

SOME NEEDED RESEARCH ON WRITING

Among most of the arts and skills people attempt to acquire in this society, the sequences and goals of instruction are far more stable and specific than they seem to be for writing. Most students of piano, wherever they study, make their way through similar types of scales and exercises (many are still apprenticed to Czerny's exercises for finger dexterity, now over one hundred years old). Ballet students still practice their *pliés* and *rond de jambes* in much the same order and according to similar developmental timetables, whether their studios are in Kansas City or New York. And athletes have familiar training rituals, known to coaches from big leagues to little. For such skills, teachers need not invent whole pedagogies as they go, nor return with debilitating regularity to fundamental questions about their purpose and procedures. They continue a vital tradition of instruction in which their roles are of unquestioned importance. It is assumed that to learn to play the piano or to dance or to play football, a person must generally become someone's student. And that someone, a teacher, understands what comes after what and what constitutes an acceptable level of performance at each step along the way.

Teachers of reading and writing, particularly those who teach ill-prepared freshmen, enjoy no such stability. In a culture that has been engaged in reading and writing for centuries, the pedagogies of literacy are in a puzzling state of discord, with theorists and practitioners and taxpayers all arguing about how people become literate or why they don't.

The reasons for this discord are clearly complex. It cannot be simply a matter of English teachers' having failed to do their homework. I have been the beneficiary, as both a writer and a teacher, of too many fine texts and theoretical works about rhetoric, grammar, style, and so on to be ready

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now to condemn the profession as roundly as it is being condemned for the state of literacy in America.

Still, I must admit that those pedagogies that served the profession for years seem no longer appropriate to large numbers of our students, and their inappropriateness lies largely in the fact that many of our students these days are exactly in the same relation to writing that beginning tennis students or piano students are to those skills: they are adult beginners and depend as students did not depend in the past upon the classroom and the teacher for the acquisition of the skill of writing.

Most of us learned to write through such a long, subtle process of socialization that we cannot remember how it happened. For some, freshman composition played an insignificant part of their maturation as writers, and for most, it was at best a helpful rather than an essential course. But the students we have now will be able to say—if they are fortunate in their teachers—that they learned to write in such a year, with such a teacher, and that their courses in writing were crucial to their advancement in college.

This is a tremendous responsibility for English teachers. But my own experience with unprepared—severely unprepared—students persuades me that it is a responsibility we can meet if we are willing to give our energies to the development of a pedagogy for writing that respects, in its goals and methods, the maturity of the adult, beginning writer and at the same time admits to the need to begin where the beginning is, even if that falls outside the traditional territory of college composition.

If we accept this responsibility, we are committed to research of a very ambitious sort—so ambitious that I have not been able to suggest its boundaries. What I will do instead is simply raise four questions that have concerned me lately and that might in turn generate specific research plans that would move us toward the pedagogy I speak of.

My first question is "*What are the signs of growth in writing among adults whose development as writers has been delayed by inferior preparation but who are then exposed to intensive instruction in writing?*" Just how, that is, at what pace and in what manner, do such students get to be better at the skills? From a managerial perspective, it would be convenient if the writing of such students were to advance regularly, on all fronts, preferably within one semester, in response to instruction, paralleling the developmental patterns that have been observed among younger learners over longer periods.

Yet experience with the unprepared adult writer suggests that the pattern of development is marked by puzzling plateaus and even retreats in

some areas and remarkable leaps into competence in others, producing very different writing records from those we are accustomed to in better-prepared students, refusing throughout to bring the unprepared writers into parallel courses with their better-prepared peers. Thus, while the most dramatic difference between the prepared and unprepared writer is probably the incidence and quality of error in each group, errors, particularly the errors that are deeply rooted in linguistic habit and not simply the result of inattentiveness, may be more resistant to direct instruction than other seemingly more complex problems that are traditionally taken up after the slaying of the dragon error. I have in mind the skills of elucidation and validation and sequencing in expository writing or the management of complex sentence patterns (which are usually ripe for development among adult students even though their early writings produce many tangled and derailed sentences, a reality which complicates the use of measures of maturity such as the T-unit). I would guess that by the criteria for improvement now common in many remedial programs, the developing writer is likely to be penalized for his or her growth simply because the phenomenon of growth in writing for this population has not been looked at directly, through case studies, for example, over four-or-five year stretches.

My second question is "*What sub-skills of writing, heretofore absorbed by students over time in a variety of situations, can be effectively developed through direct and systematic instruction at the freshman level?*" Here I raise the question of whether some of the slow-growing skills, such as spelling, vocabulary, and syntax, which in ordinary development are acquired gradually and inductively, might not be approached through effective paradigms and conceptual keys appropriate for adult learners although inaccessible to young learners. Teachers' fatalistic views about many of their students' difficulties may well arise out of a failure so far to have found the most productive generalizations about those features of written language that give students the most difficulty, generalizations that may be already available to us in research literature or that lie around the corner, were English teachers inclined or encouraged to turn in that direction. It should not be difficult, for example, to link great improvements in the teaching of spelling at the elementary levels to the major work of Hanna and others in the analysis of phoneme-grapheme correspondences as clues to spelling improvement. There is much still to be drawn from that work, now a decade old, for the instruction of adult learners as well. Or, as another example, there is the recent work of Sandra Stotsky on vocabulary development, which not only gives special attention to the mastery of prefixes among young learners but suggests a systematic

approach to vocabulary development that has applications for older students.

