



# WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

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FINDLAY COLLEGE

## WILL THE LIBERATED WRITING TEACHERS PLEASE STAND UP?

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Liberated writing teachers, in my view, are those who teach writing primarily through their own writing. Rather than relying on readers as the only examples of good writing, liberated teachers supply their own. Rather than mechanically moving to the handbook to reveal the correctness and logic of Standard English, they construct their own examples. Rather than reciting rhetorical principles or reviewing them as presented in the text, liberated writing teachers demonstrate them in their own essays which they bring to class and share with students. Such writing teachers, unfortunately, are rare birds. Yet, of all the methods for teaching writing, I think the liberated-writing-teacher model which I have just described works best. Let me explain why.

Teacher-writing is applicable to all levels of teaching, to fledgling writers of early grades as well as to older students ready to take wing on their own. Whereas professional models may never match student interests, skills, or career orientation, teacher models may be specifically geared to meet such needs. Besides, author's presence invites student attention. If the instructor-writer is present during class, students will usually express higher interest levels in the shared material.

Another reason why teacher-writing works so well is its availability for all types of writing. No matter what the form being taught, teacher models can be written to demonstrate them. For example, I have been very interested during the last several years in jogging. Consequently, I have enjoyed doing some essays--persuasive/expressive/argumentative--related to this field of interest. As another example, a friend of mine recently applied for a managerial job. After her interview, she wrote a follow-up letter for which she asked my help. With her permission, I collected both her original and revision for class use in teaching business writing. Similar resources and writing opportunities, I maintain, are available to all writing teachers who keep open an eagle eye.

Composition teachers who consistently write for their composition classes are also in the catbird seat regarding writing process, for they can personally

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demonstrate it. Unlike product-only textbooks, teacher writings can include process which engendered product. For example, teachers can save brainstorming pages for class discussion. Their rough drafts can also be compared to revisions, challenging students into rhetorical comparisons. If the teacher has time to tape the writing process as it progresses, such transcriptions (protocols) may yield valuable information about writing processes. Finally, using retrospective notes may be very helpful in introducing an essay. Discussing how an idea came about, its sources, development, number of drafts, significant changes--all include valuable information for student instruction.

Experienced composition teachers know that it is a valuable learning experience to allow students to critique teacher-writing. But students must feel free to evaluate teacher-written materials honestly. By allowing students to discuss teacher-writing in small groups, using reporters to present ideas to class, teachers will ordinarily get objective appraisals. Teachers may reinforce this openness by assuring students of its value, by teaching tactfulness, and by receiving student comments nonjudgmentally.

Composition teachers who allow students to evaluate teacher-writing will see results in the quality and quantity of student-writing. They will also see results in their own writing as well. Let me illustrate. In one of my teacher-written essays defining recreation, I mentioned in the concluding paragraph how an optometrist friend was making a doll house for his daughter. I even displayed a pictorial newspaper story about the event. Students, in analyzing my essay, suggested that this one-sentence reference to the story in the conclusion was too brief for such an interesting example, that it needed further development in a separate paragraph. I agreed with their suggestion and the essay is happily improved because of the expansion.

On another occasion, students pointed out the rather one-sided portrayal which my argumentative essay in support of jogging had presented. After reflection, agreeing with their point, I substantially revised the essay. Documenting arguments against jogging, I produced a more objective and balanced essay. My conclusion still sided in favor of jogging, but the revision much more evenly presented both sides of the issue.

Some writing teachers will crow that student imitation of teacher models produces slavish copying and stifles student creativity. In practice, however, such results simply do not happen. In my own experience, I have discerned that even those students who might parrot my overall essay pattern (and they are few) also incorporate the freshness of their own content and vision. Far from stifling them, such imitations stretch student writing into new or rarely experienced writing patterns.

Documented studies further suggest that imitation is a creative force, not a crutch, for student writers. Frank J. D'Angelo has demonstrated this point in his essay "Imitation and Style" (College Composition and Communication, October 1973, pp. 283-290). And William Gruber, in "'Servile Copying' and the Teaching of English Composition" (College English, December 1977, pp. 491-497) has pointed out how even servile copying of classic authors untethers student creativity when the simulated patterns are infused with original material.

In conclusion, teacher-writing opens up for students and teachers alike an airy realm of possibilities. Unfortunately, the wealth of such teacher experience

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 TEACHER-WRITING TO CONTROL CLASS DISCUSSION

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Love is spaghetti sauce  
coating our lives until we see  
only the opaque mushrooms  
looming in the future.  
Pass the salt, please.  
Oh, source of warmth,  
source of calories,  
source of rancid memories,  
leave me here,  
a ragu man smitten with this  
Italian disease.

