

TOTAL IMMERSION

The Queens College program in teaching writing to Open Admissions freshmen had been successful enough, by the spring of 1975, to make us wish that our students could profit from it before, not while, taking their first college courses. We also wished to test the belief that a writing course can properly be paired with practice in reading, especially if the students' own writing is the primary text. So, in the summer of 1975, the College Summer Session sponsored a six-week program in reading and writing, encouraged by Betsy Kaufman as part of the work of the College Skills Center which she directs.

I'll go on to speak soberly about the program, which was, day in and day out, a celebration. But the tale would be false with no mention of the festive element, which was unplanned. Besides, though celebration does not appear in the syllabus, it may be repeatable, for it was not a festival of indolence. It was rather the high spirits I imagine among those newly recruited to work out with the Yankee farm team or just admitted to the heady and rigorous practises of the Royal Ballet School. Perhaps such festive enjoyment is what we should expect of work which is human, intense, and visibly productive.

We called the course Total Immersion, since we met from 4 pm to 9 pm four days a week. Twenty-eight students with high-school averages below 75 and English 001 placement on the Cooperative Test worked with two members of the Department of English — myself, bodily present, and Sandra Schor, mystery correspondent, present in weekly letters; five undergraduate team-teachers on three of the four evenings; and part-time support from four or five CETA people.

Students chose to join the group after hearing it described at the Orientation Assembly and at registration in May; we noted that this self-selection was chiefly from among students who had not found full-time summer work.

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Well, we had work for them, academic work, from which we all emerged exhausted but exhilarated at the end of the program. Team teachers and I spent, in addition to class time, four hours a week — and many off-moments — discussing plans and rationale generally and each student's work particularly.

We used standard tests before and after, and recorded no staggering over-all changes in test scores. The slightly higher final scores were not discouraging for we felt we lacked instruments calibrated to gauge the real and dramatic changes in students' work. One measurable fact did emerge: out of the 3360 man-hours of scheduled classes, there were 32 man-hours of absence; four people were absent once, and one person was absent because of illness four times. No one dropped out.

Since irregular attendance is often a severe handicap in teaching Open Admissions students, since the work we did was constant, demanding, and intense, and since the room we used was very hot in a hot summer, we felt the students showed by their presence that they wanted to do the work the program offered.

I therefore venture to describe what I hope are the repeatable elements of the program.

It was preceded by thinking again, as we must each time we plan a course, of the real questions implicit in it: What is writing, that I should teach it in this course? Who, as writers, are these students, that I should try to teach them?

To the first I answered that as language embodies thought, so writing embodies language, extending thought into time and space, making thought recoverable — an amazing instrument, agreeable, suited to a lifetime of skilled use.

To the second I answered that student writers come to us with 18 years of experience and with 18 years of experience with language. They come with 12 years of school experience so varied that while we see all freshmen know something, we can assume little about the facts, attitudes, and skills transmitted to them, not even that schools have been the transmitters. We can assume of their work as readers and writers of English little save that it is probably scanty, and that not much in their lives, in or out of school, has stirred them to prize reading or writing. I answered further with my own belief that inability to read and write readily is not only a bar to college work but an impairment of personal freedom and a lifelong handicap to thought.

For Total Immersion there came, out of these honest pieties, two ideas: a general aim, that we would teach reading and writing as preparation for college work and also as essential skills for all, even for

those whose lives might not allow them more than a few semesters of college; and a defined aim, that students would end the course willing, ready, and able (a) to write in 50 minutes, 350 words of coherent non-fiction prose, beginning and ending with a relatively abstract statement and supported in the middle paragraphs by one or more anecdotes or examples drawn from their own experience; and (b) to read a piece of writing from an essay to a book, to report accurately their observations about it, and to derive from their observations an idea, an inference, about the text.

To work toward these aims, I had the core of a syllabus for developing writing which had served my work in English 001 for several years, and a view of developing reading which was closely allied to it. Though I had tested the ideas about reading chiefly against experience with my seven children, I would have access all summer to the expert counsel of Betsy Kaufmann and the College Skills Center staff. Everything in the writing syllabus had grown out of my decade of professional experience as a writer. The extracurricular origins of the Total Immersion syllabus may account for its assumption — which I think sensible — that those who read and write with competence can do so in many modes, including but not usually starting with expository prose.

