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A QUESTIONING VOICE: INSTRUCTORS AND BASIC WRITERS INTERACT

Ten years have passed since Mina Shaughnessy explained in *Errors and Expectations* that the real job of the writing teacher is not to correct students' mistakes but to see the "intelligence" of them and to "harness that intelligence in the service of learning" (11). Since then, we have come a good distance in our thinking—or at least in our theorizing. We know that the intelligence behind students' errors represents a struggle to express equally intelligent meaning, and that complex thoughts are easily derailed by lapses in the academic code. As Nancy Sommers says, many of us formerly "read with our preconceptions and preoccupations, expecting to find errors," and, therefore, "misread our students' texts" (154). By only correcting errors, many of us reinforced the notion that rightness is all, and we helped reticent writers become blocked writers; nothing could be written right, so nothing was written. The prose that overcorrected students managed to squeeze out, they protected; they believed that change meant correction, and many corrections meant many errors.

In recent years, writing programs nationwide have begun to meet the challenge of convincing inexperienced writers that writing *is* revising, and that revising is more than the correction of an error-riddled essay. Today we hope to free students from the fear of error, while we still foster a respect for good, clear prose. We now encourage students to rethink their own work independently—within bounds of convention that must be taught and learned. Teaching is not looking for errors, but it is not overlooking them either. We have to sense when to allow error "in the

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service of learning” and when to call a mistake “wrong.” In short, we must instruct students in the writing process without dictating what is to be written.

To meet this challenge in the basic writing classroom, the University of Massachusetts Freshman Writing Program adopted for its basic writing course a modified version of the laboratory method first described by Roger Garrison in his unpublished manuscript, “Teaching Writing, An Approach to Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition.” In highly structured and closely supervised writing laboratories, students and instructor meet five hours a week in one-on-one workshops. They work through a series of writing assignments, from process through description to analysis. Students follow an established series of five steps for each essay they write. They are instructed to choose a topic; brainstorm in rough words, phrases and/or sentences as many facts, ideas, and impressions about their subject as come to mind; order their notes; write a first draft of the assignment; and revise the draft. Students are required to show the instructor each step before proceeding to the next.

The initial “brainstorming” activity—not composing paragraphs but simply jotting down ideas—frees reticent, inexperienced writers from anxieties about sentence structure, punctuation, and diction. Even the most blocked writers can manage words and phrases. (ESL students—many of whom are sophisticated composers who have difficulty, not in producing ideas, but in producing English sentence structures—can practice roughing out sentences in the less threatening environment of idea sheets and lists.) Everyone learns that writing down ideas, as Garrison points out, *is* writing; that the first step in the composing process is not imagining a full-blown essay but accumulating the raw material of meaning.

In the one-on-one workshops, basic writing students also learn that writing does not happen instantaneously or even linearly. It happens as they draft an essay much shorter or scantier than they meant and discover that essays grow, not as new material is appended, but as they return to brainstorm, reorder, redraft. We encourage beginning writers to spend time at their brainstorming and ordering activities, because it is there that they discover the naturalness of revision. As idea sheets become more and more easy to create, they become easier to junk. And as students make and scrap lists, they discover that the clutter and chaos of their thoughts is constructive.

Because our final goal is to give students their own writing processes, we work to convince our instructors to do this. Thus our first goal is to minimize the teacher’s role and maximize the student’s role. This does not mean we give over all the influence that comes to us from experience, but it does mean we surrender our authority over our students’ texts. Ironically, while the five-step process we use affords instructors a format for intervention, it also affords us maximum opportunity to “take over” students’ writing. By inclination, any tutorial model can easily become teacher-centered. Our presence in each student’s writing process is immediately felt. We are there, privy to every act from the generation

of initial ideas to the completion of a final draft. There is maximum opportunity for us to take over the writing process, and there is also maximum temptation; beginning writers are not well able to defend themselves against invasion and are most grateful for any help they can get.

Therefore, we strive to help instructors resist temptation, to become neither teacher nor writer but rather a very particular sort of reader: the informing reader and poser of questions who stimulates writing. We know from reader-response criticism that reading produces a second, imaginary text, partially of the writer's and partially of the reader's concocting. Strong writers are strong readers of their own texts. Throughout writing, they anticipate other readers' questions and other readers' attempts to provide answers. Strong writers take control by providing answers of their own. Those answers are the written text.

Basic writing students are not strong writers in this sense. When basic writing students are unable to generate any more material, they generally have run out of questions to answer. The teacher's job is not to provide the students with answers or directives. The teacher's job is to return authorship—and responsibility—to the students by providing a reader's voice, by asking the questions needed to get the writing started again. Eventually these questions become part of the students' own repertoires. Incorporating the role of informing reader, basic writers become stronger writers.

