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IDEAS ON TEACHING AND IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS ACROSS DISCIPLINES

I and II

The following ideas on teaching and improving students' writing may seem old. Yes, they have been around for some time; however, application of these ideas in all our classes that require writing may be new and they do work.

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IDEAS ON TEACHING AND IMPROVING
WRITING SKILLS ACROSS DISCIPLINES-I

Presented at the Conference on
English Language Arts
Michigan State University
1983

The Use of Drawings in English Composition Courses: A Summary

Since the very first time I used a drawing (cartoon) in my class because I could not think of a suitable topic for an in-class writing assignment, I have come to the realization that I can use drawings in class for other, more important, reasons: namely, to offer the students an impetus to move beyond the narrative/descriptive mode of writing and to give them an opportunity to distance themselves from language and learn to use it as a tool.

Recent research in the development of writing appears to support the notion that instructors should literally push students beyond the narrative/descriptive mode of writing. James Britton, in his studies on the development of writing skills, points out that a writer passes through a hierarchy of modes of writing. At the base of his model is the expressive mode, the stage at which the writer masters the building blocks of writing. This stage, according to Britton, must be mastered so that the writer can move on to other forms of writing: transactional and poetic discourses. Expressive writing is the easiest mode of writing for the inexperienced writer. It may be true that the writer will automatically move on from this stage to the transactional and poetic, as his conceptual and cognitive growth continues. However, in March 1982 issue of *College English*, Mike Rose from UCLA argues that there is a reason to doubt this is in fact so. He points out that narrative, rather than being a building block, may be a substitute for the ability to respond in a more complex or abstract discourse.

Perhaps, then, there is no guarantee a student while mastering the expressive mode will move on to transactional or poetic writing. In fact, as Rose points out, many of the students may become locked at the expressive stage, because they have not been given the extra push needed to get them out of that particular mode of writing.

I bring up these points because I am concerned with the practical problem of leading students beyond the narrative/descriptive mode. The use of drawings has helped me to identify the students' preferred responses in the narrative/descriptive mode, which we have then used as the preliminary stage in moving on to other forms of writing.

In addition, I have found drawings useful in pointing out to the students that mental operations used by experienced and inexperienced writers are the same. Here I have relied on the work of Ann Berthoff. She sees the whole composing process in terms of the dialectic. For example, language leads to thought and thought to language. Next, she sees the composing process as being comprised of three operations: naming, opposing, and defining. These three elements are

also involved in a dialectical relationship. To get from naming (i.e., chaos) to defining (i.e., making order or meaning), we oppose or examine relationships. The most important point is that the mental operations necessary in executing the naming operation are, in fact, the very same required in the operation of setting up oppositions.

What teachers can do is make students aware of their own thought processes and the language that reflects them. Once they are aware of their skills, the teacher then guides the students in mastering them. Again, I have used students' responses to drawings in order to point out the mental operations that take place as writers name, oppose, and define. If by pointing this out one distances or objectifies language for the writer, the first step of pushing students toward manipulation of language, and thus beyond the narrative/descriptive mode, has been accomplished.

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IDEAS ON TEACHING AND IMPROVING
WRITING SKILLS ACROSS DISCIPLINES-II

Presented at the **Conference on College Composition and Communication**

New York, 1984

And the seminar on **The College Teaching of English**

Michigan State University, 1985

Theorists Can Help Teachers of English Composition

Theories, be they political or literary, are most appealing when we hear them at political rallies or at various conferences. Yet as soon as we return to our homes or our classrooms, the well-formulated theories are often forgotten or appear inapplicable in real situations. I share the frustration of composition instructors who sometimes feel that theory and practice do not go hand in hand, and I wholeheartedly support the proposal made by Don Pierstoff in his article "Why We Need an English Teachers' Meeting" (*Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, Fall 1984, 12-15) that we ought to have conferences on how theorists help English composition teachers. For those reasons I have decided in this short paper to explore the bridges that can be made between theory and practice in composition classes.

One of the most frequently quoted terms in composition theory today is "shifting paradigm." This term was used by Thomas Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) to explain a process by which major changes occur in scientific fields. According to Kuhn, this process is a gradual one and occurs when an old model no longer solves problems at hand. Maxine Hairston borrowed the notion of a "shifting paradigm" from this context and applied it to describe what is presently taking place in composition theory. She points out in her article "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing" (*CCC*, 33, February 1982, 76-88) that, in teaching of writing, we are currently at the point of a "paradigm shift." This means that in composition theory we are moving from an inadequate model of inquiry to a new one. A number of people concerned with composition studies have questioned whether a theoretical model implied by the term "shifting paradigm" even exists for this discipline; others have challenged the very use of scientific terminology to explain recent changes in composition studies (Robert J. Connors, "Composition Studies and Science," *College English*, January 1983, 1-20).