The syllabus teaches whole structures. It begins with shapes found in literature of the oral tradition, for these shapes have by their spontaneous recurrence and long survival, even among students who have read little, proven that they are congenial to the human mind. It is a natural, central starting place.

So Total Immersion began with the writing of a fable. We presented it as a submerged structure, so that the students had written a fable before we named or described it, and were able to discover its two parts in their own work. We talked about the correct punctuation of dialogue as though that were our sole objective. Then we asked them to write, paragraph by paragraph, a dialogue between a deer and a bear. Here is a sample from among papers by native speakers of English; graphics (punctuation and spelling) have been corrected. It is by Curtis Whitehead:

The big exhausted bear sat down. He was so tired a deer came right up to him and laughed at him and said, "I thought you were so strong, but here you are all wore out,"

"I been running from these two hunters," said the bear. "I do not think they'll quit until they catch me," said the big exhausted bear.

The deer without thinking twice said, "I learned a trick when I heard

some bears talking once. I been chased by hunters for days, many of times, but I know how to get them off my tail.”

“I will be grateful to you if you will show me a few tricks on getting rid of hunters,” said the bear.

The deer thought he was very intelligent because of the tricks he had learned. Without hesitating he was happy to show the bear how to operate.

“This is my best trick,” said the deer. “Find some other animal in these woods that the hunters will try to get instead, and lead the hunters to him while you split.”

The bear said, “I might have someone in mind that I might have bumped into today. Thanks for the advice.”

Suddenly he jumped behind a tree. The hunters came and shot the deer and carried him away. The bear said as he walked home, “It doesn’t pay to talk smarter than you are.”

The moral of this story is: True understanding is not just hearing someone else’s words.

Both parts of this two-part structure are structures in themselves, the first a narrative, the second an aphorism. The narrative is concrete, the aphorism abstract.

Abstract and concrete are terms the meaning of which is crucial to the writer who wants to control his writing. So, having written fables in a large group, we divided into small groups of 5 or 6, each with a team teacher, to examine them. We dwelt long on each one, not only admiring but naming their parts and particular moments of success. Words we would use often in the course (narrative, aphorism, concrete, abstract) became part of their vocabulary that evening.

Practise in reading began as they read their fables aloud. Their own work was our chief text, though we paralleled its use with printed works. In asking them to respond to each other’s readings, we first related the ideas of concrete and abstract to the ideas of observation and inference. We suggested that since everyone was expected to respond to each reading, no one would be at a loss for words if we were to respond concretely, saying what we remembered or noticed of what we had heard. Comments which were inferences (for instance, on the simplest level, “Terrific!” or “I didn’t think it was interesting, did you?”) were to be saved until we had heard enough observations to support or alter them.

Weeks of tactful reminders to tell the writer about what he had said, and how, rather than about the hearer’s feelings, resulted in an active and articulate climate of response based on accurate hearing; listeners were not only attentive but often useful critics. Students used to observing exactly what is said and written are in shape both to criticize and to

learn from others' language. The habit of making plentiful observations engages and activates the mind, I think. We soon found our students grouping their observations and using them to explain inferences.

The first response to our fables was surprise and pleasure at their success. There are those who feel suspicious of work which engenders pleasure, but in a writing class, at least, I would debate with them. Such pleasure is neither unstructured nor soft-headed. It is rather the first step in evoking the quantity of constant writing—in and out of school, with and without assignments—which alone makes writers proficient.

After several sessions of writing fables, considering alternative morals or aphorisms, using each other's aphorisms as starting points for new fables, discussing the elegance of well-phrased abstractions, we read Aesop and LaFontaine and discussed their work too. Having used the form themselves, our students had a context for noticing what Aesop does and a personal interest in the reasons for his success.

The syllabus moved us from fables to parables, and we wrote stories with implicit morals. We read a variety of tales—Sufi stories, African stories, Jewish, French, Chinese stories—in *World Harvest of Folk Tales*, a rich mix. Students not only wrote and read but memorized and told stories. One Persian student, far less able to write than to speak well in English, had a fund of parables learned from his family. His success in telling them to us helped him to endure his labors on form and syntax. Work in small groups continued to distinguish observation from inference, abstract from concrete.

