wants to "get back to" are really the primary language skills which make systematic articulate thought possible. Reading provides us access to information and ideas. Writing and arithmetic provide general tools for manipulating and expressing ideas and information. Unlike speaking, which children learn on their own, long before kindergarten, these more abstract language skills are formally introduced in first grade and developed progressively during the next twelve or twenty years. This rather simple-minded formulation about why we go to school is meant to introduce "writing" as one of the truly elemental--basic--studies for serious students from the earliest through the latest grades.

But, of the three R's, the role of writing in learning--and in the school

\*Portions of this essay have appeared in New Directions for Teaching and Learning: Teaching Writing in All Disciplines, No. 12, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, December, 1982.

curriculum--is perhaps least understood. Everyone believes that reading is the basic skill (the most basic?); without it few avenues to civilized culture or higher knowledge exist. Everyone also knows that mathematical languages are the foundation on which scientific and technical knowledge--and hence our civilization--are built. Everyone does not know that writing is basic to thinking about, and learning knowledge in all fields as well as to communicating that knowledge. Elementary teachers teach penmanship and believe they are teaching writing; secondary teachers often teach grammar and believe they are teaching writing; while many college professors teach literary criticism and expect that their students already have been taught writing. In other words, many different activities are taught in the name of teaching writing. Furthermore, as Don Graves indicates, courses which do, in fact, teach writing sometimes do so in a harmful manner, suggesting that the "eradication of error is more important than the encouragement of expression" (1978, p. 18).

The emphasis on teaching reading in the elementary school curriculum may actually contribute to the neglect of writing. Many American educators believe that reading must precede writing as people develop their language-using skills; this hierarchical model actually separates reading from writing--which may be a fundamental mistake (Stock and Wixson, forum, forthcoming). Schools which subscribe to such an artificial instructional hierarchy are also likely to subscribe to a set of basal readers accompanied by fill-in-the-blank workbooks; these workbooks both help sell the reading series and diminish the amount of writing a teacher is likely to assign in connection

with the reading lesson. Graves even suggests that the dominance of reading in the curriculum discourages active self-sponsored learning: "Writing is the basic stuff of education. It has been sorely neglected in our schools. We have substituted the passive reception of information for the active expression of facts, ideas, and feelings. We now need to right the balance between sending and receiving. We need to let them write" (1978, p. 27).

Graves' position presents reading as the passive receiving of knowledge and writing as the more active generation of knowledge. We know, of course, that this polarity is too severe. Frank Smith (1971), Kenneth Goodman (1968), and David Bleich (1978), among others have demonstrated that reading is both a highly subjective and active process--hardly the passive activity which Graves describes. Each of us "reads" information differently because we have experienced the world differently. However, there remains enough truth in Graves' observation to consider it further. In a sense, reading is the corollary opposite of writing: to arrive at meaning, readers (and--for that matter--listeners too) take in language from "outside" and process it through an internal mechanism colored by personal knowledge and experience. To create meaning, writers, on the contrary, produce language from some internal mechanism which, as it happens, is also shaped by personal knowledge and experience from the "outside." So, just as no reader reads texts exactly the same way as other readers, no writer generates texts which are totally unique or original.

The importance in these qualified comparisons between reading and writing is

this: they are interdependent, mutually supportive skills, both of which are "basic" to an individual's capacity to generate critical, developed independent thought. Few courses of study, however, in the secondary schools or colleges, seem to recognize explicitly this relationship. Whereas reading is assigned in virtually every academic area as the best way to impart information, introduce ideas, and teach concepts, no such imperative exists with regard to writing. In many subject areas, teachers are more likely to assign machine-scored short answer, multiple choice, and true-false tests than significant written compositions. In fact, in a recent study of the kind of writing required across the curriculum in American secondary schools, Arthur Applebee (1981) discovered that only 3% of assigned writing tasks required students to compose anything larger than one sentence; most of their so-called writing was "mechanical"--filling in blanks, copying and doing homework exercises. Other courses may assign periodic essay tests, term papers, or laboratory reports but use them to measure--rather than promote--learning. A recent publication by the American Association for the Advancement of the Humanities reports findings similar to the Applebee study. The report says in part:

