



# WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

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## WRITING AND AMBIGUITY

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What happens in people's minds when they realize that there is more to the writing process and indeed to life itself than black or white, right or wrong, error or correction? The glib mind whirls in frustration, anxiety and confusion. In our society, so assured that all problems have solutions or at least taxonomic names, many people panic when confronting ambiguity. We would like to propose that the central goal of English teachers is to foster among students an ability to handle ambiguity with resilience: writing is the best medium teachers can use to develop this virtue.

Writing provides the mind with a means of proposing ideas and elaborating until contradictions arise which cause the writer to read back and revise. Thus, revision truly means to see again. This practice of seeing again affords an opportunity to engage the ambiguity of our knowing in a manner that does not exist among the other language strategies: listening, speaking, or reading. Writing promises to function as a means to greater intellectual understanding, and, because mind and emotions are inseparably linked when choosing a particular subject, point of view, and technique for writing, composing indeed promises to liberate the spirit.

So far what we have asserted may or may not be consistent with the reader's intuitions or experience. Is there research that backs up this conjecture? In answer to this question, we would like to review a few studies relating writing performance and personality, or, more specifically, attitude orientations. We want to point out the exciting links between attitude and achievement in writing, and strengthen the hypothesis that writing is a powerful way of confronting the ambiguities of life head on, in a spirit of emotional and intellectual inquiry that can only further the development of the whole individual.

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The time has come to pay closer attention to the role of attitude, rather than aptitude, in teaching writing. In an article entitled "The Content of Basic Writer's Essays," (CCC, October, 1980) Andrea Lunsford stated:

...we badly need help from psychologists in designing studies that will probe the relationships among self-image, cognitive style, perceptual system, and development of writing abilities. We, as teachers of basic as well as more skilled writers, need assistance in determining how best to foster cognitive and moral development, and what specific writing skills might be developed in that effort. ...much evidence now points to the connection between poorly developed writing skills and poor self-image, lack of confidence, and lower levels of cognitive development.

The earliest work in this vein is the comprehensive study done at Wisconsin State University at Platteville, reported by Paul Eulert "The Relationship of Personality Factors to Learning in College Composition," (CCC, Spring, 1967). During the 1970's, researchers Daly and Miller published much about apprehension and writing, finding among other things that excessive apprehension is antithetical to success in writing, and that composition classes are among the most feared courses. All of this work dealt with college students, although Tom Gage has studied the personality orientations of students in alternative high schools. More recently, James Freeman has studied the relationship of attitude orientation and performance in writing with the student body population at a rural high school. We will examine the stunning results of these studies below.

In his report on the long-term Wisconsin Study, Eulert found that "...nearly 70% of student performance could be predicted by items measuring ...a student's attitudes and values. Performance cannot be so accurately predicted by items usually considered significant, such as the number of themes written, grading techniques, type and amount of grammar, or even percentile rank and intelligence." Using the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values, Eulert identified a profile of a successful writing student as one who slightly fears English, "...feels unprepared, and blames himself for it." A student who will do poorly generally does feel "prepared--or, if not, blames his high school teacher." The factors found to be significant in predictions of success are the following:

- number of semesters of high school English  
(not type of instruction)
- students' opinions of their high school instruction  
tangible ends
- students getting hooked on writing during freshman English
- a sense of altruism

As we mentioned, Daly and Miller devised a questionnaire to assess fear of writing. Their work demands attention, especially the finding that students who scored high on apprehension and on the verbal section of the SAT avoided majoring in or choosing courses requiring writing, an obvious loss of talent to society. We may be creating "won't writers" among potentially good students by overstressing error and mechanics, thereby creating excessive performance fear.

[To p. 5.]