We next all read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Lattimore's or Fitzgerald's translations, and tried our hands at writing not epic poems but little versions of myths and romances. We also wrote riddles, noting the specific query and the general answer. Riddles call for a careful selectiveness in details. Here is a sample by Delaine Jones.

People use me all year round. My shape is like a boomerang with one end open. I am considered as a part of clothing. I come in many colors. I am used on the lower part of the body. What am I?

This riddle produced wild and ribald guesses before it was answered: a sock. And we took the punning play as a sign of lively interest in language.

We wrote rhymes too, and paeons and curses; along with them we read ballads and poems.

Sitting in a big circle and passing papers to the right after writing, we wrote rhymes in couplets—first, a single line ending in a rhymable

word; thereafter, a line rhyming to the one already written on the page, plus a line ending rhymably for the next customer to rhyme. In half an hour we had twenty-eight twelve-line sets of couplets, fairly zany but full of verbal high jinks. The first set was done as a birthday present for the very shyest young woman in the class. A week later, when another woman had a birthday she demanded equal time, and everyone seemed pleased to grant it. Mother Goose not John Dryden was our common ground in setting this exercise forth. We went round the circle reciting what we could recall of childhood jingles. Lovers of letters can be grateful to Disneyland, if for nothing else, for keeping alive seminal bits of rhyme and fable for children who might without cartoons of them be the poorer.

Beginning by reading the resounding power of Biblical prophecy, we proposed the curse as a two-part structure for imitation. One student, a marvelous story-teller and a brutally unable writer, at once saw the likeness to what he described as a rank-out street game, “the dozens.” (In deference to the women present, he kindly and firmly instructed us as we began to write, “OK now, no mothers.”) Samples:

“No wonder you gonna get no where
You got acne on your hair!” and,
“You think you are dy-no-mite
But you dinosaur, good night!”

Because our sessions ran from 4 pm to 9 pm, we needed a supper break but did not want to waste time or slacken attention. Nor did we want to dissipate the sense of community by wandering off to look for eating places. So we brown-bagged sandwiches and emptied the soft-drink machine we were lucky enough to have in our classroom-lounge. While we ate, we usually had a speaker, a reader, or a film to attend to. One night we had as guest a young Englishman, Brian Murphy, who has a repertoire of ballads.

He stood in the center of our circle and sang to us, unaccompanied, for an hour. The effect of the human voice solo is wonderfully moving. One usually cool young woman clutched my arm as he began and whispered, “My Lord, he’s brave!” He made good listeners of us. He made us feel that rhythm and rhyme and a poetic voice are natural to man; once again, the literature worked its powerful energizing effect because someone trusted that it would.

For we had planned, according to the syllabus, to follow Brian’s singing with a quick experiment—a half hour of having students read aloud to each other from our collection of anthologies of poetry. When

the half hour was up, no one wanted to stop. Two hours later, well beyond the time for the class to close, people were still sitting with books in hand, saying, "Just let me read this one. It's short."

I had taken care to provide, among the books, a good proportion of strong contemporary poets—Lee, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Giovanni. The students tried them and set them aside in favor of "something that you can see he had to work on," Wyatt and Surrey, Herrick and Keats. I have no explanation for this, save a suspicion that as philogeny recapitulates ontogeny, the growth of expertise in language recapitulates the history of literature. Anyway, it was a fine evening. I hope it restored to our students the sure knowledge that poetry belongs to them if to anyone.

The first two and a half weeks spent on reading and writing material derived from the oral tradition developed more than a shared set of terms. It made us all especially sensitive to the over-all shape of a masterful piece of writing, since the shapes with which we worked were all certified by ages of conventional use and short enough to be readily perceived. Besides, we had not just defined them, or even just uncovered them in our reading of classic texts; we had written them ourselves first, and begun our understanding of them in completing the shapes of our own writings.