While it is at the brainstorming and ordering stages that we most want students to get the feel of revision, it is here that we are most apt to leap ahead of students. Faced with nothing but suggestive words and phrases, we are apt to lapse into traditional roles of teacher and writer. We view notes, so easy to take over, as details that will be shaped into finished themes—themes finished as we imagine and expect they will be. In our eagerness, we ask for more details, assuming that the same appropriate details we envisage will soon fill the students' pages. We are inevitably disappointed.

Indeed, the request for "more details" is probably the most frequent advice given by new instructors in our program in response to student drafts. These instructors are, in effect, demanding an answer without posing the question. Teachers who insist that a student "develop this" or "give additional detail here" fare little better. For whether instructors leave students to search for answers without knowing the questions, or attempt to force the instructor's answers on the students, the result is usually one of those maddeningly familiar drafts that does not "hang together," that seems more a catalogue or collage of minutiae, without a cohering theme or center. These instructors have fallen into the trap of addressing directly the content of the students' prewriting, rather than affording the students the means or opportunity to explore on their own what the final content will be.

We hold, therefore, to the fundamental lesson of strategic intervention: it is almost always dangerous to address content at the initial stages of writing, for inevitably we lead students off their own developing, though as yet undisclosed, course. Moreover, when we attend too early

in the process to the particulars of the content of a student's writing, we fail to open the student's awareness to the context in which writing takes place. Knowledge of particulars—of the particular content pieces of a particular essay—is nontransferable, but an understanding of context can be applied in every instance. As a result, we approach content through questions, and most especially through questions of contextual relationships: writer/subject, reader/subject, or writer/reader.

While specific questions differ according to specific assignments, almost all papers require a set of questions that speak first to the issues of organization and focus—always within a contextual framework. In each instance, the teachers' suggestions are framed in the sort of questions students can ask themselves in later assignments. For instance, the guiding questions of a descriptive essay might be, "Why are you describing this particular person [or place]?" "What is the impression you want to give someone else?" Or, "What is most important or special about your subject to you? What more might your reader want or need to know about these special characteristics in order to feel the way you do?" There is no need to wait for answers. Answers can be allowed to develop in further prewriting: "You don't need to answer now. Go back and, with your answers in mind, jot down more thoughts." And as the bare materials of the first idea sheets begin to flesh out and develop, the students are prompted to experience, finally, a natural, almost organic evolution from brainstorming to draft.

The following interview from one of our classes illustrates the use of questions to help basic writers:

Student (reading from her initial idea sheet on the topic "Describe a Person"): My Brother. Kind, caring, special friend, generous, talk, considerate, there when I need him, fight once in a while, friend, relative.

Instructor: Good start. Now, of all these important ideas, what do you most want someone to know about your brother? What are the most important ideas to you? Think about this, and then brainstorm some more.

Student: I don't think I can . . .

Instructor: Wait. You don't have to come up with these ideas right here. Sit back and think and brainstorm for a while.

(elapsed time :45)

Sent off to find her own solution to her own problem, the student returned approximately fifteen minutes later with this expanded idea sheet (all errors reproduced):

My Brother

generous—during graduation he bought me a nice gift, saved up for it, wanted to give me something special, for college.

friend I can talk to—talk about feelings & concerns about Mom’s boyfriend he is nice, but around to much, tells stupid jokes, to old for her, but she likes him, he treats her well, we talk about how we feel & we should try to like him.

considerate—If Steve watches TV all day on Sunday, he will let me watch whatever I want that evening without fights or hastles.

Having been prompted with questions directed to the writer/subject relationship, the student began to locate the core of her relationship with her brother (at least for this writing) and to develop some useful “details,” some examples of what would become the core of her essay. The instructor then turned to the reader/subject relationship:

Instructor (skimming the idea sheet): Steve sounds like the perfect brother—generous, sensitive, considerate. Is this the Steve people see when they first meet him?

Student: I don’t know what you’re asking.

Instructor: Well, you’re describing Steve as generous, sensitive and considerate. If you never mentioned Steve’s name in your paper, would everyone who’s ever met or seen Steve read your essay and know who you’re talking about? Or do some people have a different impression of him?

Student: What difference does it make?

Instructor (more openly directive): It would make a difference to those people who just see Steve watching the TV all day, and don’t see him letting you choose the program at night. Think about how you usually go about convincing friends that you’re right about a person and they’re mistaken. You may have to do some convincing here that their first impression of Steve is wrong, or that there’s another side to him.