Plainly, schooling as usual won't work. Most schools have a powerful hidden curriculum that precludes the development of higher-order skills in reading, thinking, and writing. The elements of this pernicious curriculum include the following:

No writing in the testing program, only short-answer, true-false, and multiple-choice tests;

Writing relegated only to English courses;

Writing viewed as an end, not as a means, of learning;

No systematic instruction in solving problems, thinking critically, and examining evidence;

No opportunities for disciplined discussion in small groups;

No regular practice in writing at length (1982, p. 9).

Not only is the curriculum "pernicious," but teachers are seldom trained to understand fully the degree to which language skills are involved in the development of higher thought:

Moreover, most teachers are unprepared by their education or professional training to teach and foster the needed skills, just as most schools offer no in-service training for teachers and no small classes, released time, or teacher aides to help evaluate student writing (1982, p. 9).

These studies, together with my personal experience as both student and teacher suggest that writing has an ill-defined and haphazard role in the curriculum. And where writing has an established role, that role is likely to be superficial or limited in scope. If we are interested in helping schools to do better what we believe they were primarily intended to do--teach people to reason systematically, logically, and critically--then we need, as Graves suggests, to balance the curriculum as carefully with regard to writing activities as we currently do with reading activities. Moreover, the curriculum should not include merely more writing, but more of certain kinds of writing. Let me explain.

#### Thought and Language

Thirty years ago George Gusdorf (1953) stated clearly the double and often contradictory role language plays in the development of individuals. On the one hand, humans use language to communicate ideas and information to other people; on

the other hand, humans use language to express themselves and to develop their own articulate thought. These two functions, the "communicative" and the "expressive," often work in opposition to each other; as Gusdorf puts it: "The more I communicate, the less I express myself; the more I express myself, the less I communicate" (Nystrand, p. 128).

Whereas Gusdorf's formulation of the double role of language may seem obvious and common-sensical, it is surprising to see the degree to which schools promote the one, the "communicative," and neglect the other, the "expressive." Most writing assigned in most curricula asks students to write in order to communicate learned information to teachers--through which writing the students will be evaluated, judged, and graded. Few curricula recognize, implicitly or explicitly, that writing can have an equally important role in generating knowledge (the expressive function) as in communicating knowledge. In other words, an individual's language is crucial in discovering, creating, and formulating ideas as well as in communicating to others what has been discovered, created, and formulated.

Why am I making such an issue about the different functions of writing? Because I believe with James Britton that "knowledge is a process of knowing rather than a standard of the known" (forum, forthcoming). Much of the "process of knowing" takes place in language. Not only is it the symbol system through which we receive and transmit most information, it is the necessary medium in which we process or assimilate that information. We see and hear language, we explain experience and sensation through language, and we use language to identify the world. Gusdorf says: "To name is to call into existence, to draw out of nothingness. That which is not named cannot exist in any possible way" (Nystrand, p. 48). By naming objects and experience we represent our world through symbols. Susanne Langer describes sense data--the stuff we take in from outside--as "constantly wrought into symbols, which are our elementary ideas" (1960, p. 42). In order to think in the



first place, human beings need to symbolize, for in using language they represent, come to know, and understand the world. We actually do much of our learning through making language; another way of saying the same thing: language makes thinking and learning, as we know them, possible.

For our concerns here, the process by which we think and learn is most important: what happens to sense data, information, ideas and images when we receive them? How do we manipulate them in our minds, make them our own, or do something with them? Psychologist Lev Vygotsky describes "inner speech" as the mediator between thought and language, portraying it as "a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought" (1962, p. 149). He argues that "thought is born through words...thought unembodied in words remains a shadow" (1962, p. 153). Other sensory experience--sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches--contributes to, but does not in itself constitute, formal thought. We often think things through by talking to ourselves, carrying on "inner" conversations in which we consider, accept, reject, debate, and rationalize. The key to knowing and understanding lies in our ability to internally manipulate information and ideas received whole from external sources and give them verbal shape or articulation, which Richard Bailey defines as forming "sensory impressions and inchoate ideas into linguistic form" (fforum, forthcoming). We think by processing; we process by talking to ourselves and others.