The syllabus continues in the oral tradition, but gradually shifts from imaginative use of conventional forms to narratives drawn from memory. There is a clear echo of oral tradition in the stories families tell about themselves or adults remember about their childhood. These are the anecdotes, polished by memory, which adults use to suggest models of behavior to their children, and which adults use to reaffirm a sense of the roots of their identity.

We asked students to write, non-stop for ten minutes, about their memories of a favorite childhood hiding place. We read these aloud and commented on them as usual. Then they wrote for another ten minutes on what they remembered of their first day in school, and we read the results. I now think I would have done better to start with family stories, since I now see how closely the shaping of our elder's twice-told tales lies to the shape of parable.

Interest in listening and commenting on each others' stories ran especially high that night. The narratives were vivid, the language fresh; the tones varied from cherishing to sardonic. I commented for a few minutes on tone, once again grateful for my team-teachers' training in literature which enabled them to observe such distinctions fruitfully. It is by treating our students' writing as literature—which, as far

as we are concerned, it is—that we can find plenty of cogent, usable things to comment on positively.

We asked them to choose one of the childhood stories, rewrite it in class, and take it home to rewrite thoroughly, adding, subtracting, and refining until they thought it sounded just right. Readings and comments in their small groups helped ready them for this effort at revision. Many of the comments asked for more details (“What door of the school did you go in?”; “Did your mother know you were hanging out in her closet?”) and many of the rewrites provided them.

They went on to write out of family tradition, stories told by grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents. How did grandparents first meet? What shoes did grandma wear to her wedding? What was grandma’s first day in school like? As always, all of us did the writing assignments, and when we read them to our groups, I was reminded of Northrop Frye’s remarks on how imagination shapes memory, “constructing possible models of human experience.” The correspondences between what we wrote and what we hoped ran deep but visibly in this assignment.

There is in the syllabus a vital move. We wanted to use our short personal narratives in writing essays having the structure of formal exposition. This transposition is the fulcrum of the course. As I see it, the structure basic to exposition begins with an abstract or general statement or paragraph which is explored, explained, or demonstrated in middle paragraphs and concluded by a final abstract or general statement. Beginning with the third week, we turned to writing in this shape.

We reviewed the ideas of abstract and concrete, of observation and inference. We explained the rationale behind the syllabus as we had so far experienced it. We reread the rewritten versions of stories about parents and grandparents. Then we spent two hours talking over what we had noticed in the stories and in the experience of writing them, and what kinds of idea we might infer from what we had noticed. We used free writing in non-stop ten-minute bursts to provoke a large, varied, and visible group of suitable general ideas. Since we had already worked on generalizing sentences that were both abstract and elegant, students were willing—because able—to work on the sketches of notions they had jotted down until they not only made sense but sounded elegant.

Students now had both an anecdotal narrative and a fitting general statement they had derived from thinking about the narrative. They had also learned from practise, by dividing their comments in discus-

sion into observation and inference, that it is from specific knowledge that understanding of general statements grows.

We were now asking them to reverse the order in which we naturally think, by putting the general statement first as a statement of thesis and following it with a specific narrative as an example or demonstration of their thesis. We spent two weeks in getting these parts to move as an integrated whole.

By the end of the fourth week, we had written and revised two essays, 500-700 words each, that told family stories introduced and concluded with general statements. Among the opening sentences:

Since 1935, everything in New York City has changed except the way people fall in love

Children don't need to spend a dime to have a good time

My grandmother is as close as I will ever get to having a fairy godmother, (revised after discussion with fellow students to, A grandma is as close as most people ever get to having a fairy-tale godmother).

During the final six sessions, using the form rehearsed in the two essays as models, they wrote an essay every evening. We gave them one-word topics (e.g., schoolyard, panic, daydream, highway) to develop. We also gave them blue books to write in. I hoped by this stratagem to prevent in them some of the uneasiness I still feel in the presence of blue books, countless semesters after I was last subject to examination in them.

We treated these essays differently. Instead of reading them to each other at once, we team teachers took them home to comment on, paying especially heed to structure, sentences, and verb forms. We discussed them in small groups the following night, before going on to write another essay. We even discovered a way to improve handwriting, which was already noticeably better than the first week's samples—students exchanged papers to read them aloud. (We never did get our Persian student to write all his o's and a's above the line.)