## TEACHING WRITING TO THE BASIC STUDENT IN HIGH SCHOOL

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Teaching writing to a basic class is somewhat like teaching a hydrophobic to swim; the teacher must first overcome the fear and reluctance inherent in any individual who feels a strong sense of inadequacy. Committing thoughts to paper is, for a basic student, a terrifying experience. Such a feat involves a much greater risk than does simply putting down the wrong answers on a test. An essay can highlight a person's shortcomings on both a structural and on a personal level. Too often the basic student perceives an unfavorable evaluation of writing as an unflattering assessment of his or her personality.

Small wonder, then, that an assignment to write a composition often results in a two-sentence paper; a paragraph assignment, only one. Such reluctance is understandable. The less students write, the less they can be criticized.

Teachers who understand the student's resistance are less likely to misread the hostility or defiance they see before them. They realize that student fears must be overcome; in order to teach writing, teachers must first create a willingness to write.

As a high school English teacher with many painful years of dealing with basic students, I offer the following suggestions:

1. Start small. Do not mention the word composition in class. Writing a composition is, for the basic student, almost as formidable an undertaking as is building a house. Hence, the student will frequently refuse even to attempt it. From now on, or at least until your class feels more capable, you are assigning only paragraphs.

2. Eliminate the threat of a bad grade. Simply give credit for handing in a paper, regardless of how badly it is done. The paper should always be returned, not only with errors circled and corrected, but with a positive comment at the bottom. Rather than, "Too short," a better remark might be, "Interesting; I would like to hear more." The student will feel much less threatened by the tone of the second statement.

3. Always supply an intriguing writing topic. Otherwise, you will hear, "I can't think of anything to write about!" Any subject in which students must express their own views is useful' just remember that basic high school students are much more interested in rock groups and video games than in political unrest in Poland. Topics such as "My Worst Fault," or "My Favorite TV Show" will furnish a good beginning for an entire year of writing, but in order to continue the pace of subjects, you will need additional ideas.

Begin a collection of interesting (and short!) news articles which deal with unusual occurrences or episodes. I have found news

articles concerning principals who issue redeemable vouchers to their students for good attendance, parents who sue school systems for teachers' misdeeds, and teenagers who perform in unique capacities all particularly useful.

4. Always supply at least three sample topic sentences from a variety of viewpoints. The most frequent student complaint concerning writing is, "I don't know how to start." Show them how to start, and another aspect of reluctance about writing will be eliminated.

5. Watch your language. Under no circumstances should you use terms such as, "thesis statement," or, "comparison and contrast." Your students will become paralyzed with fear. Remember that you are attempting to eliminate their reluctance to write. Fancy terms merely intensify it. Keep all instructions as simple as possible.

6. Be enthusiastic. Writing is fun! Expressing a clear opinion is satisfying! Make occasional remarks such as, "If we finish our grammar lesson early, we'll have time for a paragraph," or "I found a new article for you in the paper last night." Do not feel guilty over this very constructive form of subtle brainwashing.

If you follow these simple recommendations, the chances are excellent that you will not only remove most of your students' reluctance concerning writing, but that you will also someday hear them inquire eagerly: "Do we get to do a paragraph today?" At that point you can feel proud that you have overcome the most difficult and the most important hurdle in the teaching of writing: the unwillingness of the basic student.

#### CALL FOR PAPERS

The Writing Centers Association: East Central announces its Sixth Annual Conference, to be held on May 4-5, 1984, at Raymond Walters General and Technical College of the University of Cincinnati. The theme of the conference is "Writing: 1984." Papers, panels, and workshops should address standard concerns of writing centers, including using computers and writing across the curriculum.

Persons interested in participating should submit a substantive one-page proposal (plus 3 copies) by January 15, 1984. Please send proposals and requests for further information to:

Phyllis A. Sherwood  
Raymond Walters College  
9555 Plainfield Road  
Cincinnati, OH 45236

In the 1960's, Dr. Paul Heist at the University of California-Berkeley made operational the psychological theories of Erik Erikson, publishing the Omnibus Personality Inventory (OPI) with Younge. The OPI includes 14 scales, clustering around Intellectual Disposition, Authoritarianism, and Social Maturation. The subject answers 385 questions, responding either true or false to a question like "People ought to be satisfied with what they have." Tom Gage, along with other researchers, has used the OPI to measure the attitude orientations and personalities of student populations. Until recently, no one had used the OPI to test the influence of particular attitude orientations on writing ability.