This last point is most important: we often inform ourselves by speaking out loud to others. Drawing on the work of Gusdorf, Langer, and Vygotsky, James Britton argues that the "primary task for speech is to symbolize reality: we symbolize reality in order to handle it" (1970, p. 20). Considered this way, speech serves the needs of the speaker as much as the listener. Britton argues that human beings use "expressive" speech--or talk--more to shape their own experience than to communicate to others: the words give concrete form to thought

and so make it more real. This "shaping at the point of utterance" (Britton, 1972, p. 53) helps us discover the meaning (our own meaning) of our everyday experience. As Martin Nystrand summarizes it: language "facilitates discovery by crystallizing experience" (1977, p. 101).

We carry on conversations with others to explain things to ourselves. I explain out loud to a friend the symbolism in a Bergman film to better understand it myself. I discuss with my wife the gossip from a recent dinner party to give that party a shape and identity. And so on. The intersection between articulate speech and internal symbolization produces comprehensible meaning. This same intersection helps explain the role of writing in learning.

Many teachers identify writing simply as a technical communication skill necessary for the clear transmission of knowledge. This limited understanding of writing takes no account of the process we call "composing," the mental activity which may be said to characterize our very species. Ann Berthoff describes composing as the essence of thinking "...the work of the active mind in seeing relationships, finding forms, making meanings: when we write, we are doing in a particular way what we are already doing when we make sense of the world. We are composers by virtue of being human" (1978, p. 12). Janet Emig believes that writing "represents a unique mode of learning--not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique" (1977, p. 122). The act of writing, according to Emig, allows the writer to manipulate thought in unique ways because writing makes our thoughts visible and concrete and allows us to interact with and modify them. Writing one word, one sentence, one paragraph suggests still other words, sentences, and paragraphs. Both Berthoff and Emig point out that writing progresses as an act of discovery--and furthermore, that no other thinking process helps us develop a line of inquiry or a mode of thought as completely. Scientists, artists, mathematicians, lawyers, engineers--all "think"

with pen to paper, chalk to blackboard, hands on terminal keys. Developed thinking is seldom possible, for most of us, any other way. We can hold only so many thoughts in our heads at one time; when we talk out loud and have dialogues with friends--or with ourselves--we lose much of what we say because it isn't written down. More importantly, we can't extend, expand, or develop our ideas fully because we cannot see them. Sheridan Baker writes: "Only on paper, by writing and rewriting, can we get the fit, make the thought visible...where it will bear inspection both from ourselves and others" (forum, forthcoming). Sartre quit writing when he lost his sight because he couldn't see words, the symbols of this thought; he needed to visualize this thought in order to compose, manipulate and develop it (Emig, 1977).

#### School Writing

In 1975, James Britton and a team of researchers published a study of the kind of writing assigned to students, 11-18 years old, in British schools. The results of the study are not surprising: "transactional writing" (writing to communicate information) accounted for 64% of the total writing assigned students between the ages of 11 and 18. "Poetic writing" (writing as creative art) accounted for 18%--exclusively in English classes--while "expressive writing" (thoughts written to oneself) barely shows up at all, accounting for just 6% of the total sample (Britton, 1975). Miscellaneous writing, including copying and note taking, accounted for the rest. The figures are more extreme when the research team looked at the writing assigned to eighteen year olds: "transactional," 84%; "poetic," 7%; and "expressive," 4%.