One woman, particularly quick-witted and eager, said after writing a couple of these blue-book essays, "Can you suggest some other structure I could try? I think I've got this one where I won't forget it." (We showed those interested how they might use some of the logical three-part ways of developing middle paragraphs: too big, too little, just right; how it used to be, how it may become, how it now is; how I see it, how my friends see it, how the wide world sees it; conservative, revolutionary, moderate; etc.)

The last half-dozen impromptu essays were, some of them, five to

ten times as long as the essays written for the placement examination. They had structure. Not every student wrote in sentences all the time, but many mostly did. True, there were plenty of errors—especially in spelling, which I am still trying to learn how to teach—but the errors occurred in a more adventurous text. And nobody hated writing them. The reader could sense their willingness to tell him something. More, they were written by individuals sure enough of their own voice to make it heard, and the reader could sense that too.

What I have described so far is a syllabus that was one, perhaps the main, stream in this white-water course. Confluent with it, inextricably mixed, were four other streams:

1. Ten minutes of daily exercise in non-stop free writing at home, ten more in class; frequent in-class recourse to such writing as a provider of written language in response to readings, speakers, films, ideas

2. Grammar through use of a programmed workbook at home for twenty minutes a day, and through comments on papers and conferences with team teachers spent chiefly in identifying what was right and showing where the right way could be substituted for the wrong

3. Readings (parallel to composition of structured pieces) of literature in books, and readings (parallel to free writing) of any book that struck their fancy

4. Efforts to sustain a community of workers, grounded in the college and extending beyond our class, based on the narrow but profound exchange writers and readers know, on a shared frame of reference in literature, and on a remarkable series of softball games and swims in which team teachers, CETA people, and students voluntarily spent many hours together outside our long day in class.

“Free writing” is a practise long known to writers in one version or another—jotting, scribbling, keeping notes or a notebook. It has gained currency as a classroom technique since the Plowden Report discussed its use in British schools in 1958. It is no gimmick but a tremendously rich and not unconventional kind of associative writing. Those who have heard of it as a mere device for undisciplined self-expression or amateur psychologizing may find it disappointing on first trial. When used fittingly, however, it gives writers direct and error-free access to their own language.

We began, on the second evening of Total Immersion, by asking students to write for ten minutes without a halt, writing “the the the” if they got stuck for ideas, paying no particular heed to spelling or sentence structure or sequence of ideas.

We did free writing at least once during every session, and required

students to write for ten minutes every night, seven nights a week, at home. It was our main text for the course. We felt that we could teach both rhetorical and grammatical structures from it. For the structures of language, obviously, inhere in language itself. To discover them there first is more memorable than to meet them in rulebooks; to know that one has produced what the rule discusses is to make the rule more memorable.

Students did their free writing in bound composition books, old-fashioned mottle-covered ones. We began each evening by reading aloud from these books; it was a good way to guarantee that the work be done. Response to it came from both team teachers and students in small groups, orally, and from one or two team teachers in written comments. We tried to find 10 or 20 minutes in the course of each evening to look at each student's writings, the oral response following the mode we had established in discussing fables. Some students produced page after page of fascinating non-stop writing, once they felt free to "make mistakes." One wrote half a dozen free-writing fables full of charm though lacking all sense of the graphics that would make them intelligible to most readers. But at least he got the stories out on the page where work with his team teacher could rescue them for the rest of us. Five minutes with pencil in hand will provide even the most inarticulate with something cogent to say when their turn comes. We used it to collect our thoughts after listening to a lecture or viewing a film, to summarize impressions of books we read, to review what we could recall of the week's work in grammar.

Yes, we did formal as well as informal work in grammar. It was of three kinds. First, we used a programmed work book, Joseph Blumenthal's *English 3200*, as an assigned out-of-class work to make students realize how they may themselves control their knowledge of the rules. *English 3200* puts students in close, frequent contact with thousands of finely articulated models of sentence structures, written correctly. While they answer the questions it asks they also perform take in the look of correct usage on the page. *English 3200* states the rules clearly and follows them by examples which progress very, very gradually in complexity. Perhaps not a perfect solution (it contains no sentence I would long to have written), it is certainly for me a good one, since I have not been able even to think of devising examples which move—as they should and as these do—in so many many tiny steps.