During the summer of 1978, Gage directed the Redwood Writing Project on the Hoopa Indian Reservation in Humboldt County, California. As a result of this University of California/Bay Area Writing Project program, four enthusiastic English teachers returned to school in the fall and on their own initiated a holistic study of student writing. James Freeman was interested in the work begun at Hoopa High School. He worked extensively with the English teachers there and used the OPI in conjunction with the longitudinal narrative writing assessment. Hoopa High is a small rural school with approximately 150 students; each student had the same teacher for the year; and half of the English classes were taught by teachers trained in the summer institute. The situation afforded us with an excellent opportunity to pre-test in September, 1979, using professional evaluators to holistically score both writing samples simultaneously. The results testified for the efficacy of the Bay Area Writing Project model of in-service and its benefits on student growth in writing. But of greatest interest in Freeman's work is the question asking whether the OPI is a promising instrument for measuring the correlation of personality and attitude with writing performances of 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students.

Freeman's findings are tantalizing. His data were collected in two ways. First, he used a Cyber computer to search for correlations between the OPI and writers of "high," "middle," and "low" scoring writing samples for the year. Second, he studied correlations between the OPI and "gain" and "regression" in writing scores. Briefly, here are some highlights of the first investigation:

- The "high" scoring writers (mean of 9.4 of a possible 12 on the writing scale for the year) had a .64 correlation with the OPI's theoretical orientation scale, a measure of a preference for dealing with theoretical concerns using logical and analytical techniques.
- This quite strong correlation fell to .28 with the "medium" scoring writers (mean of 6.9 for the year), and receded to -.02 with the "low" scoring writers (mean of 4.6), clearly suggesting a trend.
- The "high" scoring writers correlated at -.40 with the impulse expression scale, a measure of great readiness to seek gratification in overt action.

James Freeman's findings here seem to show clearly that theoretical orientations in students tangibly improve their writing; that good critical thinkers write well, and poorer analytic thinkers not so well, even when the mode of writing is narrative. Interestingly, "high" scoring

writers appeared to be not very impulsive, lending support to the idea that reflectivity is even more important in good writing.

In the second component of Freeman's investigation, some other attitudinal traits proved to influence "gain" in writing ability. The altruism scale correlated highest with his whole sample, which grew significantly on the holistic writing scale over the school year, and altruism correlated at .21 with the subgroup of isolated writing "gainers" (n=30). This finding again concurs with Eulert's report and suggests that a student's sense of altruism, usually thought of as a desirable personality trait, does in fact influence growth in narrative writing ability. In another mode of writing its influence might be even greater. In the above mentioned group of writing improvers, the anxiety level scale, a measure of how few feelings of tension, nervousness or worry a person holds, correlated at .23 with writing improvement. Thus, the writing improvers had lower anxiety levels than did the regressors. Clearly, two hunches that many of us share are supported by these particular findings, but further confirmation is needed.

Freeman's work can be considered a bench mark, and an invitation to a needed area for research. Many of his findings did support what other instruments detected about student populations, so the OPI should be of considerable value for other researchers. Most important, James Freeman is asking the right kinds of questions and directing us toward the more heuristic area of attitude, away from the wasted effort of testing achievement with standardized instruments.

We have concentrated far too long on skills which we can isolate and measure with a semblance of objectivity. The accountability movement, behavioral objectives, time limitations, and state-and district-mandated proficiency testing often lead us as educators to take the easy way out: to concentrate entirely on developing curriculum to teach those "objective" skills, forgetting the questions of student motivation and attitude which after all are the final determinants of how much learning goes on in the classroom. Study of those factors is no longer so vague as to be vacuous. Clearly, we have much to learn about the roles that a student's ego, his personal attitude and his motivation play in learning, but we know enough not to stop pretending that we can change students' language performance by simply telling them about language. It is time to let life kick down the classroom door.