Student: In my essay?

Instructor: First in your notes. Brainstorm some more, keeping our talk in the back of your mind.

(elapsed time 1:15)

By the close of the class period, the student had produced the following notes, which reflect the start of reader consciousness and a resulting “voice”:

My Brother Steve

first impression—you may think he’s self-centered. Good looking & smart. Plays hockey, goalie, macho. sometimes we fight, I get jealous and other people get jealous. he’s not all perfect.

considerate—Doesn't hog T.V. when I want to watch he lets me. Other brothers and sisters fight. Steve is not self-centered. Cares about my feelings.

Friend—we are friends as well as relatives. can talk about good/bad problems/accomplishments. recently talked about how we felt about Mom's boyfriend.

Upset
he was to old
around to much
realized—
she likes him
he is nice
we should give him a chance
He helped me.

generous—for graduation he was proud of me and wanted to get a gift I could take to college. clock radio-Sony Digital
I use it, think of him

This student spent a class period on brainstorming, but in those fifty minutes created a base from which to move into ordering and drafting. In fact, her ordering step was nearly already complete, because she developed her material while maintaining a clear focus (Steve's considerateness and generosity), purpose (convincing others of his good character), and audience (those who might think him vain). In short, student and teacher avoided the problem of finding focus and purpose for an unfocused draft, a difficult task for an experienced writer, an often impossible one for beginners.

With particularly taciturn students an instructor's initial questions are crucial. This time the assignment was to describe a place:

Student: Look at this. I'm ready to start writing.

Instructor: You're already writing. Let's hear what you've written so far.

Student: Columbus Day weekend, First Baptist Church, Memorial Day weekend, Jim Morrison (The Doors) (didn't like them at first.)

Instructor: What are you writing about?

Student: Old Orchard Beach, Maine.

Instructor: Is that what you want to do, describe what it's like at Old Orchard?

Student: Yeah. On Memorial Day and Columbus Day.

Instructor: That's a good way to narrow down the time, but it's still a big job you've cut out for yourself. Old Orchard is a big place—the town, the amusement park, the boardwalk, the beach, the jetties. Why don't you go back to your seat, close your eyes,

and imagine that you're standing or sitting or lying in one spot—your favorite spot—and jot down notes of what you see and hear in your mind.

(elapsed time 1:35)

This particular intervention—sending the student to “see” his subject from one vantage point—is more directive than questioning. Still, it serves to heighten the student’s sense of context and to sharpen the focus. The student’s introduction of Jim Morrison into his prewriting, along with his seeming impatience with the prewriting process, suggests a tendency to wander from the topic, or to rush from one topic to the next. This is a tendency the student would likely find frustrating to curb at the drafting stage; it is easier to handle during brainstorming.

About ten minutes later, the student returned with this “expanded” idea sheet:

Old Orchard Beach

Columbus Day weekend
Memorial Day weekend
sit & watch tide go out
Summertime: touristy, trashy, beautiful, hot
Fall: autumn, scarcely populated, clean, beautiful sunrise, cold,
windy, gray skies.
lighthouse
black rocks

This is the conversation that took place:

Student: Okay. Done.

Instructor: It looks as though you’ve put yourself on the beach. Is that right?

Student: On the rocks.

Instructor: All right. What are you going to do now?

Student: Write the paper.

Instructor: From the notes you have?

Student: I’ll add some stuff.

Instructor: Such as?

Student: Like about the amusement park . . . and the rides . . . and the trashy food places . . .

Instructor: And if that’s not enough, you can work your way along the coast, right down to Bar Harbor. Let’s see if you can develop the information you’ve got. Pretend I’m your cousin from Ohio. I know what a beach is, but I’ve never been to one. We’re talking

on the phone and you're describing Old Orchard so I can really see what you think is so great about the place. First let's take one of the entries on your sheet—"sit and watch the tide go out." Close your eyes and tell me what you see when you watch the tide. Go ahead. I'll write it down.

Student (somewhat hesitantly): You can see little lines of foam on the sand. Little waves in the sand, where the water was. Around the rocks and pebbles, the water makes the waves . . . like behind boats. It looks at first like the rocks are moving.

Instructor: Good. Anything more? Maybe farther off shore, over the ocean itself?

Student: Seagulls and killdeer diving for food. They come out of the sky like divebombers, not missing a stroke. Fight and argue over dead crabs.

Instructor (showing the student the notes): Okay. This is what you've written on just that one entry, and I think even your cousin could start to see the beach in it. Take your other entries and make notes for yourself. See what you can come up with.

