

TEACHING WRITING:

Methods, Materials,
& Measurement

LIBRARY
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During the spring semester of 1978 I indulged a long-standing impulse to teach composition in a section of E110.

Like most college English teachers, I had always accepted the prior need for literary content in the course--a need legitimized in the very title of our course--and had accordingly used as a primary text some collection or selection of readings with which to remedy a presumed poverty of ideas. At the same time, I have always been troubled by the amount of attention diverted from the practice of writing to the examination of ideas, and even of style, a diversion constantly reinforced by the attractions of interest on the part of the students and teachability on the part of the instructor. The actual teaching of writing is likely to be, by contrast, a painful, tedious, and all too often unrewarding business. The use of handbook exercises for this purpose, frequently alternated with reading assignments for palatability, has definition and structure to recommend it--indeed, such exercises can usually be graded, if that is one's game; but they suffer from an essential artificiality which tends to render their principles abstract and difficult to translate into constructive habit. Then, too, there is the question of what kind of readings to use for the "content" portion of the course. In addition to the siren character of readings in general, selection must contemplate and at least try to escape the Scylla of art-for-art's-sake and the Charybdis of someone-else's-discipline. Not surprisingly, the English teacher's Homeric effort, intended to awaken Lotos-eaters and to turn swine into men, commonly ends in shipwreck.

Pondering these chronic problems, I recalled to mind a sort of theme-and-variations writing program in which I participated in another college some thirty years ago, and, following the usual course of pedagogical progression, determined to devise an "experimental" writing course along those ancient and forgotten lines. I proposed at the outset two major objectives for my students: (1) to deal with writing problems closest to one's personal academic needs, and (2) to learn how to get the best possible writing out of oneself independent of a teacher. Instruction, in other words, was to be predicated on the importance of each student's doing the sort of writing that had maximum practical significance for him, and doing it in such a way as to prepare him to carry on effectively after the expiration of his brief formal apprenticeship in class.

The keynote of such a plan is independence, and the corollary of independence is initiative. The students were to have no canned reading to do and no canned exercises to write. They were to have no theme assignments beyond a series of deadlines for the presentation of finished copy. What they had instead was an obligation calling on individual resources. Each student was given one week in which to identify an area of interest to which he could profitably and congenially commit energies commensurate with a three-credit effort in one freshman course. The selection of field was in effect an introductory exercise in intellectual curiosity. I directed their attention away from sports, hobbies, matters of opinion, subjects of already achieved familiarity, and areas

within the immediate compass of other courses of study. Each student had an initial conference in which we could get acquainted and explore the possibilities of subject selection. I lectured meanwhile on matters of general procedure, enlisted the aid of a reference librarian for introductory instruction on the finding of materials, and assigned an initial (ungraded) paper on the nature of the student's interest in the proposed field of study.

As part of this exploratory process I distributed several prepared aids, including (a) an outline of the project, keyed to a handbook (the sole text for the course), (b) a list of sample subjects or feasible areas of interest, and (c) an illustrative sequence of writing topics drawn from one particular field. (See appendix) Several students chose subjects of my suggestion, but most choices reflected personal interests which proved correspondingly rewarding to those who read and wrote their way into them. Among those reporting a sense of substantial gain from their semester's research were students who elected to work on the women's rights movement, aspects of human genetics, communes and social reform movements, covert intelligence operations, parapsychology, under-sea exploration, speleology, keyboard instruments, space flight, and labor relations.

Predictably, not only interest but confidence grew as each project matured. Every week a new paper was produced, representing an ever-broadening grasp of the field: a new concept defined, a crucial process explained, an important figure described, significant changes and options argued or compared, histories traced and prospects projected. Bibliographies expanded as reference led to reference. Many books and articles were read in their entirety; many more were scanned and mined or passed over as increasingly skilled judgments were exercised on the location and management of useful information. Important lessons were learned from the start about the conversion of source materials into original thought and language. (Although this matter must be quickly passed over here, it is readily recognizable as the make-or-break point of any writing course.) Irrespective of the rate of improvement in composition, which remains to be discussed, great gains were perceived by both students and teacher in analyzing a self-defined area of knowledge and in articulating it for a less informed audience. These alone are skills of high value to a college student in any field.

