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A PIECE OF THE STREETS

ABSTRACT: *The frequent use of journalistic texts for classroom discussions encourages students to interpret and analyze written texts more freely and with less apprehension. Two groups of students who had failed an upper-division writing exam and who were reluctant to discuss assigned readings, became engaged and careful readers when similar material was presented spontaneously. Their responses suggest that the use of unplanned material creates a supportive environment in which teacher and student meet on common ground.*

I want to make a case for the frequent use of newspaper, journal, and magazine articles as texts in composition classrooms. I imagine many teachers already use them, but I suspect many do not, preferring to follow the order of reading and questions and exercises prescribed by a bound text, one chosen by the department and supported by at least a publishing house. Using "found" articles, the printed communications we encounter and read every day may be a little risky for the teacher but it can also bring composition into the area where the students live, which is what we're all attempting to do.

Two years ago, at the University of Arizona, I was teaching three summer classes, two of which were writing workshops for students who had failed the university's Upper Division Writing Proficiency Exam. These students weren't likely to have a favorable attitude toward writing: they were juniors and seniors, held back by their

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departments from graduating or from taking advanced classes, until they could present evidence of acceptable writing proficiency. They felt, each of them, caught in the English Department's web of "basic skills." Actually, the proficiency exam is the joint effort of the university's numerous colleges and is only administered by the Composition Board. At any rate, the students had little faith in the Department of English, and none in themselves. After all, a written exam had just shown them (and the world, they seemed to believe) that they were unable to respond in writing to a piece they had read. They weren't exactly Troyka's "non-traditional" (16) students. They were accustomed to academic life, procedures, and expectations. But like Bartholomae's students, they were not familiar with academic discourse, and like Rose's they were apprehensive, and expected failure rather than learning and success. They wanted simply to pass the course.

As I had designed the workshop originally myself, the packet of materials was one that, for the most part, I approved of (some readings had been added by others), and would have selected again. The writings, by such writers as Lewis Thomas, George Will, Joan Didion, and others, were short, accessible, lively, and were meant to generate interest and response, not to test students' analytical abilities, but to foster them. The main readings in the course would be the students' own writings, as Murray and Bartholomae and Petrosky convincingly suggest should be the content of a writing class. As I wanted the students to see and hear many voices and techniques, and to help them acquire their own, the chosen texts seemed reasonable, accessible, and nonthreatening.

The classes stymied me. If the students found the material accessible, they didn't find it engaging, and no amount of willingness on my part to query, model, mirror, entertain, or coerce, could bring flickers of interest to their eyes. Certainly they joined in discussions, even prompted some, and took notes. We approached writing as process, following current theories and, gradually, trying to keep the information relevant to their own writing, I introduced them to audience awareness, to writing choices in arrangement, modes, and language. They were attentive, somewhat participative; but even in peer-response work, they were mostly courteous and patient. It's odd how patience resembles defeat.

Then one morning I read a Royko essay, "The Risks Women Take in Miniskirts," containing passages such as the following:

The fact is, someone who wears a miniskirt is, in effect, making a statement. She is saying: "Gaze upon my flesh. Don't I have a neat set of gams? Don't they turn you on?"

They can deny it, but why else would a female person wear so revealing a garment in public? It is, pure and simple, exhibitionism. A modified form of flashing.

Now if a man flashes, women say “eek,” call a cop and the poor soul is hauled to the jailhouse and labeled for life as a creep. But when a woman does essentially the same thing, she takes refuge behind the concept of “fashion.” (15)

I reacted personally, as I usually do to Royko—sometimes favorably, sometimes not so. I cut and pocketed the essay intending to ask colleagues—not students—their opinions. Had Royko stepped over the bounds, even considering his limited audience? Shouldn't someone respond? I had at that time no intention of using the piece in the workshop classes. However, the first professor who responded to Royko said something about the article being “tongue-in-cheek,” and that no one “takes Royko seriously.” Yet I was taking Royko seriously.

To test the professor's claim, I read the essay aloud to one class—the American Short Story. They took Royko seriously, too; but they also agreed with him. That was disconcerting. Here were students a little attuned to the power of language. They were fairly good writers themselves, and interested in literature. I turned the Royko article into an impromptu lesson, asking the students simply to examine the article closely, weighing Royko's evidence for his position. The next surprise was more pleasant: most of them decided they did not agree with Royko's evidence and thus did not actually agree with him at all. What they had accepted initially was an implied maxim underlying his essay: that we must be aware of the risks of our actions. With this he had disguised a traditional sexist stance.

