



# WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

ISSUE THIRTEEN

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FINDLAY COLLEGE

## WRITING ACTION IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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Combining composition with literature is difficult at best.<sup>1</sup> Invariably, the former gets "short shrift." By training, if not by bent, junior and senior high school English teachers--as well as college teachers, certainly--feel better qualified to unearth the profundities of a Crashaw poem than to unsnarl the syntax of Johnny's prose.

Yet amidst cries for "Accountability," "Basics," and "Competency (dare I call them the new A,B,C's?), Joan's syntax had best not be overlooked. The public could care less if its offspring can fathom Crashaw's conceits, but it cares very much if the little rascals cannot compose intelligible inter-office memos. Necessity, if not desire, obviously demands that the profession yield to the priorities of the moment.

Those priorities have altered my approach to American Indian Literature, a sophomore-level introductory course which I teach every semester. In my revised format, writing receives almost daily attention; hardly a class period passes without discussion of it and practice with it. Two strategies that I have introduced reflect and reinforce the alteration, strategies so effective that not only will I use them in all basic literature courses that I teach in the future, but also I urge other literature teachers to try them.

The first of the pair makes use of chalkboards. Immediately before each class period, and continuing if necessary through its first few minutes when I am taking roll, one or two students anxious to earn extra credit copy paragraphs which they prepared at home. The content of those paragraphs is American Indian literature, and the topic sentences in paragraphs that are developmental and the thesis sentences in those that are introductory I have mentioned as appropriate to the class in previous discussions. What emerges are paragraphs which students can copy into their notebooks, I can evaluate publicly, and all of us can discuss candidly.

I keep an eye on the clock so that the paragraph sessions do not become lengthy; eight or ten

<sup>1</sup>I discuss the difficulties more fully in "Literature and Composition," Arizona English Bulletin, 20 (Feb. 1978), 1-6. That whole issue of AEB has the theme, "Teaching Composition and Literature" and is a valuable resource for teachers.

### WLA FOCUSES ON WRITING IN OTHER COURSES

Issue Twelve contained articles on teaching writing in courses in junior high science and college economics, as well as an editorial urging English teachers to talk with colleagues in other fields about using "writing as a way of teaching."

Bob Reising's lead article in this issue continues the concern with teaching composition outside of "writing classes." WLA would like more short pieces on this topic.

minutes is normally what I allocate to them. Fluency and editing receive equal time and attention, and documentation does not go untreated. The sessions are lively and cordial; I encourage comments that are respectful and constructive, and paragraph writers seldom have reason to be embarrassed or frustrated. Class members recognize that their writing can and will improve only if they write and react--only, in other words, if there is "interaction," to use James Moffett's key term.

The extra credit does not harm student motivation either; some are hungry for it, knowing it may well spell the difference between an A and a B or a C and a D in their semester grades. That credit I allocate according to a formula which is perhaps novel but one which all students have thus far found fair and acceptable. Each paragraph attempted gains one, two, or three points, depending on the effort expended by the writer. Simply put, I reward how hard a student tries. My logic is that I want a class's average and weak writers, as well as its strong ones, not merely to try for extra credit but also to profit from the practice and the peer and instructor feedback. The only other restriction that I impose concerns maximum credit: no student can earn more than seven points through paragraph writing. The reason for that limitation is, I believe, obvious: it is crucial that no one "dominate the boards," to use a basketball cliché; I want as many students as possible honing their writing skills as well as striving for extra points.

My second strategy is no more sophisticated and is woven even more closely into the fabric of daily classroom discussions. At appropriate times, and usually once a period, I invite students to develop orally topic sentences related to material being considered. With no break in or from our exchanges, I challenge them to support, through evidence gleaned from their reading materials, statements like "Geronimo disliked General Miles," or "In 'Chee's Daughter,' Chee also reveals a great love of the land." In issuing such challenges, my emphasis is on developmental paragraphs (note the "also" in the last illustration: obviously that paragraph would be created to follow another paragraph) which feature specifics and examples. By consulting materials that are literally in their hands at the very moment they are challenged, my students have an opportunity to test evidence, to try out "proof" which they believe appropriate to the topic sentences demanding validation.