The fact that students were seldom required to write in the expressive mode suggested to Britton that writing was taught almost exclusively as a means to communicate information rather than as a means to gain insight, develop ideas, or solve problems. This complete neglect of expressive writing across the curriculum

is a clue to the value of writing in schools. According to Britton's classification, which closely parallels Gusdorf's identification of the dual function of language, expressive writing is the most personal, the closest to "inner speech" and the thinking process itself. The absence of assigned expressive writing in school curricula suggests that many teachers have a limited understanding of the way language works. As Britton's co-researcher Nancy Martin explains: "The expressive is basic. Expressive speech is how we communicate with each other most of the time and expressive writing, being the form of writing nearest speech, is crucial for trying out and coming to terms with new ideas" (1976, p. 26). According to the research team, personal or expressive writing is the matrix from which both transactional and poetic writing evolve. Serious writers who undertake significant writing tasks almost naturally put their writing through "expressive stages as they go about finding out exactly what they believe and what they want to write. Pulitzer Prize winning author Donald Murray explains: "I believe increasingly that the process of discovery, of using language to find out what you're going to say, is a key part of the writing process" (1978, p. 91, italics mine).

Preliminary findings in Applebee's study of writing in American schools (1981) indicate a pattern similar to the 1967-70 British study; "informational" (transactional) writing--dominated the composing tasks in all disciplines; "imaginative" (poetic) writing was limited largely to English classes; "personal" (expressive) writing was virtually non-existent in the sample. Applebee examines one additional category, "mechanical writing," which the Britton study did not consider in detail; Applebee describes mechanical writing as any writing activity which did not involve significant composing on the part of the writer--filling in blanks, translating, computing, copying, taking notes, etc. This category, it turns out, was by far the most frequently assigned writing in American classrooms and actually accounted for 24% of total classroom activity (Applebee, p. 30).

These studies suggest the kind of writing currently assigned by most teachers and written by most students in the junior or senior high school years. Transactional (or informational or communicative) writing dominates the curriculum while there is little or not evidence of expressive (or personal) writing. The pattern is a disturbing one, for it suggests that across the curriculum, from subject to subject, writing serves a narrow function. In fact, mechanical writing, in which students do not have to originate or develop thought to any significant extent, is the most frequently assigned form of writing. Transactional writing, the only writing of paragraph or more length assigned in most disciplines, communicates information, but usually to an audience already familiar with that information, who will evaluate or grade the writing--hardly an authentic act of communication. Expressive writing, which serves the thinking process of the writer directly is generally ignored throughout the curriculum. As Richard Baily concludes: "the emphasis on writing as a tool for inquiry, a stage in the articulation of knowledge, seems so rare in American schools that it plays a negligible role in the educational system, at least at the secondary level" (fforum, forthcoming).

### Visible Language

When we speak, we compose. When we write, we compose even better, usually, because we can manipulate our compositions on paper, in addition to holding them in our heads. We can re-view them, re-vise them, and re-write them because they are now visible and concrete. Consider, for example, the following piece of writing produced by Anne, a sixth-grade girl, who was faced with giving her first formal speech--a two-minute explanation of how to do something. She had a topic, "stenciling," but was not at all sure how to create a "speech" about it. To make Anne's task manageable, her teacher asked her two questions: first, what do you want to say about stenciling? To which she wrote:

---

Stenciling speech

Where you can buy supplies  
 What stenciling used for  
 question?  
 Origin of stenciling  
 Dictionary Definition  
 Show sample  
 Make one

