

7-1-1969

Emergency Teaching

Ronald Sharp
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Sharp, R. (1969). Emergency Teaching. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 9 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol9/iss4/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

EMERGENCY TEACHING

Ronald Sharp

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Ken Macrorie has for years been campaigning for the prohibition of instructors' "blood in the margins" of their students' freshman themes.¹ His admonition that marking all the weak points can easily discourage a student came immediately to mind when I was reading my first set of freshman papers this fall. One paper was so marred with fundamental stylistic errors that had I bloodied it with chicken-scratches the paper would have been almost completely red. There would have been at least fifty marks and the paper totalled only about 500 words.

It was not long until I discovered that although this particular girl's problem was exceptional, there were quite a few other students in the required writing course who clearly needed special attention. For a number of reasons, mostly administrative, the idea of establishing a regular remedial program complete with testing and tracking had already been dismissed. It occurred to me that if we could find three senior English majors to work four hours a week and three instructors to volunteer just two hours a week, we could begin immediately to offer near-tutorial instruction for about twenty-five students.

For some strange reason, I felt deeply obligated at this point to invest the whole project with an educational rationale which would be not only cogent and appropriate but all-inclusive. Fortunately, before I wasted a lot of time formulating a theoretical umbrella, another faculty member who had initiated a similar project a decade ago described its operation to me.

Her clinic had operated on the assumption that the real learning occurs not after the student has completed a piece of writing but while he is actually working on it. Instead of calling a student to your office and discussing his paper, you do the talking and explaining while he is writing. To the student, that means you are not accounting for errors in a finished product but guiding him through the resolution of specific problems he encounters in the *process* of trying to express himself. The approach has numerous advantages.

First, because you are not working with a paper which displays the battle scars of evaluation, you at least postpone (if not entirely avoid) the common complications of wounded pride or simple frus-

1. Ken Macrorie. "To Be Read," *The English Journal*, LVII (May, 1968), 688.

tration. Instead of defending both the grade and the comments written in the margins, the instructor can speak directly to specific problems, elaborating when the student still seems confused and shutting up when the student seems to understand. So often I have written lengthy explanatory comments on the assumption that the student did not understand something, only to discover that the problem was the result of a typing error or an accidentally omitted word.

Especially for students who have not just a few but many, many writing problems, it is important to maintain this flexibility. If an instructor is not on hand to provide direction, the student can easily lose all sense of proportion and simply become overwhelmed by the number and range of his problems. The instructor's job is to say, "Look, this isn't clear because you've put two completely different thoughts into one sentence. Let's forget paragraphing for a few minutes and talk about sentences." If the problem is severe enough, perhaps the instructor will want to spend an hour or two explaining the idea of a sentence and having the student work on appropriate exercises. On the other hand, both may discover that after a two-minute explanation the student has caught on. At that point, they can go on to paragraphs. What is important is that solutions are found in the process of writing and in the presence of an instructor who is working not as an interpreter and defender but as an advisor and teacher.

This was as much rationale as we needed and the idea seemed workable: writing is a skill and you learn a skill by practicing. To guide the practice we hired two senior English majors and one graduate student. Three instructors volunteered two hours a week to bolster the staff and we opened the clinic that same week. Because it was an experiment, only seventeen students participated first semester, but because it operated twelve hours a week, the student-teacher ratio was nearly one to one. Instructors would recommend students in their classes who needed remedial work in addition to, not in place of, the work they were doing in their regular College Writing classes. The students would then schedule a one to four hour block and simply come to the classroom and write. Although most instructors can afford to spend a half hour or an hour here and there with a student, very few can regularly set aside a two hour period during which they do nothing else but remain available if the student needs help. We therefore arranged the clinic's schedule not merely to accommodate the student but to cater to him. Twice a week sessions ran from six to ten at night and once a week from two to six in the afternoon.

Attendance was not at all required but very few students missed any sessions. A number of them would often practically beg the instructors to remain an extra half hour or hour and one person actually spent four hours every Thursday night writing in the clinic.

One simple and revealing explanation for the enthusiasm is that many of the students felt they were getting extra help, something for nothing. Exactly. And why not? Many of them would work on the paper due in their College Writing class that week. The only difference between working at the clinic and at home was that at the clinic they had a guide, a helper. It is irrelevant to suggest that they were receiving partial treatment; they needed it ! ! !

Moreover, students seem to be much more gratified by a word of encouragement *while* they are writing than by written praise in the margin of the finished product. Most of these students really needed encouragement and while it was never offered falsely or as a substitute for practice and concentration, it proved the best protection against easy discouragement. It is not hard to imagine the frustration of a freshman who is required to produce a 500 word paper each week and can scarcely put a sentence together. Syntax, pronoun references, diction—these mean nothing to him. His needs are much more fundamental and cannot be ignored.

The experiment proved a great success, far greater than I had ever imagined. The girl in my class who could not write a sentence the first week of her freshman year of college was writing B+ papers by the end of the semester. Not everyone improved so dramatically, of course, but every student who attended made genuine progress, some by leaps and bounds and some gradually. I am convinced that they all improved their writing more than they could have without the extra help. The students and instructors who staffed the clinic considered the experience extremely valuable and very informative. One senior even volunteered to tutor again this semester without pay. But above all, the experiment demonstrated that a successful remedial program can be initiated and efficiently administered with a minimum of red tape and time. And in a large university in 1969, that's saying something.