Again, the paragraph sessions are brief, perhaps just two or three minutes, and the students have a chance both to take notes and to evaluate what is volunteered. As in the blackboard exercises, "sticking with the topic sentence" invariably emerges as a major concern, as does development. Thus my cries are constantly for "Unity and coherence, please!" and "More!" And my most common questions are "Have you stayed with the topic sentence?" and "Can you add anything?" My students seldom have reason to feel overpowered or flustered, inasmuch as the topic sentences confronting them surface from discussions of the moment and information crucial to validation lies immediately before them.

At the 1978 meeting of the Conference on English Education, William W. West, the nationally respected teacher and textbook writer, declared that effective writing programs feature in-class assignments that are short, motivated, natural, functional, and non-threatening. Such assignments, he stressed, are frequently tied to reading. I believe that West's criteria make excellent sense. I believe, too, that the two strategies outlined above allow me, and will allow other literature teachers, to move toward meeting those criteria.

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#### THEORY AND PRACTICE ARTICLES SOUGHT BY ELAB

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS BULLETIN, journal of the Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, needs compact, readable articles for a special issue on "Getting from Theory to Practice in Writing." Especially welcome will be articles that briefly explain a specific theory and then describe a method for implementing it in the writing class. Briefer articles will have an advantage over longer pieces. By 15 October 1979, send typescripts with stamped return envelopes to Richard Gebhardt, ELAB Editor, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

RESEARCH ON COMPOSING:  
A REVIEW WITH SOME DEPARTURES

Richard Gebhardt

Charles Cooper and Lee Odell's collection, Research on Composing: Points of Departure (NCTE, 1978) has a refreshingly honest editorial slant--that our profession does not have all the answers about the teaching of writing. As the editors put it in their introduction:

For too long, many researchers assumed that the most . . . significant kind of question was: What materials and procedures will improve students' work in written composition? Underlying this question was a further assumption--that we did, in fact, have an adequate understanding of the term composition, that our primary job was determining the effectiveness of specific instructional materials and procedures, rather than finding out exactly what information and skills teachers and researchers ought to be concerned with.

The fallacy of such an assumption becomes apparent almost any time we test the precepts that have informed most of the teaching of composition in this century. (p. xi)

While we may not have all the answers, Research on Composing shows that we do face a great many questions, including these highlighted in the introduction:

What do we mean by competence in writing?

How can we best categorize diverse pieces of written discourse? What basis is there for thinking that narration, description, exposition, and argumentation are valid, useful categories?

What are the practices that allow skillful student and professional writers to evolve successful pieces of written discourse? Would analysis of these practices allow us to identify distinct stages in this evolution? If so, does each stage entail unique problems, special abilities, or special cognitive/perceptual/sensory-motor activities?

What can we learn from observing successful writing teachers . . . ?

How can we draw upon other disciplines such as developmental psychology to help us refine and pursue the questions we are beginning to ask? (p. vii)

The spirit of posing questions about composition and its teaching runs through the book and, true to its title, every chapter suggests points of departure for research on composing. Research on Composing thus performs a valuable function in focusing attention on areas in need of systematic study. The editors state that the book has an "audacious aim--that of redirecting and revitalizing research in written composition" (p. viii). And I imagine that, at the very least, the book will stimulate research in areas emphasized in its ten chapters.

Research on Composing performs a second valuable service, too. Though it insists that our profession needs much more research into the nature of the composing process, this book is a compact source of a great deal of information about what we already have discovered about writing. Just a glance at the table of contents suggests why English teachers who try to keep up with developments in writing will want to add Research on Composing to their professional libraries:

Discourse Theory: Implications for Research in Composing

Lee Odell, Charles Cooper, Cynthia Courts

The Composing Processes and the Functions of Writing

James Britton

Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention

Richard Young.

