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Two and a half weeks into my first semester as a Freshman English instructor, I discovered that there is not often a causal relation between what the teacher teaches and what the student learns. The discrepancy often results from the inadequacy of one party or the other, but the basic problem is more complex than that. The difficulty teachers face is inherent. Teaching is an act; learning is a process. For teachers of composition, the problem is particularly acute. There is no foolproof formula for teaching writing, no guarantee that the student who knows grammar will be able to write a lucid paragraph. Good writing, to paraphrase Monroe Beardsley, is more than correctness.

Like most other first-semester instructors at the University of Delaware, I did not design E110, the course required of all freshman. I was provided with a syllabus and three texts. The course focused on particular rhetorical strategies as presented in James M. McCrimmon's Writing With a Purpose. Supplementary reading was taken from McQuade and Atwan's Popular Writing in America, and exercises were extracted from Scholes and Klaus' Elements of Writing. There was no unit dealing specifically with style included on the course syllabus and although I was wary of trying to deal with it and unsure how to approach it, I felt that some treatment of style was essential. I had graded two sets of essays and waged a week-long campaign against the dangling modifier when I realized that my students' problems were not generally mechanical or grammatical: not one paper had contained a dangling modifier. Rather, the problems were stylistic: the manner of expression was awkward, the sense of audience limited, the word choice imprecise, the generalizations extreme, the lack of detail abundant. Parroting the rules of style I had heard and ignored throughout high school and college seemed ineffective at best. I had visions of myself lecturing on the Five Steps to Fluid Prose and Graceful Transition and, at the first challenge, having to smile feebly and stammer, "Well . . . you know . . . rules are made to be broken." They do not need rules, I thought, they need practice. Yet I was wary of requiring a great deal of written work and of straying too far from the course outline. The particular writing strategies presented--comparison/contrast, cause/effect, classification, and persuasion--provided an excellent framework within which I wanted to stay. I wanted to integrate and emphasize the stylistic concerns which presented themselves in the texts and in the reader rather than digressing

into areas which were of no immediate interest to my students, who were Medical Technology, Chemical Engineering, Biology and Accounting majors. They were very literal and pragmatic, and I was less interested in presenting a critical theory for analyzing literature than in finding tools for teaching effective written communication. In addition, I was having some trouble defining the term "style" in a way that would make sense to them and also have some integrity for me. I was, however, certain that they could benefit more from actually writing than from theorizing.

Although I feared too formalized an approach and wanted to encourage originality of thought, I realized that I must provide some direction; the process must make some sense to the students, and I had to find some way, however impressionistic, of measuring their stylistic development. I needed a painless way to mix practice--writing itself, which is ultimately the only way to learn to write--and theory--an awareness of what to look for and what to do in the writing they did.

Richard Weaver, in his book The Ethics of Rhetoric, includes a chapter called "Some Rhetorical Aspects of Grammatical Categories," in which he speaks about the ways in which "the bound character of language affects our ability to teach and persuade." An awareness of the different uses of language can give the student a sense of audience, make him conscious of the importance of precise diction and attention to detail and ultimately help him develop a style all his own. The use of language shapes and refines the thought process; filtered thoughts make for clearer, sharper writing. "Rhetoric affects us primarily by setting forth images which inform and attract . . . language is not a purely passive instrument . . . while you are doing something with it, is doing something with you."¹ Weaver's theories echoed those of Scholes and Klaus in Elements of Writing, and I felt that I had come a little closer to defining the term "style." It is not, for freshmen any more than for other writers, a static body of knowledge to assimilate and reproduce, but rather an evolutionary process of discovery and development which is highly personal. My definition still seemed a bit nebulous, but I was sure at least that language was a valid way to explore the problem without straying too far from the rhetorical structure of the course. I was convinced also that the study of language is inseparable from the use of language.

Having reviewed several sets of in-class essays and out-of-class revisions, I thought it best to limit the number of in-class writing exercises and allow for a bit of personal exploration and experimentation. The students were self-conscious but not inhibited about their writing, and enjoyed talking about themselves. I decided, as part of the course work, to require journals. I told the class that they were to write every day for at least fifteen minutes, about anything they had seen, done, or thought about. I did not intend to grade or even correct the journal entries, but I did intend to read them, and I made that clear to the class. I drew up a series of short assignments, emphasizing different uses of language and focusing on particular aspects of style.

Walker Gibson, in the introduction to his work Tough, Sweet and Stuffy, touches on the various ways in which the human being responds to the people he meets. Gibson points to our immediate apprehension of physical detail and notes the many levels on which we communicate with

one another. He discusses the manner in which relationships begin, drawing an analogy between the meeting of two strangers and the confrontation between reader and writer, stressing the reaction to language use in each situation.

