TEACHER COMMENTARY ON STUDENT WRITING: THE STATE OF THE ART
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Arguably, nothing we do as writing teachers is more valuable than our commenting on individual student texts in order to facilitate improvement. We know that successful writers achieve their communicative purposes by correctly anticipating the needs and expectations of intended readers. We also know that inexperienced writers find it especially difficult to imagine audience responses in advance or to use them as a guide to composing. Accordingly, we comment on student essays to dramatize the presence of a reader who depends on the writer's choices in order to perceive the intent of a discourse. Thoughtful commentary describes when communication has occurred and when it has not, raising questions that the writer may never have considered from a reader's point of view. The aim of repeated cycles of writing, teacher response (perhaps peer response as well), and more writing is to enable students gradually to internalize this Questioning Reader so that they can better realize their intentions. Presumably, the more facilitative voices people hear in response to their writing, and the more often they hear them, the more quickly they will achieve that internal control of choices which our teaching strives to nurture.

At any rate, so the theory goes. The depressing trouble is, we have scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice. This is not to say that we have never sought empirical support. Over the past 25 years, from J. H. Warrick in 1955 to Searle and Dillon in 1980, better than two dozen studies have looked at diverse modes of teacher intervention, and compared their effects, within student populations ranging from grade school to college age. Nina Ziv's recent study of the relevant literature shows the diversity, but also the futility, of this completed work. Some research has contrasted responses offering praise with others offering criticism, for instance, Taylor and Hoedt in 1966 or Earl Seidman in 1967. Not surprisingly, this research concluded that students who are praised tend to write longer essays and to have better attitudes about writing. But it also found no necessary connection between higher motivation and a higher quality of performance. Other researchers have contrasted oral and written comments, including McGrew in 1969, Coleman in 1973, and Miller in 1978. Again, attitudes seemed better among students who received taped oral responses than among those who received only comments written on their essays. But neither group wrote demonstrably better essays because of the commentary they received. In 1972 Elyn Bata contrasted marginal and end comments but found no important differences in their impact.

Marzano and Arthur, in 1978, gave varying types of comment to students in three different groups, one receiving actual corrections of mechanical errors, and the third receiving substantive commentary "designed to foster thinking." Once again, no significant differences in the quality of student writing could be discerned. The morose conclusion of their study could well summarize a dominant impression to be gained from all the research cited here: "different types of teacher comments on student themes have equally small influences on student writing. For all practical purposes, commenting on student essays might just be an exercise in futility. Either students do not read the comments or they read them and do not attempt to implement suggestions and correct errors."

Actually, Marzano and Arthur overlooked the drearier possibility that students simply fail to appreciate what teachers are trying to tell them. Jean King approaches this conclusion in a 1979 study of certain types of grammatical intervention. King discriminated three varieties of comment, one an outright correction of errors, a second only naming kinds of error (e.g., "lacks subject-verb agreement"), and a third offering rules (e.g., "singular subjects take singular verbs"). She found that students rarely understood directly corrective commentary and that, even when they did understand comments in the other two categories, they were not necessarily aided by either, or by one more than the other, in making corrections on their own. The implications of her research, to the extent that they can be generalized, are as plain as they are troubling: (1) students often do not comprehend teacher responses to their writing; (2) even when they do, they do not always use those responses and may not know how to use them; (3) when they use them, they do not necessarily write more effectively as a result. In light of these findings, the question whether one type of comment might be more or less helpful than another is conspicuously irrelevant.

Is there reason to persevere in the time-honored practice of commenting on student essays in the face of all these unpromising empirical studies of its relevance to writing improvement? Severingly, either that practice is deficient and the available research has proven it so, or the research is somehow deficient and has failed to reveal the true promise in teacher commentary. We would argue that responding supportively to student writing is indeed central to enlightened instruction, despite the apparent weight of evidence to the contrary. But we would also implicate both previous research assumptions and certain traditional commenting practices in the repeated failure of studies endeavoring to show its value. One problem is methodological: it concerns the habitual focus of these studies on types or modes of commentary, which has led researchers to expect too much from isolated marginal remarks on essays and to reflect too little on the larger conversation between teacher and student to which they only contribute. A second, more important problem concerns the actual practice of commenting, its peripheral and largely judgmental role in conventional teaching. If research efforts have failed to show the use of teacher commentary, one reason may be the larger ineffectiveness of the instructional format within which it has been evaluated. In other words, those efforts may say more about the limitations of a widespread and traditional teaching method than about the potential value of our intervention in student composing.
Consider, first, the matter of research focus. Nearly every study has distinguished types of comment and then tried to evaluate the impact of one type against another. We have already noted the implausibility of attempting to determine degrees of effectiveness amidst such gross uncertainty about the value of any kind of commenting. But the problem of focus goes beyond its present impracticality; even when we can finally show the positive effect of intervention under certain conditions, we will not necessarily be able to prove a qualitative difference in types. For the implicit assumptions of such an undertaking are, first, that the process of commenting can be isolated from the whole environment of oral and written communication between teacher and student, and, second, that categories of response can be further isolated according to the intrinsic merits of their superficial features (such as, statement versus question, or marginal comment versus end comment, or abbreviated reference versus extended reference) and thereby ordered as a hierarchy. It is hard to imagine that any experienced writing teacher would find intuitive validity in either of these assumptions. The first one in particular seems demonstrably false.