Implications of Cognitive-Developmental Psychology for Research in Composing

Loren Barritt, Barry Kroll

Hand, Eye, Brain: Some "Basics" in the Writing Process

Janet Emig

The Writing of Young Children

Walter Petty

Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery

Donald Murray

Research Strategies for the Study of Revision Processes in Writing Poetry

Gabriel Della-Piana

Helping Young Children Start to Write

Charles Lopate

Story Workshop: Writing from Start to Finish

John Schultz

A third value of Research on Composing is the caveat for writing teachers, and especially researchers, that appears in half of these chapters. This is a recurring warning against approaching composition from too narrow a theoretical position, a call for broader and more conscious theory behind what we do in our field. For instance, in "Discourse Theory," Lee Odell, Charles Cooper, and Cynthia Courts note that the compelling theories of James Moffett, Walker Gibson, and James Kinneavy "are based largely on an analysis of written products," and that "to use this theory in researching the composing process, it seems essential that theory be informed by analysis of the composing process" (p. 6).

The implication of that statement seems to be that research on composing should not necessarily be built on familiar theoretical bases. Walter Petty is more direct in "The Writing of Young Children":

My point is the propensity of researchers to apply a particular kind of logic to research questions. We have historically followed this logic as we have examined the written products in terms of various instructional procedures, writing conditions, curriculum content, or some combination of these. . . .

It is difficult for researchers to break this pattern because of the logic of examining products and the tradition involved. . . . However, I believe the focus of composition research should be upon the writer's behavior rather than upon the product. (pp. 76-77)

This tradition and "logic of examining products" is a major concern of Richard Young in "Paradigms and Problems." Current-traditional rhetoric "has dominated the discipline so thoroughly and for so long," Young writes, "that it is probably more accurate to speak of a rhetorical tradition rather than a theory, if by theory we mean an explicit system of assumptions." And he makes it clear that, comfortable in this tradition, researchers can be led into errors:

During stable periods, theoretical assumptions tend to function as presuppositions rather than as subjects for investigation. When one believes, he (or she) does not question his beliefs; he acts on them. It is quite possible to teach and even carry out pedagogical research informed by the paradigm with only a general notion of what the basic assumptions of the discipline are. (32)

Later, in a more limited context, Young writes that "our conception of the composing process--more specifically, our conception of its scope--influences strongly our criteria for determining what is an adequate theory of invention" (p. 42).

Aware of this tendency of unquestioned assumptions to influence the way we look at the writing process, John Schultz writes, in "Story Workshop," that:

Researchers might pay profitable attention to the way implicit assumptions phrase, shape, and direct the focus of a research question. The field of the teaching of writing abounds with assumptions, often with little documentation for them. In many cases, the implicit assumption of a question promises to be at least as worthy of research as the question itself. (p. 178)

And Gabriel Della-Piana suggests, in "Revision in Writing Poetry," that researchers should strive for diversity in their research arrangements, rather--so I infer--than limit research too sharply by narrow theoretical frameworks:

/To p. 6/

"STARTING FROM SCRATCH"--SOME-RULES-OF-THUMB  
FOR TEACHING VERY REMEDIAL WRITERS\*

Bill Bernhardt  
College of Staten Island

The following "Rules-Of-Thumb" represent the fruits of my many years as a student and a teacher of writing. To me, they represent a practical way of working with students for whom other approaches have failed. I think they work because they take into account certain factors which are often overlooked;

- That most "remedial" writers are using energy which could be available for writing for holding themselves back.
- That most people who have trouble with writing don't know how to apply their powers as speakers to the challenges of writing.
- That most people who did badly in English in school were led astray by well meaning but misguided elders who told them to compose and edit at the same time, and encouraged them to rely on half-understood rules and formulas instead of training their ears.
- That unless people begin by writing for themselves, they will never acquire an interest in writing to others.

I hope that others will also find that the suggestions provided here are practical because they are inspirational.

--The first piece of business is for each person in the class to learn the first names of all the other people.

--In-class writing on the first day and everyday, if only for a few minutes at the beginning.

--During in-class writing sessions, everyone must observe the conventions of "free writing"--continuous composing (even if it is "I can't think of anything") without stopping to correct, re-read, etc. People should be advised that they will not be penalized for mistakes and should disregard spelling, grammar, propriety, etc. It is the instructor's responsibility to prod individuals who resist such instructions to keep going, whether they want to or not.