My first two journal assignments dealt with physical description: in the first, I asked them to paint a picture with words, to take an object, scene or event and describe it as carefully as they could; in the second, I asked for a description of a person they knew fairly well, talking about his clothes, his haircut, and telling what sort of things they assumed just from what they saw. I gave them the option to talk about themselves rather than another person, asking how their particular style of dress and so forth were in keeping with their own self-image. The third assignment was written during class time. "Consider the person you described in Wednesday's exercise. Talk about his or her use of language--peculiar expressions, profanity, bad grammar, regional accent. You may do this either by narration or by attempting to imitate his or her dialect in quotations or dialogue. What kind of assumptions do you make about him just on the basis of his language? Are they different from the impressions you explained in Wednesday's exercise or in keeping with them?" I wanted them to do exactly what Gibson had done: analyze their response to a visual image, and then to see whether language changed or reinforced the initial impression. Class discussion during this period concerned first the visual impact of advertising: the clothes worn by the models, color photography, and second, the advertising copy: particular words, phrases and brand names. I asked the students to discuss their responses to the words and images, and then to think about what sort of audience might react favorably to certain ads.

The first series of assignments worked rather well, as did the discussions about advertising. The object descriptions were good. Students chose a variety of things to describe: a roommate's desk, a stuffed animal, a photograph, a piece of jewelry, a building, a dogfight. Many played a sort of guessing game with me, not revealing what they were describing until the last sentence. The writing style was not sophisticated, but attention to detail was close and accurate. The descriptions of people were also good, although the students' assessments of their own reactions were not. Initially, the students seemed unable to articulate feelings and impressions. Those who chose to talk about their own appearance had a clear sense of their own image and were able to discuss it more fully than those who discussed images of others. The discussions of advertisements seemed to interest the students, and many were able, in their writing exercises, to make connections between the physical image and the language use of the person they described. They were unable to talk very specifically about language itself, stressing what the person they knew spoke about rather than the way he expressed himself. A few mentioned profanity, discussing the way it affected their perception of the individual, but specific kinds of word use did not seem to impress them.

The next series of assignments were a bit more abstract and their connections to the course material less obvious. The fourth exercise asked them to explore a memory that was visually vivid to them. So that they could get a sense of a particular, yet fairly simple, stylistic constraint, I directed them to write the account in the present tense. Response to this exercise was mixed. Most seemed anxious to narrate

something significant and to tell why the event had impressed them, and very few wrote in exclusively the present tense. They did not grasp the importance of the visual image or how language was able to reconstruct the event for them; they wanted to describe how they felt and why the event changed their lives.

The fifth assignment was aligned with the strategy of comparison/contrast which we were then discussing in class. We had looked closely at Tom Wicker's two accounts of the Kennedy assassination, one written for The New York Times on the day it happened and the other a retrospective written for Times Talk, a trade publication. I stressed the link between memory and language and emphasized Wicker's tone and sense of audience in each of the articles. The students were given a choice of two essay topics, both of which dealt with the differences in language and style between two pieces from Popular Writing. The first question asked them to compare "Stephen Crane's Own Story," an account of the wreck of the Commodore written for the New York Press, and "The Open Boat," a short story drawing on the events of the wreck which Crane wrote much later; the second question concerned Zane Grey's "What's the Desert Means to Me" and an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's Walden, each of which expressed a particular attitude toward nature and society and had a strikingly different use of narrative voice. The week after the essays were due, I gave them the fifth journal assignment: "Reconstruct a typical day in your life. Write as though you were preparing a news account. Remember to use details in such a way that they will interest your reader--but stick to the facts. Using basically the same events, write a narrative that illustrates the comedy of your life."

The assassination articles worked well. The students remembered the event and seemed to recognize the evocative quality of Wicker's language. The essays were genuinely impressive. Students dealt with the language and style of each author on a fairly sophisticated level and were able to draw some interesting conclusions. Few were able to articulate exactly what the differences were between the two pieces they selected, but most demonstrated a grasp of the issue. The class enjoyed the journal assignment, and a few turned out some very funny pieces. Most were careful to present two distinctive accounts and indicated a clear understanding of stylistic differences and the way to handle various forms of narration.

I assigned the sixth exercise rather late in the semester. I asked the students to summarize the plot of a movie or television show they had seen recently, using only the passive voice, and then to retell the plot, using only action verbs. The assignment had a three-fold purpose: by asking them to summarize, I was anticipating the process of compiling material for the required research paper; asking them again to reconstruct a past event, I was hoping to reinforce for them the connection between memory and language; confining them first to passive and then to active verbs, I hoped to make them see the effectiveness of a certain stylistic device. This assignment was the least successful of the group. Some students decided to write a movie review; others misunderstood the distinction between active and passive voice, and presented two nearly identical accounts. I realized that I had not clearly defined the difference, nor had I given them any sense of why the distinction was important.