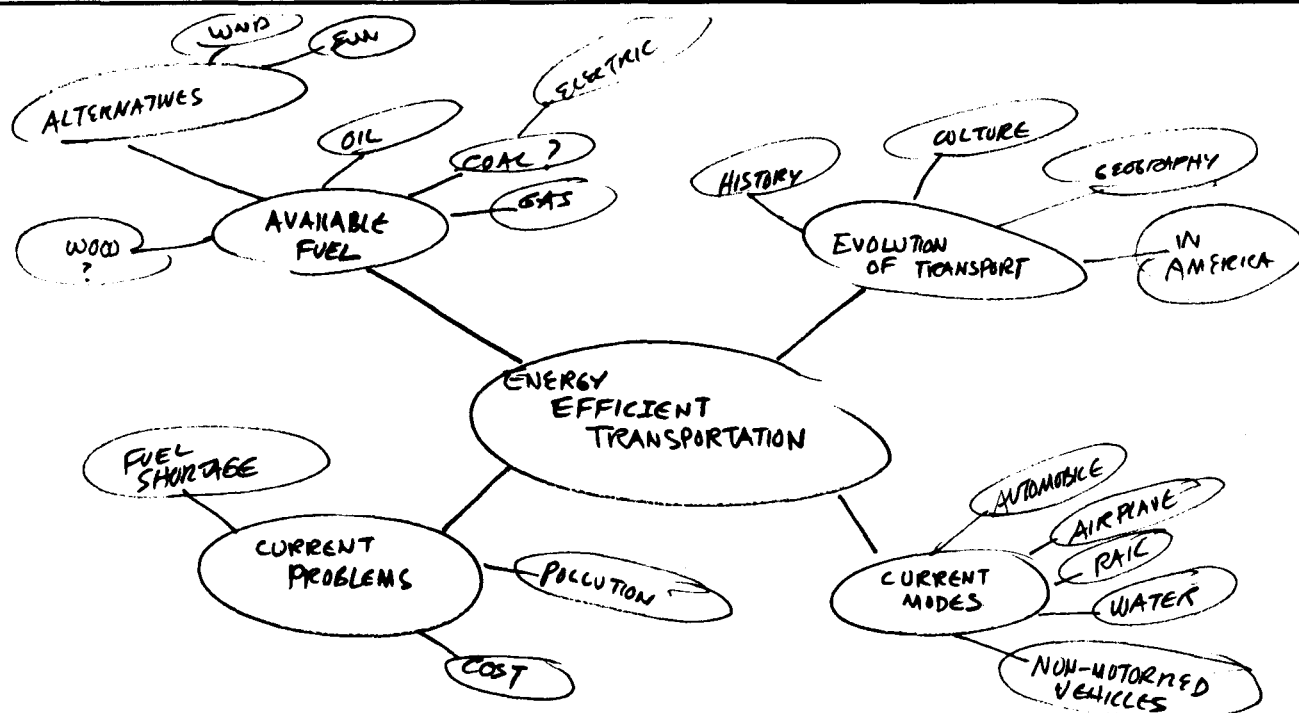
---

Pleased with her list, but wondering what, exactly, to do next, Anne again asked her teacher for more help. The teacher asked a second question: In what order do you want to tell this? In another two minutes the speech was essentially organized and looked like this:

- 
1. Dictionary Definition
  2. Origin of stenciling
  3. Show sample
  4. Make one
  5. Where you can buy supplies
- 

The stenciling speech example is meant to make a simple point: by writing out the list "in the first place," the student was able to move to "the second place"--the organization of the speech--and so solve a difficult problem of communication. Writing the words on paper objectified the thought in the world. Peter Elbow reminds us that it helps "to think of writing as input or as movement of information from the world to the writer" (fforum, forthcoming). The same "movement" even happens when I write out a grocery list--when I write down "eggs" I quickly see that I also need "bacon." And so on.

Consider another example: Doug, a high school senior needs to write a paper on the topic "Energy-Efficient Transportation," but is not sure what to say about it. He has dozens of scattered impressions, but no developed thought, organizational theme, or focus. His teacher suggests a simple mapping exercise to pull his thoughts together and make them visible. This student produced the following conceptual "map":



Again, this is not a profound example; it is, however, clear testimony to the power of visible language to suggest, define, organize, and create relationships. The visual map is really an elaboration of the bacon-and-eggs principle. In this case, Doug started with a general subject, "Energy Efficient Transportation" and generated as many related subtopics as possible. At some point he can stop and number the clusters according to importance or sequence--or delete irrelevant ones, develop existing ones and add others. For example, one idea, "Alternative Energy" may become the focus for the entire paper. Doug may then decide that "Current Modes of Transport" should introduce his topic while "Evolution of Transportation" is really the subject of another paper. A visual diagram such as this spreads out the options before the writer's eyes and allows him to make carefully reasoned choices about where to go and what to include. While the power of such exploratory writing may seem obvious to many readers, there is little evidence that such writing is valued by, taught, or encouraged by teachers in many school curricula.