--In-class composing sessions may be divided into two types of occasion: when each person writes in a private notebook which no one else is ever allowed to read; and when what is written is public and will be submitted to the teacher and shared with others at his or her discretion.

--Samples of the students' and the teacher's public writing should be read aloud from the first day, but without comment.

--Samples of public writing should be collected and studied by the instructor, but there should be no marking of any kind until everyone who attends regularly has achieved relative fluency in composing on paper.

--The instructor should observe what people do when they have a pencil in their hands before paying attention to what goes onto the paper.

--The instructor should ask questions to elicit information about what is not visible--i.e., How do the students feel about writing? Do they feel inhibited by a fear of making mistakes? Are they able to respect the conventions of free writing without inner resistance? Are they conscious of having an inner voice?etc.

--No speculating about anyone's "problem" until data has been collected concerning each person's writing behaviors, inner experience of writing, spoken /To p. 8/

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\*Bill Bernhardt, whose "The Double Standard Among Writing Teachers" appeared in Issue Twelve, sent WLA a list of thirty thought-provoking suggestions, of which these are a representative sampling. WLA is interested in reader-reactions. (R.G)

/From p. 4/

The elements of the revision process outlined will, of course, focus the investigation on certain questions. It is important, however, that the methods of investigation leave open the possibility of discovering diversity in revision processes both with a poet and between poets.

The probability of representing diverse revision processes increases with the diversity of theoretical views brought to bear on the subject and with the conflicting or overlapping findings they generate. The multiple viewpoints of researchers from different disciplines produce a happy diversity of variables in the creative process. (pp. 108-109)

One of the things that interests me about Della-Piana's words is that while they sound utopian, they actually seem to suggest a major fact of the current professional attitude toward composition research and teaching. A "diversity of theoretical views" and multiple viewpoints from different disciplines are reflected in the contents and bibliographies of Research on Composing, as they were in Gary Tate's anthology of bibliographic essays, Teaching Composition (Texas Christian University Press, 1976), which included chapters on "Linguistics and Composition," "Dialects and Composition," "The Uses of Media in Teaching Composition," and "Composition and Related Fields."

That composition is related significantly to other fields is suggested, I think, by the special power of many candidly interdisciplinary articles on writing--studies such as Ann Berthoff's "Tolstoy, Vygotsky, and the Making of Meaning" in the October 1978 College Composition and Communication, Janet Emig's probes into the brain and composition in the May 1977 CCC and her chapter in Research on Composing, Richard Coe's prize-winning "Rhetoric 2001" in the Spring 1974 Freshman English News, and Glenn Matott's Braddock Award-winning consideration of Martin Buber's applications to the writing class in the February 1976 CCC.

The theme of the 1979 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication states the point compactly. WRITING: A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY ENTERPRISE. Just why it is this sort of enterprise is something Carl Klaus discussed in "Public Opinion and Professional Belief":

. . . a writer in the act of using language is drawing on a unique set of verbal possibilities (idiolect) which is the product of the writer's interaction with shared sets of verbal possibilities (dialects). Understanding these phenomena and their impact on the process of writing requires the expertise of such disciplines as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. Likewise, . . . the words which a writer uses to define experience not only communicate but also shape that writer's perception of experience. Understanding the interaction of language, cognition, and perception requires the expertise of such disciplines as cognitive psychology, semiotics, and transformational linguistics. Furthermore, a writer in the act of using language is communicating experience for one kind of audience or another. Understanding the interaction between a writer's social intention and language requires the expertise of such disciplines as rhetorical theory and communication research. Finally, of course, a writer uses language to produce a piece of writing which embodies in its particular selection and arrangement of words the interaction of all the phenomena I've described thus far, and countless others . . . Understanding the relationship of that selection and arrangement of words to the phenomena that brought it into being requires at last the expertise of stylistic analysis, which in turn depends upon a variety of disciplines, such as literary criticism, rhetorical analysis, psychoanalysis and statistics. Clearly enough, one discipline or another can provide only one perspective on only one element or stage in the process of writing. If the process is to be wholly understood . . . then we must bring to the study of it as many disciplines as are possible and appropriate.  
(College Composition and Communication, Dec. 1976, p. 337)

# SLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

## About WLA Newsletter

The WLA NEWSLETTER began in a workshop on "Writing as a Liberating Activity" at the 1973 NCTE College Section meeting--a workshop emphasizing the role of writing classes in freeing student imagination, broadening student outlook and opinion, and increasing the instructional options of teachers.