God-awful, isn't it? At least that's what I hoped my poetry writing students would say as I tried, in ten minutes, to compose the world's worst poem based on a metaphor. Class discussion lately had been lagging, especially when we workshopped student poems. The students had circled the wagons, and their comments were generally of two types: "I think it's nice, or "Well, I don't understand it, but if it says what the writer wants it to say, who am I to knock it?" Sensing that the problem was less one of their being uncritical readers than of their not wanting to offend their classmates, I decided to sabotage the class, putting a poem in front of them that they couldn't ignore. I typed and ran off a sheet of five student poems and my spaghetti poem, all without authors' names, and walked into class, knowing I'd have an active discussion.

There come times in any discussion-oriented class when the teacher needs to intervene to control the discussion. One sign of this is when students are reluctant to engage the material; comments are sparse and superficial. Another occurs when students seem not to understand the material; their comments are plentiful but "they aren't saying what they should be saying." On both occasions, I've found the best way to guide the discussion is to write pieces that I can almost guarantee will elicit the kind of responses I feel need to be made.

The spaghetti poem exemplifies such writing. It had the advantage of being so pointedly bad, with parts that demanded commentary, that it ensured discussion. It had the further advantage of not being written by a student, so no one in the class would be burned by harsh comments.

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presently remains mostly caged. If and when more teachers unlock these cages to let their writing powers take wing, their pinions will move them on an ever upward, spiraling course toward new discoveries. The journey, challenging yet exhilarating, will be academically liberating for themselves and advantageous to the students they serve.

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WLA Newsletter welcomes very brief pieces that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical teaching experiences. Irregular WLA departments are: Teaching Tips, Reading Lists, Student Perspectives, and Interconnections (among different levels of writing instruction.)

We discussed three other poems before my masterpiece, and by the time we turned to it, the class was buzzing. After a few laughs and pleas of "Who wrote this?" comments flowed: "This is really bizarre." "The line about 'passing the salt' doesn't belong." "I like the ragu man." "The ending is interesting because the rhythm builds it up." "It sounds like the poet is praying to spaghetti; that's weird." And on and on. In the end, the class decided that the poem might work as parody, but even then they saw serious faults with it. The students had made several pointed, concrete comments of both praise and condemnation, the poem having prompted a lively discussion of the nature of metaphor and the use of images.

Some might argue that I unfairly duped the class in presenting the piece anonymously. But putting my name on it would have had two real disadvantages. First, it would have intimidated the students; their initial reaction that "this is a lousy poem" would have been tempered by the fact that someone who wasn't to write lousy poems had written it. In addition to their wondering why they were paying good money to learn from a bad poet, they would only have made the same "safe" comments that I was trying to counter. Second, and even worse, any claims on my part that this wasn't a serious poem would have created an artificial situation; they would have felt manipulated and would hardly have taken the discussion seriously.

Once we finished the discussion, though, I did tell them that I'd written the poem and even told them something of why. Fairness decreed that I take the blame and credit, not some mysterious, unnamed student.

I often intervene in the class with what I consider my better poetry, too, sometimes on sheets on which all the writers' names are revealed, and sometimes on pages of anonymous poems. (As with ostensibly bad pieces of writing, a good piece with the teacher's name on it sometimes inhibits discussion or evokes superficial praise.) By doing some of the same writing that they're doing, I give students a sense that I'm taking the class's work seriously and, more important, because I've built them into my writing I can guarantee that certain points will be discussed and issues raised.

I write for all of my classes, from basic writing to advanced composition, not for every class or every assignment--I just don't have the time--but when the class discussion is accomplishing less than I think it should. At those times, I find I can assess and intervene to meet the needs of my students better than I could ever reasonably expect a textbook devised for thousands of students at hundreds of different schools.

I've found three guidelines helpful:

1. Decide what you want to stress and focus almost exclusively on that as you write. If you want to provoke, provoke. If you want to illustrate comparison/contrast, illustrate comparison/contrast. Don't try to pack too much into an example unless you're willing to risk your students' picking up on the wrong things; that's not your purpose in doing this kind of writing, though it certainly may be nice other times. A scientist who wants to know the effects of different changes in a system will try to control all of the variables in that system but one. Likewise, you should try to achieve perhaps one or two things with any intervention.