Furthermore, this new thrust of personality-attitude research does not focus on error, but probes beneath the surface, asking not how this writing deviates from the norm but what is occurring emotionally, semantically, and syntactically as the student attempts to convey his knowing to an honest and caring teacher/audience, not someone seeking to chalk off another illiterate. The student's poor image as a writer may be a result of teachers echoing the public's frustration, dichotomizing the "writers" and "can't writers." This narrowness creates the "won't writer."

"Won't writers" refuse to tolerate being assigned to one or the other of these categories; it is to our peril not to admit that the Huck Finn mentality is alive and twitching in the 1980's. In fact, many promising students opt out of composition altogether. We cultivate "non-writers" and "won't writers" by informing them that they are at the fourth grade level (which is never true),

and we nurture the clichéd student attitude of, "It's your fault I can't write, teacher!" Perhaps we are quick to label students as "can't writers" after objective testing because it is easier than realizing that there are only "won't writers" who have educational and often attitudinal problems.

We conclude by returning to our earlier assertion: writing can liberate the spirit. We may all endorse this abstraction intuitively, but we need to try to define better what we mean by it. Our work with the OPI suggests that liberating the spirit is the result of increasing an intellectual disposition, a sense of autonomy, a resilience to flux in a changing world, a patience, a momentary tolerance of opacity without suffering anxiety about a pending victory, and living gracefully with ambiguity. A person with an unliberated mind thinks he knows what he is looking at and so he stops seeing what he is looking at. Humans react to aberrance by labeling, which hopefully dismisses the deviation from consciousness. We say that Jim Jones and Guayna was "insanity." With this naming, we elide dionysian excesses from our thought and get back to our own business. As teachers of English, we need to help students develop a willingness to live with ambiguity because ambiguity increases our ability to see what we are looking at as we search to understand what we see. Writing helps the writer untangle the ambiguity around him in both his internal and external world by working as a lens to focus the mind's eye. It's time to begin untapping this great potential in the classroom.

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KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

- \*The fundamental compatibility of craft and creativity in good writing and in effective writing instruction.
- \*The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- \*Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

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WLA Newsletter

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ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA welcomes brief articles that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. More-or-less regular WLA Departments:  
Teaching Tips--2-3 page outlines of a unit or an approach to a specific teaching task.  
Interconnections--Examinations of approaches or materials of one level of writing class (e.g., college, high school, middle grade) from the perspective of a different level.  
Reading Lists--Recommendations, preferably annotated, of useful or stimulating reading.  
Student Perspectives.

A Call for Papers

HOW HAS WORD PROCESSING CHANGED THE WAY I WRITE

AND THE WAY I THINK ABOUT WRITING

WLA Newsletter is interested in publishing a number of brief pieces in which writers who teach writing discuss how computer-writing is changing the way they write, and how these changes are modifying ideas of the composition process.

That's a large topic of course, one that research journals will be covering in depth in the future. But WLA is looking for personal pieces, reflecting the discovery of human beings--biographical details pointing toward insight, humor, pitfalls to avoid, etc.

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WLA NEWSLETTER IS TEN YEARS OLD

WLA Newsletter began as a workshop on "Writing as a Liberating Activity" at the Conference of the NCTE College Section in the Summer of 1973. That, you may recall, was a relaxed summer-camp sort of conference. And a dozen teachers--along with workshop leaders Richard Gebhardt, Barbara Genelle Smith, and Ray Kytile--spent several afternoons thinking about the role of writing classes in freeing student creativity and outlook and about how to expand the instructional options of writing teachers. When the week was over, someone said, "It's too bad that this all has to end." And that was the start of WLA Newsletter.

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