With students whose school experience in grammar has taught them to fail it or to find it hermetic and jargon-laden, *English 3200* serves to make the paradigms familiar and less threatening. Besides, since as-

signments in it were done outside the class's central reading and writing (as real writers in the real world might use dictionaries or other standardizing aids), we could keep the emphasis in class on elegant and expressive communication rather than on error.

The second part of our work in grammar was an extension of the way, described above, in which we responded to free writing. We taught not from faults but from strength—from examples, identified in the students' work, of complete sentences; of coordination; of the one correct verb form out of a dozen non-standard uses of the third person singular, present tense. It is just as practical and logical to signal what is good as to red-pencil what is wrong—and it is decidedly easier for a student to fix in mind.

The third effort in grammar was in the form of short talks on major matters, like proper subordination (as a way of avoiding fragments, which are often errors in graphics rather than in syntax), co-ordination (which produced a wave of work sprinkled—often admirably—with semi-colon), and minor irritants like the spelling of the contraction for “it is.” The point of view of these talks was that of my own experiences as a writer.

Work in reading was meshed with work in writing. Reading our own and each other's work, we examined the language closely—a useful skill. This and other reading skills derive from a primary response of pleasure. We relied on books themselves to generate it. We read two a week, one assigned, one chosen. Assigned were: Aesop, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, folk tales, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Hamlet*.

The 200 volumes of the class library were there because one of us had found them irresistible. They were long, short, easy, hard, new old, in all genres. Many had gripping narratives. On Thursdays, when my fellow team teachers were absent, I asked students to talk in small groups about their books so that others would want to read them too.

Their conversation was like that heard at any literary party: “There's a scene at the end where he . . .”; “She's married to this horrible guy, and . . .” Their demeanor showed the awesome extent to which instructors are models of behaviour, for each student acted to replace the absent team teacher by encouraging the shy, calming the explosive, and keeping the talk to the matter at hand.

After the conversation, we free-wrote for ten minutes about our books. Then we tried to condense our opinions onto index cards which remained with the books for others to consult when choosing what to read next. Emphasis remained on enjoyment. But I soon heard many remarks that reflected the distinction between observation and in-

ference which we were practising faithfully in talk about our own writing.

Though my handling of writing about reading was clumsy and inexperienced, the good books in the collection did have the effect we'd hoped for: choosing the week's book was a cheerful event. Reading with no motive but pleasure (side by side with reading our manuscripts and literature related to our writing) meant that we were behaving, at least for the duration of the course, like habitual readers. The most popular books (5 or more readers) exhibit the mixed nature of our library: Carlos Castenedas' *Teachings of Don Juan*; the *Viking Book of Ballads of the English-Speaking World*, Vol. 1; Domenick Yezzo's *A GI's Vietnam Diary* (it was our good luck to have Mr. Yezzo as one of the undergraduate team teachers).

Most of the team teachers and CETA helpers had the advantage of previous experience in Queen College's team-teaching program and in the Writing Skills Workshop, where they had been trained as tutors under Judy Fishman. Their active and creative work gave the breath of life to our syllabus and schedules; they were true colleagues.

Perhaps the ultimate example of collegiality was that of Sandra Schor, our glorious Mystery Correspondent. To her, in a class hour or two each week, students wrote letters; from her, in class, they each received an envelope containing her reply. This exchange was, I think, a kind of transcendental paradigm of the effectiveness of Total Immersion. The read and written word, alive outside the classroom, was the only vehicle of communication. Students never knew who their cherished Ms. Mystery was, until her visit one gala evening in the sixth week. No team teachers interfered; the letters were private. Sandra Schor's Correspondence never lapsed into corrections, into shades of Dear Abby, but remained time after time a model of civil discourse. With gifted teacherly and literary expertise, she kept up a dialogue that both evoked and tested each student's separate growth as reader and writer.

I can neither quantify nor summarize the value of Total Immersion. Given a choice, however, this would be the way I'd always teach the basic writing course.