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A FOUR-FOLD ORIENTATION TO FREE AND FACILITATE

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"Good" writing is far more than the highschoolish notion my entering freshmen possess: "We were graded half on the mechanics and half on whether he/she liked it." No; I want them to aim toward confident "dynamic discovery and delivery," to generate valid substance, then rewrite to convey it effectively to reader. In short, our "authenticity," "process," "audience."

To launch us toward that, I give, during the first week, a tour through four major, if contradictory, criteria of "good" writing, as described below. The tour does not seem to confuse students so much as banish old myths, donate new options, and above all shift response-ability from out-there in Teacher and Rulebook, to within their own selves. The orientation frees and yet guides them. And so we begin; the chairs in a tight discussion-circle now.

Criterion One is CORRECTNESS: "good" writing avoids errors, gets it right. But since the correctness-ogre inhibits students, I try to dethrone it somewhat.

(1) Mechanics? Do worry about them--but only when finally editing your paper. For mechanics are not needed to get your message across--think about that--but rather for you to sound credible to your reader and to aid your message's flow.

(2) Rules of Style? Almost every "rule" (as to diction, syntax, tone, length, specifics) has its confusing opposite and both can be true, depending on occasion. So I shelve the "rulebook" for a few weeks, to get their hand-brain-eye working fluently on the page, and then return to rules as flexible tools, in the rewriting stage only.

(3) Correct Content? I tell them that our course has no Party Line, that they may usually select their own topics, and may always take their own stances on them. Of course this means they can-and-must choose topics valid for them to write well upon!

For, Criterion Two is AUTHENTICITY: "good" writing is truth-telling, a freshly-felt look at the old topics which the writer explores as an insider. Its opposite is "plastic" writing--sometimes overt Bull, but usually what I dub Machinewriting: cliches and platitudes which the tyro writer honestly feels are "authentic," but are only "Engfish" after all, safe, polite, empty. To clarify the concept, I read out loud several paragraphs, some of them for-real, others (on the same subject) stilted-and-bogus. I also specify: your audience will never be Me the teacher, but either "us" the peer-class, or another audience you or I specify. Write honestly to them!

Indeed, Criterion Three also considers the audience: "good" writing is EFFECTIVE, fulfills its intended purpose. (For now, "purpose" simply means "getting the point across"; I defer mentioning the dozen purposes from self-exploration to defrauding the reader which do exist.)

Here, the only judge is the MOIA--the majority of the intended audience. Not the Rulebook--students can vote down a paragraph their textbook claims is "good." Not even authenticity or moral standards: if a pamphlet on nuclear power convinces 90% of its intended readership, it is "good" writing here--even if fallacious (let alone ungrammatical). Not the teacher either--in fact, I actually refuse, in class

to proclaim, myself, that a given student paragraph is good or bad. That is for the MOIA, the class, to decide, via hand-vote; which they do. When I downplay my dogma and pet stylistics--and even "helpful guidance" after while--the students' fledgling autonomy seems to strengthen. They soon see that they can test-and-taste writing on their own (which makes me able to require that they do so). True, the class often splits on the same paragraph, some savoring the structure or detail which others condemn. But communication is complex--another new lesson.

Still, Criterion Four is PLEASINGNESS--writing is "good" if an individual reader likes it, period. I urge students to respond subjectively to readings as well as to judge them objectively, but of course to separate the two responses. Such dualism helps free up class discussion. I tell them that the reader has a right to react personally, but also a duty to judge writer fairly--not "did I like it" but "did writer fulfill his obligation to us." (Admittedly, professional real-world writing such as journalism and public relations must "hold" and "interest" its readership; but too many readers react too variously in re subject, slant, and style to make pleasingness a good criterion for my beginning writers.) Still, the writer has a right to explore his topic his way--at least in personal writing--but also a duty to try to be audience-aware, to reach and serve the reader. Again, a complex paradox with which to work. . . .

Thus the tour. Ahead still lies the whole course: prewriting for authenticity, rewriting to communicate and maybe please, editing to correct--all with audiences of self in prewriting, teacher in first-draft conferences, and peers in the class-circle. But a precise introduction to plurality in the first week seems to improve student writing, quicken class discussion, and season the course mood too, probably because it shifts the locus of substance and judgment away from "out there" in Teacher/Rulebook, to within the writer's self. But happily, that gentle reformation increases not only "freedom" to write better, but also proficiency and motivation--response-ability.