In order to accommodate individual initiatives and the very different structures of particular subject fields, I sacrificed not only the common subject matter of conventional freshman English assignments but the common rhetorical mold as well. All students tried their hands at biographical sketches sooner or later, and at personal essays and essays of classification and comparison and so on, but they were encouraged to adopt these methods when their reading and reflection carried them into topics calling naturally for those various approaches. In this way they mastered a set of tools "on the job," as it were, and avoided still another common artificiality of the composition classroom. Not only did this method (or apparent lack of method) stimulate writing by the very freedom of the assignments, but the various kinds of themes produced each week served as informal models, when read and discussed, for students who had not yet attempted those types of essay.

By the time the students had settled into their subjects and gained some perspective on the available bibliography, questions of what to

write about ceased to arise and were replaced by problems of what topic to choose next from a plethora of options and how to do all the reading that beckoned from a wealth of material at hand. Only the final paper of the course was required to be fully documented, and footnotes in short essays were strongly discouraged; but each paper carried a list of readings done in its preparation, and the aggregate, even allowing for some occasional padding of the record, was impressive. As a rule, I prescribed the use of at least two or three different sources for each essay in the interest of avoiding mere summary or paraphrase of a single authority. One incidental gain I envisaged from this procedure was the growth of facility in note-taking and the formation of good habits of working from library resources. On this score, I failed to reckon with the invincible sloth of human nature and found a number of students, after months of experience, still cutting corners or resorting to makeshift methods of research. (E.G., notes in notebook instead of on cards, etc.) The best students, on the other hand, finished the course a long step on toward upper class expertise.

All this machinery of engagement, of course, is incidental and instrumental to the business of E110, which is the improvement of writing. Here I find myself in substantial agreement with E. D. Hirsch, who in his new book The Philosophy of Composition argues that revision is the most valuable learning experience in a writing course, and that the best teaching of revision is therefore the best teaching of composition. He particularly stresses the importance of critical commentary on students' papers and of the use of class meetings as workshops in revision. Although I did not see his confirmation of these principles and methods until late in the semester, these were in fact the exact emphases of my instruction. After grading and commenting on each theme, I regularly culled from the current crop "problem" sentences and paragraphs, most needing improvement but some illustrating one or another kind of effectiveness as set forth in handbook advice or my own ad hoc recommendations. These were duplicated and distributed for group consultation at the same time that the original themes were returned to the class. In this way certain characteristic writing problems could be analyzed for the general benefit and the results of the exercise simultaneously made available to the individuals faced with revisions of those errors and misjudgments. Following the working session or sessions all students revised their papers (though this rarely necessitated total rewriting) and handed them in for a spot check, sometimes a conference, before the paper was filed and attention turned to a new theme.

Necessarily, instruction by this method has a certain makeshift, disheveled air about it which can give an unsympathetic observer the impression of disorganization. The impression is accurate enough, as far as it goes. There is no neat progression through sentence structure, punctuation, paragraphing, and the like, chapter by chapter as the handbook runs. (How many times has the student been exposed to that systematic cycle of topics and exercises in the pre-college years?) In this respect, as in all others, the focus of instruction was the themes the students were writing and revising--the problems at hand and not the problems that might be. The targets were quite frankly those of opportunity, since the opportunity afforded the only motive and condition the class could share in common. Normally, I divided attention about evenly between some particular technique, such as uses of the colon, or options

in subordination, or strategies of introduction, on which a modicum of concentration could be achieved on the basis of current work; and a selection of significant but miscellaneous problems, many of which, as the term progressed served the purpose of review and reinforcement. For instance, after some early instruction on structural principles governing sentence unity, I aired nearly every run-on or fractured sentence I could flush out of the themes until the class was either so thoroughly taught or so sick of hearing of the matter that the problem vanished. Spelling could not conveniently be handled in this case-by-case manner (we had lists, drills, and tests), but even diction--at least an approach to vocabulary building--could be dealt with by illustrative example and class discussion.