(elapsed time 3:15)

In speaking, this particular student demonstrated facility with words, and once he had overcome his general impatience with the prewriting, he developed material quickly around a discernible center. Within the class hour he returned with a load of useful images:

Old Orchard Beach, ME

Summertime: touristy, trashy, beautiful, hot

Sit & watch tide go out. You can see little lines of foam on the sand. Little waves in the sand, where the water was. Around the rocks and pebbles, the water makes wakes. Like behind tiny boats. It looks at first like the rocks are moving.

Black rocks: My favorite place to sit. Shiny in foamy waves. Every wave comes in to freshen them with a new shiny coat of water. Shiny, sweaty like basketball players sitting on the bench at the half.

Right below where I sit on my favorite rock seagulls scream and argue and fight over a dead crab all pulled apart.

Farther out off shore, out over ocean. Seagulls and killdeer dive for food. They come out of sky like divebombers & enter water without missing a stroke.

You can see everything in the moonlight. On midnight walks rocks look wet and slick in the moonlight also. Especially nice when moon is full because shadows show designs.

About 2 miles out in harbor you can see the lighthouse with the light circling around like radar on a screen.

Fall: autumn Scarcely populated, clean, barren, beautiful sunrises, gray skies, cold windy.

gray skies overcast. thin cold with mist coming off rocks, as waves come in. Just a dusting of mist, lighter than a drizzle, but heavy enough to notice it. Would cut your bare skin like a straight razor.

On the black rocks waves are much higher and they crash harder. Tide going out leaves yellow foam, like old man's beard on sand and around rocks.

Now beach is an old man. You know that the old man is ready for winter. Next year I'll go back on Memorial Day weekend and see the young man being born again.

The student's final essay was not perfect: some critical foreground images were less fully developed than were some insignificant background scenes; transitions were at times abrupt or halting; the leitmotif of the old man/young man was a bit heavy-handed. Nevertheless, because the instructor had prompted the student to question the writer/subject relationship ("what you think is so great about the place") and the reader/subject relationship ("you're describing Old Orchard so [your distant cousin] can really see"), the student began to develop material around a solid core of thought, to consider reader needs, and to compose with some overall sense of purpose.

That student now had a sense of when to use a semicolon.

Even when students follow the prescribed writing process and instructors leave authorship to their students, cracks in the structure do occasionally appear: dialogues strike a dead end, apparently lively ideas suddenly die. But just as most veteran writing teachers have developed a repertoire of written responses to finished essays, teachers working in the laboratory method develop a repertoire of strategic contextual questions upon which they can draw as the writing situation demands: "What might be the most important quality of this person/place for your reader?" "What about this person/place seems contradictory? Are there moments when he/she/it changes?" "If your reader were to see a photograph of your subject, what would it show? What wouldn't it show?" "Where in your explanation of this process might a reader get confused?" "Why would a reader do this your way and not another?" "How might a reader argue against your position on this issue?" "How will you answer your reader's arguments?" "Can you anticipate and answer those arguments now?" The most effective interventions are directed at only one issue—or at most two issues—at a time, so instructors can develop their questions along a continuum to suit the natural continuum of the writing process, from the generation of material to the polishing of sentence structure and diction. Initial questions can be aimed at helping students uncover the pertinent information available to them and the central focus

of their ideas: "What is the issue?" "Why are you writing about this topic?" "What is the impression you want to give your reader about your subject?" "Exactly what makes you feel or think the way you do about your subject?" Once thoughts have been collected and a center has begun to form, questioning can turn to concerns about organization: "What are you preparing your reader to expect?" "Do these points prepare your reader for the final point you want to make?" "What information leads your reader to the conclusion you intend? What might lead your reader to another conclusion?" Only after basic issues of focus and organization have been resolved do we encourage teachers to address questions of sentence completeness, diction, and finally punctuation. These questions provide the step from editing to proofreading, and these are the questions of correction that we want beginning writers to realize come *only* at the close of revision, the questions that often answer themselves when the topic has been reviewed and seen clearly by the writer and when the essay has been rewritten and presented clearly to the reader.

Interventions such as we describe in the classroom must be brief, so that students can get on with their writing and teachers can get on to the next writer. The overriding principle is that the purpose of instruction is not to involve ourselves in students' writing, but rather to remove ourselves from it. Or perhaps more correctly, we hope to insinuate somewhere in our students' consciousness our own questioning voice, asking them over and over the questions critical to every writing task, questions they will answer in their own writing but will eventually ask themselves.

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