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2. Consider the level of the class you're writing for. Different things will be more effective with different classes. Suppose I decide to work with the comparison of two pieces of writing on the same subject in an analysis unit. For my freshman students I'd try to devise two passages with several obvious points of comparison; for my advanced composition students I'd be more interested in their learning to make inferences and would devise my examples accordingly.
3. Exaggerate the thing you want the class to discover to the level appropriate to the class. Remember, discussion is most effective when students discover and state things about the writing that's being discussed. If the examples are too subtle, the students will discover nothing. As someone who is familiar with your students, you should be sensitive to their abilities. On the other hand, you can't insult the class and expect to be successful. A good example will engage the class without boring it.

As you might sense, this kind of writing can involve a good deal of hard work. It forces the teacher to consider closely the audience and purpose of a particular discussion, something that's easy to let slip when he or she can fall back on the textbook and hope it will work for his or her students. Yet, the payoff for that effort is control; it's reassuring not to have to hope something will work.

## SPEAKING FOR OURSELVES

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Would it be an exaggeration to say that the image of our profession has reached a crisis point? We can scarcely check out of a supermarket without confronting a popular magazine emblazoned with some form of "Is Your Child's Teacher Fit to Teach?"

The public image of our profession must be a major concern of all teachers everywhere--and of English teachers in particular. Both public and private schools are dependent in large measure on the respect of an informed electorate; and quite aside from practical and economic consideration, teachers should be committed to the proposition that we have an inherent human right to be perceived as we really are--and not as some ill-informed or ill-tempered critics say we are.

As always, with every right there is a concomitant responsibility: it is up to us as English teachers to adequately--and aggressively--inform the public of our broadly based concerns and commitments. If a local newspaper editor sees the English teacher almost exclusively as a purveyor of spelling and apostrophes, the editor's own professional credibility can be seriously questioned; but he or she will not likely be questioned or called to task, unless by English teachers themselves.

For example, after a recent NCTE Convention, a colleague gave me an editorial from a local newspaper in which the proceedings of the convention were represented as centering primarily on a "unanimous" endorsement of "faggotry" and anti-racism. Decrying these oddly-paired causes, the editor advised his readers that there was no report of any NCTE concern over the deplorable lack of language skills exhibited by current high school graduates, lamenting in particular a rampant inability to identify gerunds.

Although a rebuttal was voiced--the editor was advised that among the many concerns duly researched, discussed, and acted upon by NCTE was a keenly felt concern to educate a generation of citizens who could cope intelligently with the mixed blessings of media, including the inclinations of some journalists to feed the public sensationalized half-truths--this single editorial influenced and confirmed many negative opinions of the profession.

Anyone associated with NCTE knows that such a report is a gross misrepresentation of the organization's concern and focus; members may indeed be marginally amused by it. But for those who give to NCTE so generously of their time and talents, the report is a serious injustice; perhaps most important of all, for the general public, which is largely dependent on the popular media for their truths about our schools, the report is--and I have considered my words carefully--a well seasoned lie. It is a gross misrepresentation, originating at best in abysmal and unprofessional ignorance, or at worst in deliberate attempt to pander to the public's worst proclivities. We must not tolerate such abuse.

This is not an isolated incident of biased reporting; it is an "analysis" of the convention that deliberately gives the impression of "summarizing" the focus of the profession's proceedings in a manner that will appeal to an already irate electorate. Such warped news stories help divide the public and a profession genuinely committed to public enlightenment. If we English teachers are to carry out this commitment, we must be active beyond the classroom, not only in defending our right--and the public's right--to a fair representation in the media, but also in aggressively presenting a more balanced accounting of our broadly-based concerns for a humanistic curriculum, which does indeed include a deep regard for the basic language skills, as well as a special commitment to teach young people to use language to discover and tell the truth.

In an age when it is so popular to detract, decry and deride, we teachers of English must place a higher priority on the accurate representation of what we do in and out of the classroom. We must not, ironically, be so busy with internal concerns, with doing a good job in the difficult tasks of teaching about language and communication, that we fail to see ourselves as others so often see us--through the ill focused lens of the media. Nor must we overlook the fact that letters of complaint, rather than paeans of praise, are more commonly addressed to our legislators. Who but the teacher can answer and counter the irate citizen who officially blames the English teacher for her son's failure to achieve excellence--in a classroom of thirty-eight, with inadequate texts and parental and community apathy toward (or genuine misunderstanding about) the goals of the English curriculum?

It is not enough to lament such ill-found judgments; we must make ourselves heard in the arenas of the media and in the halls of the legislatures. If we do not speak for ourselves, who will?

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