The heart of the method, in conjunction with its pragmatism, is to teach principles, not rules, taboos, or conventions. I tried to impress on my students the simple but unalterable dependence of good sense on good structure. I taught grammar and syntax as architecture--as of course any knowing teacher of writing must do. And it is precisely on this ground, potentially the most technical in the discipline, that the absence of a textbook--or its presence only in the wings, as a home-study resource---proved most salutary. We talked of sentences and paragraphs as extensions of the mind--verbal kites that had to be made to fly--and avoided as much as possible the use of linguistic terminology, which all too often, for all its laudable precision of intention, seems to drop an algebraic pall over the study of human language in action. Focusing in this way, not so much on structural principles as on the principle of structure itself, and always in relation to writing immediately at issue, I found the lack of a textbook or even a sequential plan for the semester's work not a palpable deterrent to learning, and possibly an inducement to it. The continuity required was supplied by the students themselves as they worked deeper and deeper into their subjects and felt, despite the normal student gravitation to indifference, an increasing urgency to do justice to what they had to say about it. The method mouse-trapped them into caring about their writing.

How much they profited by it is another question. The steady rise of grades is a reward that comes all too seldom to students and teachers of composition, whatever the method and however extensive the course of study. All of my students said they learned from it; all of them said they felt better about the work because of its independence and practicality. Most of them gave signs of enjoying writing for the first time in their lives and a few said so. One man, who achieved the only A in the class, actually learned as much as he thought he did. There were numerous B's, risen from C's and D's, including among the solid B's one young woman who was repeating the course after failing it the previous semester under traditional tutelage.

There were some drawbacks. One or two students complained of the literary vacuum in the course and wearied of the standard diet of student writing no better than their own. Remembering how Franklin and countless others before and since have taught themselves to write, I grant the point. But many students, impelled by their own intellectual curiosity, did in fact find good books to read in their fields, and more could be done to encourage that. The fixed pace of a theme a week became burdensome at times: to the students, who sometimes had difficulty keeping up the reading and research preceding each paper; and to the

instructor, who was under unremitting pressure to read papers and prepare lessons on them. With a class of fifteen the method was manageable; more students or more sections might make it oppressive. Twice during the semester I declared welcome moratoriums, during which the students caught up on revision and I lectured or demonstrated with model materials. No weekly papers were required during the four weeks of preparation for the major research paper. Still, they produced eight substantial pieces of work, excluding exercises and tests, and could say with Ishmael, when it was over, that they had "swum through libraries."

My own conclusion is that it was a good course, and I think so in part because my students thought so for the right reasons. I would be less confident in recommending its method to others, although I would use it myself another time. For one thing, it is terribly dependent on the library, a dependency we all approve in principle, but a burden to the library staff and a drain on the library collection which it might not be able to sustain in mass production. (Runs on harp seals and space flight caused characteristic crises.)

And the method is not teacher-proof. Precisely because there is no textbook and no program of class preparations, the course has virtually no capability for running itself, for keeping the class busy through three fifty-minute meetings per week. Outside of class the method has exemplary power to occupy the student, and of the two kinds of activity that is surely the more vital; but each class meeting must be created ab ovo and demands virtuoso performance from the teacher. Probably it is not a method for the diffident or inexperienced. The strain of mapping the course in transit and of having to appear at all times as if one knew what one was doing smacks of bareback riding or flying "by the seat of one's pants." Any slip, any failure of nerve, could bring the whole show down in a heap. But it makes a great adventure for a composition teacher ready to take the heat and the risks necessary to move away from the encircling shoals of boredom. Back to Ishmael and the open independence of the sea: "better to perish in that howling infinite . . .!"

