Opinion Writing for Publication

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Part of the reason for the woefully low level of writing skills among Americans is the scarcity of examples of literacy produced by those of us who claim to be able to think. From college catalogs and administrative memoranda to freshman themes, the quality of writing within education ranges from unintelligible to abysmal — clustering around abysmal.

I have known for many years that students in composition classes are both poorly taught and poorly motivated. I've forgotten every theme and almost every paper written over my own lackluster educational career as a student. Probably that's good; they were poorly done, careless responses to thoughtless assignments. I remember those few favorable comments which came from class or teacher, but I have forgotten every scribbled negative comment, every correction, every criticism.

On the other hand, I can recall everything I've ever had published and that runs into hundreds of articles and thousands of reprints over a quarter of a century. I can remember, almost to specific words, every fan letter and every crank letter sent to me; and I can recreate almost every favorable (and unfavorable) comment made by phone or in person to me.

So, when the "writing crisis" hit the pedagogical fan, I was ready with an "innovative" method (so dear to the hearts of educators) for teaching writing. What had lurked in my mind for years pushed its way from subconscious to conscious — i.e., the only completely satisfying reward for good writing is publication. Students who are given a better reason for writing than the bored approval of a graduate student and/or an arbitrary grade by a young instructor marking papers and time until a section of English Lit. 5,000 opens — students with appetites whetted by the dream of publication — such students have a motivational reason for improving their writing style.
Off I went to the foundations, armed with a proposal to teach three writing workshops: (1) to college and university administrators who need it most; (2) to elementary and secondary administrators; and (3) to teachers of writing in high school and college. I found an interest within the Exxon Education Foundation which funded a one-year grant paying me as director-teacher, allowing me to give small honoraria to guest speakers (editors and editorial columnists), and permitting a tuition grant award to each of 50 students enrolled.

I selected Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, as the host institution because it is five minutes from my home and, as its former president, I might expect faculty approval as a teacher in Hamline's continuing education program.

I developed a manual for the workshops, "Opinion Writing for Publication," a collection of 75 columns, articles and reviews I had written and published over the last five years in the local metropolitan press and nationally in Change magazine, the New York Times, Case Currents, Today's Education, and the Community and Junior College Journal.

Success could only be achieved, I determined, by the publication of students' opinion articles and I selected the Minneapolis Star as our goal. There were good reasons for that selection: (1) the Star has the largest circulation of any newspaper in the upper midwest; (2) the Star pays $25 for each article published on its editorial opinion page; and (3) the editorials editor of the Star is a personal friend.

Let me quickly and proudly claim success. A dozen articles were printed in the Star and another half-dozen were printed in other publications. Four of the students, that I know of, have continued to write and publish. And prior to taking the course none of the 50 students had ever been published in the mass media.

Although the Exxon grant expired a year ago I have continued offering the writing workshop: to undergraduate students last spring; to adult extension students this fall in Rochester, 75 miles from the University; as a graduate course in Educational Administration this winter on the University of Minnesota campus; and for University of Wisconsin students at a lakeside camp next summer (ten miles from my cabin retreat).

A final note of success: with only one or two exceptions every student's writing improved, or more accurately, almost every student adjusted his style to meet the standards I set (i.e., they wrote as I write).

The Approach

Continually I reminded the students that they were writing for thousands of readers (the Star has a circulation of a quarter of a million) and that to speak to thousands one must use the vehicle of the mass media. Between all those thousands of readers and an aspiring writer stands just one person, guardian of valuable space in his publication, THE EDITOR. A steady stream of these sophisticated and cynical men and women appeared in class to advise, demand, declaim and delight. Arriving reluctantly, unsure of themselves before a group of educators, they stayed on to answer questions, drink coffee and make friends, leaving with an improved impression of the sincere interest in their profession by those who wanted to learn to write their way.

And "their way" was the standard set for the workshops. Accurate: every fact checked out, every word spelled correctly (particularly names). Concise: short ("If you can't say it in 1,000 words or less you should be preaching or
politicking.”) and never an unnecessary word, never a rhetorical question, never an “it seems to me.” Newsworthy: on a subject either new or newly approached, adding information, insight and understanding for thousands of readers whose interest must both be caught and retained. Stylistic: grammatically and structurally correct, of course, but also sprightly.

Students submitted their articles to me, the editor-in-residence, for consideration and suggested revision. Rejection never! In that way I differed from a run-of-the-mill editor. Articles were graded only after the student had been given the opportunity to rewrite, a kindness no practicing editor would consider. I read almost all articles to the class after I had made editorial alterations, seeking further suggestions and refinements from their peer editorial “board.”

A required book review of the class manual “Opinion Writing for Publication” was the final paper, a pardonable ego trip.

During each workshop I developed an opinion article from idea to editor, encouraging student involvement. I recommended subject possibilities, they selected; I suggested ways of treating the subject, they determined which was best; I wrote a rough draft, they tore it apart; I revised, they revised the revision; and, finally, a “clean” copy was submitted for publication. The $25 from its sale covered incidental expenses, particularly coffee.

Evaluation (students)

The 50 students in the three pilot workshops had these things to say about the class:
1. Visiting lecturers from editorial staffs are interesting and enjoyable but of little help in the improvement of writing ability. They seemed unwilling, or unable, to tell precisely how they do it.
2. The most effective teaching device was the working of an article, through revision and rewrite, as a class project.
3. The most helpful activity was class criticism of their own articles. Just having “my” article read to “my” classmates was deeply, personally, and sometimes painfully satisfying.
4. The most prevalent alteration in attitude toward writing which took place was a reluctant acceptance of the necessity to review and rewrite. Students quit thinking of their writing as immediately valuable and began to accept it as a developing skill. They became verbal technicians rather than the creative artisans they were inclined to consider themselves when they first enrolled in the workshop. They were able to consider writing as a craft which uses words, sentences and paragraphs to build an article, much as a mason constructs a brick or stone wall.

Evaluation (teacher)

Beyond a proud and unshakeable conviction that the method is successful, I have these comments to make:

1. Opinion writing for publication is an advanced course which best serves the needs of mature students who have both a basic ability to write and something to say. It is less successful among lower division undergraduate students. It is not a back-to-basics course.
2. Approval of a teacher of writing is given reluctantly by the educational bureaucracy to a practitioner. What seems to be an obvious qualification, the ability to write, is not so obvious among those who select teachers of writing.
The assignment is blithely dropped on an Elizabethan scholar but, too often, it is withheld from a journalist. My own faculty in communication at the University of Minnesota voted 12-3 in favor of allowing me, the dean, to teach the course to undergraduate students (I intend to find the names of those three). To teach the course for graduate credit in educational administration I must bear an appointment to "limited teaching status."

3. Obtaining editorial cooperation from the press is not easy. Newsmen are loud in their criticism of the state of writing on the campus, but sotto voce in volunteering their assistance to help alleviate the "writing crisis." They need cultivation — fortunately they are susceptible to praise of their own work, making them a fallow field before a pragmatic plow.

4. Once a student has been published he or she is hooked, a writer for life. The checks my successful students received were photographed before they were cashed, to be framed and hung on office or recreation room walls.

Thus endeth a parable of success in which a university dean, in an effort to relieve the monotony of administration, departed his opulent office to light a candle in the gloom of a national "writing crisis." Ye who are tempted to curse the darkness are encouraged to go and do likewise.

Remember
The 17th Annual Meeting
Weber State College, Ogden, Utah
October 27, 28, 29, 1977
Information: Dr. Chandadai Seshachari