A third example of the power of visible language is provided by a philosophy student's journal. Joan, a college senior enrolled in her first philosophy course in summer school, was required by her instructor to keep a journal and record her reactions to the class and to new ideas she encountered during this 5-week course. An entry early in her first week of class read like this:

6/10

This philosophy stuff is weird! Hard to conceptualize. You try to explain it to someone and just can't. Like taking 3 pages of the book to decide whether or not a bookcase is there. Someone asked me if you really learn anything from it. I didn't think so but I finally had to say yes. I really never realized how we speak without really knowing (?! ) what we are saying. Like I told her, the class is interesting and time goes by fast in it but you have to concentrate and sort of "shift" your mind when you are in class. You have to really think and work hard at keeping everything tied in together—it's like a chain where you have to retain one thing to get the

next. I also told her that if you really do think and concentrate you begin to argue with this guy on skepticism, etc. and that's really scary--you think at the end of the book will be this little paragraph saying how everything really does exist as we see it and we really do "know" things, they were just kidding!

Here at the beginning of a summer school course (6/10) she is wondering about the nature of her new course of study. "Weird." She encounters Descartes for the first time and openly explores her thoughts on paper, hoping that his ideas are essentially a joke and that Descartes is "just kidding."

Near the end of course, a month later (7/4), after much debate in her journal about her religious beliefs, she writes:

7/4

You know, as the term is coming to a close I am tempted to sit back and think if I really mastered any skills in Philosophy. Sometimes when I come up with arguments for something I feel like I am just talking in circles. Or "begging the question" as it's been put. One thing I can say is that Philosophy has made somewhat of a skeptic out of me. We are presented with so many things that we take for granted as being there and being right--we were shown evidence and proofs that may be they really aren't there and aren't true. You know, I still feel like I did the first entry I put in this journal--maybe the last day of class you will say--"I was just kidding about all this stuff--the world really is as you imagine it--there are material things, God does exist with evil, etc." But I realize these arguments are valid and do have their points--they are just points we never considered. I can see I will not take much more for granted anymore--I will try to form an argument in my mind (not brain!).

At this point we see her reflecting on her course of study, on her journal, and on how she has possibly changed. Joan remains a Christian--a belief she has asserted several times in other parts of her journal--but she now also calls her-

self "somewhat of a skeptic," as she writes about her own changing perceptions. Again, this is informal writing, not meant to be graded--or necessarily ever read by someone else. But the journal writing assignment encourages her to explore and develop her ideas by forcing her still-liquid thought into concrete language.

Joan's final entry, a few days later (7/9) reflects on the value of this expressive assignment:

7/9

Before I hand this in, I have to write a short blurb on what I thought of this journal idea. I have to admit, at first I wasn't too fired up about it--I thought "What am I going to find to write about?" The first few entries were hard to write. But, as time went on I grew to enjoy it more and more. I actually found out some things about myself too. Anyway I did enjoy this and feel I like would be giving up a good friend if I quit writing in it!

The  
End  
(for now!)

Personal writing, in other words, can help students individualize and expand their learning by encouraging them to force the shadows in their mind--as Vygotsky says--into articulate thought. Art Young, in studying both expressive and poetic writing, argues that such writing not only encourages students to learn about certain subjects and express themselves, but that it gives them the time "to assess values in relation to the material they are studying" (fforum, forthcoming). Certainly we witness our philosophy student using her journal to mediate between her personal values when she enrolled in class and the somewhat different ones presented by the professor during the course.

#### Teaching Thinking: Two Solutions

My original premise contends that schools exist to teach people basic literacy skills which, in turn, are prerequisites