Perhaps it is in the employment of scientific terminology and explication of a "model" that the discipline is viable not only for those who practice in the field but also for those who do not. The use of scientific terminology, therefore, is not new in humanities and particularly not in literary criticism. The very title of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) suggests an analytic, scientific approach to this discipline. And so Maxine Hairston's borrowed term of "shifting paradigm" to talk about changes of the focus in composition theory is neither unusual nor inappropriate.

Indeed, there is nothing wrong with scientific terminology in the field of humanities, just as there is nothing wrong with a certain amount of humanistic uncertainty and intuitiveness operating and guiding scientific research. The only problem with using scientific terminology in a humanistic field of inquiry, such as composition, is that it implies repeatable and controlled examination using a scientific model that can be performed again and again.

We know, however, that repeatable and controlled situations to show the working of a particular model are difficult to demonstrate, especially in the teaching of writing where there are so many variables. This does not mean we cannot use scientific terminology to describe the focus of our study in composition theory, or the kinds of methodologies we employ, which we will eventually be able to repeat under controlled situations.

Furthermore, even if we accept the use of scientific terminology in the field of composition studies, there is something wrong with Hairston's use of the term "shifting paradigm". A "shift in focus" (a kind of Copernican revolution) would be more appropriate because a "paradigm shift" implies forgetting of an old model altogether. A Copernican system implies the same order of things among which only the point of view has changed. And what, in fact, is happening in composition studies today is merely a change in focus on the kind of workable methods of teaching.

Several years ago the New Critics in literary theory saw the text as the sole depository of meaning without considering extra-textual elements that play a role in production and interpretation of a text. Today the text has decentered and a whole host of extra-textual elements have come into play, as the readers engage the text and make it speak to them. Such decentering of a text is taking place in composition studies where the focus is now on the audience, the identification of which determines everything else about that text.

A field of study which is probably most similar to composition studies is psychoanalysis. There are some similarities between these two fields: first, neither possesses a clearly outlined model of inquiry under repeatable and controlled situations; second, in each the expert gropes on insecure ground, hoping to hit the right approach for each individual; and third, there are too many variables in these fields to determine what, if any, success has been made in helping a patient or student. Even in these disciplines there are a number of knowns, steps that can be taken and which have proven to work well in psychoanalysis as in a composition classroom.

First of all, we know that in psychoanalysis talking on the part of the patient is as important as writing is for the student of composition. Therefore, talking about good writing in a classroom will not help the student as much as the actual act of writing. It is true that with talking in psychoanalysis and writing in composition classes no immediate measurable improvement can be expected in patient or student. Changes, if any, take time because most students come to freshmen composition classes in college with poor writing habits that have been acquired over a long period of time, just as a patient who comes to a psychiatrist has habits and responses that have been learned over a long period of time and will take time to change.

Teachers in composition, like psychiatrists, aid in breaking old habits and teaching new ones. Just as a patient in psychoanalysis is asked to demonstrate old childhood experiences and, by

replaying them through language in order to break them, a student in a composition class is asked to write in his usual way and is then shown how to change that to a better form of writing. And because our students have varied backgrounds, have been taught under different methodologies, and have a variety of attitudes toward writing, we have difficulties not only in accomplishing our goals as teachers, but in measuring whatever improvement occurs. The same is true in psychoanalytic situations.

In addition, methods of pedagogy in composition, as well as approaches in psychoanalysis, will continue to evolve as we learn more and more about the way in which human beings operate. That is to say, both disciplines are young, and scientific research in these areas helps us daily to understand more and more about how human beings function. We can look forward to a time when we can speak about a general composition theory that will probably encompass all the various approaches to teaching of writing that are currently in use. For now, we must in composition studies depend on modifying old methods and making them workable in effecting good writing for students of different learning styles. Knowing recent research in composition theory should be mandatory for all teachers of composition.

The reciprocity between theory and practice is indispensable not only for composition teachers but theorists as well. Just as composition teachers to be effective must be abreast of what is going on in the field at the theoretical level, theorists must remain conversant with the activities of the classroom; they must know how their theories apply in the classroom from firsthand experience. Similarly, composition teachers should continuously read, discuss, and try to implement composition theory trends in their own classrooms.

Over the past three years I have tried to learn what has been going on in composition theory by attending meetings, seminars, and engaging in reading. All this has not been as valuable as when I tried to implement contemporary theory in my classroom. I came to realize that just as the reader in literary theory unlocks and begins to unweave the text, so in composition theory the audience becomes the focus of everything that goes on as far as composing of a text is concerned. Just this consideration of reader/audience in a classroom is what I would say is theory in practice. Today it would seem impossible to teach literature without paying attention to what the reader brings to the text, or to teach composition without considering who the audience is, so that everything else - the word choice, the tone, and the sophistication of content - the writer can select accordingly. In our classrooms the question of the audience for which a piece is being written and the question of purpose, what the writer is attempting to effect, are extremely important and must be considered by the writer from the beginning and throughout the act of composing a particular text.