## Key Editorial Concerns of WLA:

- The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.
- The essential compatibility of imagination and discipline--of creativity and craftsmanship--in good writing and in good writing instruction.

## Submissions Invited

WLA NEWSLETTER invites college, high school, and middle grades teachers to submit brief articles that relate to one or more of the key editorial concerns and that grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. The WLA format demands that articles be short (usually less than 6 double-spaced pages), that they contain a minimum of quoted material, and that they include documentation parenthetically within the text of the article.

Submissions for these more-or-less regular departments are especially welcome:

Teaching Tips--Two-three page outlines of how a teacher approaches a specific task or organizes a unit of a writing class.

Interconnections--Brief articles or reviews in which materials or approaches of one level of writing instruction (college, high school, middle grades, elementary) are examined from the perspective of a different level.

Reading Lists--Brief lists (preferably annotated) recommending interesting, informative reading on a subject (e.g. creativity, collaborative writing, values clarification, grading alternatives) likely to interest WLA readers.

## From the WLA Position Statement

"Writing is a creative act which by its very nature explores relationships between disparate materials and uses language to give new forms to the relationships."

"Writing is a means for one human being to communicate . . . to other human beings, and so a writer must be aware of the clarity of his/her writing for others, recognizing that choices in language, structure, and usage will have a direct influence on the effectiveness of his/her writing." (Excerpted from Issue Two.)

## "Liberation" Does Not Mean "License"

". . .the discipline of writing is fundamental to the concept of Writing as a Liberating Activity. . . . The WLA approach values writing that is spontaneous, genuine, and original, but it also values writing that is thoughtful, consistent, and clear. The WLA approach sees that the discipline of writing is a tool through which students can expand their opinions, increase their sensitivity to language, broaden their expository, fictional, and poetic powers--and in short liberate themselves and the linguistic resources within themselves." (From Richard Gebhardt and Barbara G. Smith, "'Liberation' Is Not 'License,'" College Composition and Communication, Feb. 1976.)

## Editorial Address:

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/From p. 5/

speech, and oral reading of own work.

--No editing or proof-reading should be permitted until most of the people who attend regularly have observed a considerable increase in their own facility. It is not enough that the instructor observes this happening. Students must notice it and comment on it also.

--Papers should be marked in such a way that people are guided to places where they need to look and listen more carefully. Mistakes may be underlined or circles, but never "corrected," labeled, or explained. The important thing is that the student must see and hear what looks or sounds "funny."

--Use group work when and where two heads are better than one, not so that good students can give weaker ones the right answers.

--Don't expect homework to reinforce what was done in class--what it will do is show what has not yet become second nature.

--Try to accept the fact that students get what they get. When they leave the class, most of them will still make plenty of mistakes. But if they leave excited about writing and clearer about what they can do to keep on struggling, then the most important job has been done.

WLA NEWSLETTER

Department of English  
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Findlay, OH 45840

THE PROCESS AND TEACHING OF WRITING:

A Workshop for Teachers, Grades 7-12

23-27 July 1979

Findlay College

The fourth annual summer workshop for secondary English teachers will focus on the process of writing and ways to utilize the process to improve student writing. Topics will include: "Why the Writing Process Should be the Center of Writing Instruction," "The Writing Process and the 'Basics,'" "Thinking and Writing," "Teaching Truisms that Violate Writing Process," "Strategies for Invention and Revision," "Aligning Curriculum and Instruction with the Composing Process."

The Process and Teaching of Writing will use readings, discussions, presentations, and writing sessions to acquaint high school and junior high school teachers with a wide range of ideas. The intensive workshop format and pre-workshop reading mean that the workshop can offer 4 semester hours of credit. Full-time teachers in grades 7-12 are eligible for a special Professional-Advancement-for-Teachers discount on tuition.

For further information and registration materials, write Dr. Jack Lizotte, Director of Summer School, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