My third question is "*What skills have we failed to take note of in our analysis of academic tasks?*" "The aim of a skillful performance," Polanyi has written, "is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are *not known as such* to the person following them." In my few attempts to work contrastively with experienced and inexperienced academic writers on the same assignments in order to discover hidden features of competency, I have been surprised by the emergence of certain skills and orientations I had not thought to isolate or emphasize as subjects of instruction. I have noted, for example, that the craft of writing has a larger measure of craftiness in it than our instruction seems to suggest. Experienced academic writers, for example, appear to spend little time deliberating over their main intent in answering a question or developing an essay; this conviction evidently reaches them through some subtle, swift process of assessment and association that has doubtless been highly cultivated after years of writing in academic situations. But after this recognition of intent, there follows a relatively long period of scheming and plotting during which the writer, often with great cunning, strives to present his or her intent in a way that will be seductive to an academic audience, which, while it aspires among other things to high standards of verification and sound reason, is nonetheless subject to other kinds of persuasion as well—to the deft manipulation of audience expectations and biases, to shrewd assessments of what constitutes "adequate proof" or enough examples in specific situations, to the stances of fairness, objectivity, and formal courtesy that smooth the surface of academic disputation. One has but to re-read such brilliant academic performances as Freud's introductory lectures on psychoanalysis to observe this craftiness at work.

Now, beginning adult writers are without protection in such situations. They do not know the rituals and ways of winning arguments in academia. Indeed, so open and vulnerable do they appear in their writing that teachers often turn sentimental in their response to it, urging them into the lion's den of academic disputation with no more than an honest face for protection. Furthermore, the traditional formulations of expository writing too easily lead to the conviction that only certain kinds of writing (poetry, for example, or fiction) are concerned with seduction, whereas the formal writing of academics and professionals is carried out at more spiritual (i.e. rational) levels of discourse where the neutral truth is thought to dwell.

This view not only inhibits students from joining in the academic contest but takes much of the fun and competition out of the sport. "The greatest minds," Leo Strauss has remarked, "do not all tell us the same things

regarding the most important themes; the community of the greatest minds is rent by discord and even by various kinds of discord.” College prepares students—or ought to prepare them—to survive intellectually in this atmosphere of discord. It teaches them, or should teach them, in the words of a Master of Eton in the 1860’s, “to make mental efforts under criticism.”

But the emphasis in writing instruction over the past years has not encouraged a close look at academic discourse nor favored such images as the contest or the dispute as acceptable metaphors for writing, with the result that too many students, especially at the remedial level, continue to write only or mainly in expressive and narrative modes, or to work with worn and inaccurate formulations of the academic mode.

As part of this exploration of academic discourse I am recommending, we need above all else to take a closer look at vocabulary, which is of course critical to the development of complex concepts, the maturation of syntax, and the acquisition of an appropriate tone or register. This is probably the least cultivated field in all of the composition research, badly, barrenly treated in texts and not infrequently abandoned between the desks of reading teachers and writing teachers. We lack a precise taxonomy of the academic vocabulary that might enable us to identify those words and those features of words that would lend themselves to direct instruction or that might allow us to hypothesize realistic and multi-dimensional timetables for vocabulary growth. We have done little to distinguish among the words in disciplines, except to isolate specialized terms in lists or glossaries, and we have done even less to describe the common stock of words teachers assume students know—proper names, words that have transcended their disciplines, words that initiate academic activities (*document, define, etc.*), words that articulate logical relationships, etc. In short, the territory of academic rhetoric—its vocabulary, its conventions, its purposes—is waiting for an Aristotle.

Finally, I must ask a fourth question, which is embarrassingly rudimentary: “*What goes on and what ought to go on in the composition classroom?*” The classroom, as I have said, has become a more important place than ever before. For some students, almost everything that is going to happen will happen there—or through work that is generated there. Yet we know surprisingly little about what goes on there. We know what teachers do by our own recollections of what our teachers did, by what teachers tell us they do (which opens up a vast territory of imaginative literature), and by the periodic observations of peers and students that are largely managerial in intent and that pose rather crude sorts of questions about teaching effectiveness.

But we have evolved no adequate scheme for observing precisely the classroom behavior of students and teachers nor for classifying the models of association between student and teacher that govern different styles of teaching. That is, we can perhaps locate metaphors that describe the orientations of teachers and students—the theatre, the courtroom, the clinic, the editorial office, the couch—but we have not analyzed them nor related them to the teaching of discrete subskills in writing. Nor have we entertained or adequately tested any bold departures from the familiar classroom configurations and timetables, even though teaching the skill of writing may be more like coaching football than teaching literature or history or biology.

What I am suggesting through this question and others is that we have as yet no sociology or psychology (not even an adequate history) of teaching the advanced skills of literacy to young adults who have not already acquired them. Yet many such students are now in college classrooms. We cannot hope to solve the problems that arise out of vast inequities in public education by arguing that when those problems were *not* being solved, or even thought about, higher education was in excellent shape.