Aside from bringing to the classroom what we know about the relationship between writer, audience, and purpose, we can focus on what we know about the function of the human mind. For example, we know that human beings make sense out of the chaotic world in which we live. Ann E. Berthoff in her text *The Making of Meaning* (Montclair: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981) points out that we know the world by looking, perceiving, identifying and grouping based on similarity and dissimilarity. In our composition classes we may ask students to create their own chaos by making lists of related and unrelated items or ideas, or we can bring to class such materials and ask the students to select and group similar ideas and objects in order to create an

orderly and meaningful piece of writing. Exercises along these lines are offered by Berthoff in her textbook for teachers. In addition, one can rate such exercises using various data and ask students to look, select, and group these to come up with a text. For example, a raw list of information regarding a family or a patient can be brought to class from which the students can be asked to compile a family or a patient profile.

We also know that a more sophisticated operation of the human mind than identification and classification is analysis and synthesis. To bring these operations into the classroom for practice, we can ask students to analyze a particular piece of writing and report on it in written and oral format. What I find especially useful in a composition class is to have students produce a synthesis of two articles that are thematically related. First, the notion of synthesis is explained in scientific terms, referring to the process of combining chemical elements as sodium and chloride in a laboratory setting. The compound produced – Na Cl – has characteristics of the original elements in it, but the seams or the connective joints where the two elements merge are not obvious. Then I ask the students to create a synthesis of two articles, as Goldberg's "In Harness: The Male Condition" and Perrelman's "The Machismo Mystique" from *The Norton Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984, 289-295; 305-309). Though this exercise may appear to be easy, even advanced composition students are challenged by it. For lower level composition students, one can choose articles that are short and simple.

Still another way of incorporating theoretical information in a classroom is to actually work with students on what James Kinneavy and James Britton have reported about writing skills. James Kinneavy, in his text *Theory of Discourse* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), points out that writers move along the horizontal axis of expressive-objective writing, by which he means from personal to a more public kind of writing. James Britton, exploring the development of writing skills (*Development of Writing Abilities 11-18*, London: MacMillan, 1975), points out that a writer passes through a hierarchy of modes of writing. The expressive mode is the stage that is mastered first and consists of the building blocks of writing. Once mastered, the writer moves on to more complicated modes of writing: transactional and poetic. Though we associate expressive writing as being easier for students to master, it is a mode students often regress to, especially when they are unmotivated, confronted with difficult contexts, or are insecure about the topic and what they want to say. (It is interesting to note that a similar situation occurs in psychoanalysis that when confronted with sensitive issues, the patient regresses to earlier modes of behavior.)

In contrast to inexperienced writers who prefer the expressive mode, students in advanced composition classes often lock themselves at the other extreme of objective writing, so that their discourse, as pointed out by Hairston in her article "Working with Advanced Writers" (*CCC*, May 1984, 196-208), is at times too impersonal. It appears to me that motivating such students to personalize their prose is much easier than pushing a student from expressive mode on to higher levels of discourse. To help students up the hierarchy of writing modes, I found that one can indeed do several things to move them from insecure personal writing to the more sophisticated and objective mode.

There is no doubt, however, that a student as s/he matures will eventually move on from the expressive to objective mode of writing, but the instructor can facilitate this process. In my

classes, for example, I ask students to summarize an article, an essay, or a paragraph. I realize these are old tricks in the composition trade, but they work. Often students must first be told what a summary is. Basically, it is a reduced original piece of writing which contains no personal opinions or evaluations. I ask them to summarize without making reference to the article, the title, or the author. Immature writers use “I think,” “I feel,” or “the author says” or “feels,” etc. as a crutch or a life-saving device without which they fear to jump in and state the point that is being made. “I think the author is saying” or other devices are just symptoms of the writer’s reluctance (or inability) to come right out and say what is being said. These expressions veil the crux of the point, much as in a psychoanalytic situation when the patient employs various defenses in order to not reveal or to not deal with material that is too sensitive for him/her to bear. The importance of this exercise is precisely to help the student become conscious of what s/he is reading and doing as a writer.

The above exercise can further be reduced if we ask students to express a summary in two or even one sentence. Though this may appear to be a simplistic exercise, the task is quite demanding for a freshman composition writer, and only after repeated tries do some students get the idea.

Reversing this exercise, one can bring to class a line or two, or a drawing with a short legend, and ask students to respond to the item in a full length essay, again without making any references to the lines, the drawing, the artist, etc. Here also some students find it difficult to avoid beginning their papers with “I see” or “the statement says” or “the artist is trying to say.” The same exercise, by the way, may be given to advanced composition students who come up with various responses, some quite sophisticated and original. In this manner, students, especially those who have not studied a foreign language, learn to use the language as a tool in achieving a particular goal.

These exercises in no way exhaust the ways in which theory may be applied in a classroom. No doubt each instructor has his or her own ideas to add. These have proved to work well in unlocking the students from the expressive mode and helping them move on to a more sophisticated type of writing.

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