I spaced the journal assignments closely at first, and then at

week- or ten-day-intervals. Throughout the semester, I reminded them to keep writing daily. I reviewed the journals twice, making either favorable comments or no comments at all. I tried to summarize my rather amorphous treatment of style near the end of the semester, after devoting two full periods to a discussion of the relationship between language, thought and writing. I attempted to summarize and justify the rhetorical strategies we had discussed during the semester by pointing out that writing is a way to make students articulate what they think within a construct which duplicates the way they think. I pointed out that strategies of writing were inefficient and artificial ways of reproducing thought but that there was some validity to teaching them. I tried to argue that in the judgments they made and the things they did each day they employed the notions of comparison/contrast and cause/effect. I then moved to a discussion of classification, trying first to explain why it was considered a rhetorical strategy and then pointing to the ways in which we classify every day. I concentrated on words and images, asking them about their reactions to certain stereotypes: hippie, red-neck, foxy chick, lifeguard, cheerleader. We then discussed the whole concept of stereotyping, exploring its validity as a form of classification. I spent the first portion of one additional class summarizing my strategy behind the series of journal assignments, trying to make some connections to the material we had dealt with in discussing persuasion. I attempted to pull together the various aspects of style I had focused on in the journal exercises. I hoped to give them some sense of the processes involved in writing, ways in which thought and writing develop and work together, the effects of various writing styles on an audience. I tried to relate all these ideas specifically to the strategy of persuasion. I stressed that a consciousness of the ways in which they think would give them a sense of how to approach and persuade their audience. Turning to the evocative qualities of language, I asked them to think about their responses and associations to particular words--fire, ocean, beach, wind. So that they could get a clear sense of the way a writer uses language and a look at how they react to it, I asked them to choose one or two paragraphs from "The Wilderness" by David Perlman, an essay which pleads for conservation. I asked them to discuss the way in which Perlman's style involves or persuades his reader, to think about the power of certain words or phrases and their associations to them, to tell how a particular description affected them and why.

Although I felt my presentation was confusing, the class reacted well to the ideas and to the exercise. As with the earlier journal assignment, they had some difficulty articulating their reactions, but they chose vivid passages to explicate and demonstrated a good deal of sensitivity in their observations.

Throughout the course, I stressed the importance of language, the relationship of writer to audience and the necessity of precise words and supportive detail. Advertising, newswriting and persuasion provided particular focal points and the material contained in Elements of Writing was of some use in terms of my own thought. My emphasis was linguistic more than anything else, though under any strict definition of the term my approach would bear little scrutiny. I do think, and attempted to prove to myself, that the link between sensitivity to language and a precise and lucid writing style, tenuous as it may be, does exist.

Whether the consciousness-raising exercises I assigned directly affected my students' writing ability is almost impossible to tell. There was a significant development in terms of fluidity and clarity, particularly in the persuasive essay written directly following the conclusion of my "unit" on style. Two students who had particularly severe stylistic problems did very well. The journals, as a whole, were successful. The students were less than enthusiastic about the prospect, but seemed to warm to the idea as time went on. They were, for the most part, thoughtful and remarkably candid. The journal format allowed for a more relaxed and thus a more fluid kind of writing and I was favorably impressed by the sensitivity of thought and facility of expression that I encountered. There were, naturally, a few who did not keep up with their journals on a daily basis and others who had nothing at all to say about anything. Those least interested in the course were least interested in extra writing, but those who gave the journal time and serious thought benefitted from the exercise. Two students who had major difficulties writing in-class essays produced particularly impressive journals. Their mechanical errors were fewer, their style much less constrained and their thoughts much more fluid. For the most part, the good writing got better and the mediocre writing seemed a bit less labored, but it may have been a matter of practice as much of increased awareness. I did sense a certain degree of interest, if not enthusiasm, in the ideas I presented; my class on the whole was attentive and responsive. I do feel that I succeeded in making them aware of language as a tool to utilize, a skill to refine, as something which can work through them and for them, shaping as well as articulating their thoughts.

NOTES

¹Richard Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 115.

²Gibson goes on to describe and examine three styles which dominate American prose: tough talk, sweet talk and stuffy talk, and analyzes the reader's response to the various strategies. The essay is carefully organized and engagingly written, but I was most interested in Gibson's preliminary remarks.