Appendix

EL10 WRITING PROJECT: PROBLEMS & TECHNIQUES

I. Finding and storing materials

A. Using library resources

1. University Library guidelines
2. Assistance of reference librarians
3. Handbook, ch. 7

B. Taking notes

1. Equipment
2. Method: (a) bibliography, (b) content--Handbook, pp. 217-20
3. Storage and retention of working materials

- II. Using material to produce paper--Handbook, ch. 2
 - A. Identification of purpose and scope; preliminary notes
 - B. Selection of topics: categories of delimitation (random order)
 - 1. Definition of a term or concept
 - 2. Classification of parts or phases
 - 3. Analysis of process
 - 4. Analysis of issue or problem
 - 5. Narrative of an interesting event, decisive episode, significant historical development, etc.
 - 6. Description
 - 7. Exemplification
 - 8. Comparison and/or contrast
 - 9. Biography or character sketch
 - 10. Argument
 - 11. Personal (familiar) essay
 - C. Stages of composition

- III. Controlling material in the process of composition: direction, tone, and originality
 - A. Strategies of approach--Handbook, chs. 1 and 3
 - B. Avoidance of plagiarism--Handbook, pp. 222-25; Guide to Freshman English; University Student Policies, p. 12

- IV. Format--Handbook, pp. 50-51

- V. Obligations
 - A. Produce assignments on time in acceptable form
 - B. Revise as required and return all papers (original and rewrite) within one week of receipt
 - C. Report for conferences as requested; report to Writing Center as directed

E110 SAMPLE PROJECT TOPICS FOR LIBRARY WRITING PROGRAM

- A people, culture, or way of life (e.g., Indians, Japanese, the Pilgrims, the Amish, etc.)
- A dead civilization (Mayan, Babylonian, etc.)
- Recovery of dead languages (cuneiform, hieroglyphics, etc.)
- The labor movement in the coal industry
- American immigration and immigrants in fact & fiction
- Slavery
- Exploration (African, undersea, circumnavigation, etc.)
- Population control
- Megaliths (prehistoric monuments)
- Hallucinogens
- Asceticism
- Witchcraft
- Bee-keeping
- Punishment
- Canals

Lexicography
Photography
Mass media (printing, radio, newspapers, etc.)
Computers
Musical instruments
Mechanical & canned music
Whales & whaling
Oceanography
Weather
Conservation
Natural disasters
Shipwrecks
Genetics
Optics
Magnetism
Mesmerism
The dance
Architecture
The nature of matter
Madness and its treatment
Social reform movements & communes
The Inquisition

SAMPLE TOPIC SELECTION IN THE FIELD OF MUSIC

1. Definition:
 - Sonata form
 - What is a symphony?
2. Classification:
 - The instruments of the orchestra
 - Musical ensembles
3. Analysis of process:
 - How to play the oboe
 - Staging a concert
4. Analysis of issue:
 - Public support for the musical arts
 - Rising talent and the star system
5. Narrative:
 - The harpsicord becomes a piano
 - The love lives of Wagner and Liszt
6. Description:
 - The Calliope
 - Opening night at the Met
7. Exemplification:
 - The appeal of folk songs
 - Opera plots: an exercise in artificiality

8. Comparison/contrast:
 - Classic and romantic
 - Starving genius and box office tycoon
 - Winds and strings
9. Biography or character sketch:
 - The romantic Mr. Chopin
 - The legend of Caruso
10. Argument:
 - Punk rock and the limits of music
 - Opera: dead or alive?
11. Personal essay:
 - My warfare with the violin
 - The church choir and I
12. Research paper:
 - The contribution of Brahms
 - Music in the Medieval Church
 - (Expansion of topic treated in short paper)