Their interest in Royko caused me to try the exercise with the writing-workshop students, the patient but lethargic class. From the beginning, they were involved. They chuckled, laughed, and (which didn't surprise me this time) agreed with Royko. He was serious, they said, and he was right. I asked them to analyze the essay as they had one another's work, and as we had analyzed the readings in the packet. Here is a summary of their findings: Royko is writing to the general public, primarily to fans who already agree with him. His essay would not appeal to an academic audience. Royko's purpose is to express his opinion, but he wants too, to persuade, and is really writing an argument, taking a controversial issue and presenting only one side. He arranges his material in a standard (classical) pattern: introduction, statement of fact, thesis, supporting paragraphs in which he gives concrete examples through compari-

son and cause-effect, and conclusion. He stereotypes women throughout, in examples and in word choices such as “eek” and “refuge.” His comparisons are false: “flashing” and wearing miniskirts are not the same type of action. He seems to consider the opposition, since he includes “fashion,” but he really evades that point. The students noted other strategies as well, but these were the major ones. The majority of the students decided that they did not agree with Royko after all—they enjoyed him immensely, but they didn’t agree with him.

I imagine that any teacher would see the value in this exercise, at least in the students’ use of analytical skills and abstract reasoning. Too, they experienced firsthand, and eventually consciously, the power of language, Royko’s manipulation of their own opinions and beliefs. If they had read the piece only once, as articles are usually read, they might have walked away with someone else’s opinion ringing in their ears and coming from their lips.

Equally as important here, though, is the question of why they became involved with this article and not those in the packet? The class material had included dramatic essays for the general reader, some very emotional, but none had elicited even half the response of the Royko article. What I had observed during their exercise with the “found” piece, was speculation about Royko the man, as well as Royko the writer, and an unabashed willingness to risk interpreting what he might have meant, how he might have approached the topic, what larger issues lay behind his words. This kind of interplay between minds, this reaching through language for ideas and beliefs, had been my goal throughout the classes. Why the success with Royko?

Part of the answer may be that because the professor’s response to Royko had surprised me, I walked into the classes totally unsure of what the students would say, could say, or should say. I was only a citizen, a reader of newspapers. But I try to be that open with every class. I believe the real answer lies in the total spontaneity of our joint response to the text, the equality created in reading a piece of everyday communication.

Any text given to students as part of a course implies an authority behind the text, an authority that includes the instructor and department, and thus has behind it years of academic learning and expectations—that authority who offers classroom texts, whether they be anthologies or packets, writings by professionals or by students. At the University of Arizona, for example, a main text was *A Student’s Guide to Freshman Composition* (Shropshire). Revised and reprinted each year, it was filled with students’ essays of various qualities, reflecting personal writing processes, personal

styles, and levels of success in an academic setting. Yet students resisted reading that text as much as they did Axelrod and Cooper's *St. Martin's Guide to Writing* or Crews' *Random House Handbook*, or any other material preplanned and presented. Even when the text is a peer's, the students still seem to see the assigned written word as something to be analyzed with an ultimate departmental goal in mind, to help their peers produce steps, ideas and techniques that will lead to success in the particular course.

We're urged more and more to make our classroom content more accessible to our students—in various works, Patricia Bizzell urges us to negotiate; James Sledd to accept as much variation as we can comfortably accommodate. A bit of common rhetoric from the newsstand is one step not only in being accessible but in meeting the students on a common ground. That kind of writing isn't so confined within the walls of learning, doesn't have a judging, hierarchical entity surrounding it. It is a piece of the streets, of homes and coffeehouses. It is everyday, thirty-five cents or free, communication in the real world. This is the students' material, their world, with its spontaneous, quick, fragmented bits of communication. They can love it or rip it apart—no heritage of education lies behind it to say, even in a subtle whisper, "You're wrong." The students are ensured success in interpreting: if they disagree with the text, no one will produce a critical anthology to prove them wrong; if they agree, they have the popularity of their stance, as evidenced by the very existence of the article, to support their decision. For this brief time they are in a totally supportive environment—what we would wish them to feel the support of all the time.

I am not recommending that a writing course be based solely on such found material, although I believe it could be done. In our times, when we know that all our choices reflect our biases and all our choices affect our students' lives, to recommend one type of content or one approach, is to assume a greater knowledge than any of us can have. But whether we believe in a canon, traditional or modern, or in totally student-generated material, we can still plan our courses to include material with which we are no more familiar than our students are. Let's read with them as citizens, be interested, angered or delighted, be manipulated by slanted information, or be vulnerable because of ignorance. If we teachers can't risk facing a strange piece of writing, then how can we expect our students to do so without trepidation and a little resistance?

Conjecture is, of course, dangerous. I haven't interviewed students and haven't documented any clinical observations. I have, however, seen a consistent pattern in the responses of my students

to “found” articles, and have listened to colleagues discussing surprising and pleasing responses to such spontaneous texts as news items, ads, fliers, brochures, and even university memos and letters. Sometimes students borrow these items from one another; sometimes they write essays about the topic raised or about the item itself; sometimes spontaneous material in one class becomes planned material in another. But even if these texts didn’t lead to writing, even if the students missed the revelation that we, too, are audiences for the same communications as they, often swayed by the same rhetoric, the texts seem vitally important—for at least a short time the doors of academe are open to the streets.

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