The flaw in both assumptions lies in their reductive view of the dialogue between teachers and their students. A single comment on a single essay is too local and contingent a phenomenon to yield general conclusions about the quality of the conversation of which it is a part. Any remark on a student essay, whatever its form, finally owes its meaning and impact to the governing dialogue that influences some student's reaction to it. Remarks taken out of this context can appear more restrictive or open-ended, more facilitative or judgmental, than they really are in light of a teacher's overall communicative habits. Potentially facilitative questions ("Is this really the best word to use here?"; "Can't you be more specific?") may be implicitly judgmental if an instructor's posture in the classroom tends to be judgmental. Grammatical references ("See Harbrace, p. 53"); "Comma splice"

In any case, the problem of research focus is secondary to a larger difficulty concerning our typical practice as respondents to student writing, a practice that has conditioned the persistently negative findings accumulated over the past quarter century. Most studies have accepted, as a "given" of the research setting, the view that commenting is essentially a product-centered, evocative activity resembling literary criticism. Conventionally, students write essays and teachers describe their strengths and weaknesses, grading them accordingly. The essays are then retired and new ones are composed, presumably under the influence of recollected judgments of the previous ones. Our assumption has been that evaluating the product of composing is equivalent to intervening in the process. Teachers concentrate on retrospective appraisals of "finished" discourses, so that students seldom rewrite in direct response to comments. Rather, they only notice the critical reception of earlier work and strive to do better next time. The recent RTE study by Searle and Dillon shows how pervasive this procedure is: they categorized 59% of the responses to student writing in their survey as "didactic/correction form," that is, summatively judgmental in their intent. By contrast, they found practically no responses in the category "moving outside the writing," that is, anticipating eventual revision (p. 239).

We suspect that intervening in the composing process, by allowing students to write successive drafts immediately responding to facilitative commentary, can measurably improve student writing, provided that a teacher adequately supports revising efforts. Certain studies already bear out parts of this surprise. The earliest of them dates, in fact, from 1936, when John Fellows showed that students receiving mechanics corrections with the chance to revise improved in grammar and punctuation—"not a startling conclusion but perhaps a suggestive one. A more contemporary, and more broadly conceived, study is Ziv's, in which students rewrote essays in response to both technical and rhetorical "revision cues" ranging from "explicit" directives to "implicit" suggestions for development. Her results show that intervention can affect writing improvement in multiple-draft assignments. Apparently, students found explicit technical and rhetorical advice more helpful than merely suggestive comments, as we might expect. But even her implicit cues stimulated rewriting, although the expanded statements often featured new grammatical and organizational problems. Ziv suggests, ingeniously, that teachers gradually adjust their emphasis from explicit to implicit cues as students grow more comfortable with their expectations and more adept at anticipating them. In any case, her research supports the potential of teacher intervention as a central activity of workshop instruction concerned with stimulating and directing revision. It successfully argues the advantage of making our commentary facilitative rather than merely evaluative.

However, an important limitation in this positive research is that it fails to consider the natural impediments to revising that we can assume in most inexperienced writers, a resistance that grows more acute as more radical rewriting is suggested. As a result, few of the studies that have included direct student response to teacher comments have shown the happy results that Ziv achieved. In a 1966 study, for example, Louis Arnold asked one group of students to revise with reference to teacher comments while a second group did not. After a year, he could find...
revised in the effort to realize that potential. This is, of course, no easy matter. Frequent efforts to rewrite paragraphs or short paragraph sequences, which can be done rather painlessly, and then discussing the changes, might help to create a receptive attitude about the advantages of rewriting. But however we undertake to stimulate the habit of revising, we should bear in mind that it entails learned skills requiring some conscious nurturing and guidance before it is likely to assume a substantial role in the typical student's composing process.

We have found only one study that includes, at least embryonically, all the features of effective instruction that might enable researchers to show the real value of teacher intervention. In 1958 Earl Buxton asked one group of students to revise essays in response to extensive commentary while another group, which also received comments, did no revising. The "revision group" rewrote their essays in class as raters went from student to student answering questions and giving advice. A statistical analysis of pre- and post-test scores suggested that writers who revised their work improved demonstrably compared to those who did not revise. One study hardly makes the case for requiring guided rewriting following teacher commentary. But it may offer a prototype for additional, more restrictively designed research based on the teaching model that Buxton implicitly recommends and that we have been describing. The model includes these features: (1) an emphasis on writers' performance rather than exclusively on their finished products; (2) a facilitative rather than judgmental view of our commenting practices; (3) a preference for multiple-draft assignments so that teachers can intervene directly in their students' composing and so that students can respond directly through revision; (4) a concern for actively educating students, perhaps through short, acclimating exercises, about what rewriting involves (and how it is different from editing), what it can accomplish, and how it can be done; (5) a concern for supporting revision by insuring that students understand what comments mean, by discussing possible changes and additions before rewriting begins, and by reviewing completed revisions, perhaps in conference, to see what they have achieved. Assuming this teaching environment, new research might profitably seek, not to discriminate comment types by their presumed intrinsic merits or deficiencies, but rather to study the full teacher-student dialogue accompanying efforts to shape writers' performance. Knowing more about this dialogue, the unspoken motives and agendas on each side that make communicating such a delicate enterprise, ought to improve the subtlety as well as the purposefulness of our more local commentary on student writing. Research that aspires to such a knowledge may enjoy a double effect, in showing the positive value of teacher intervention as it occurs in the best classrooms, but also in revealing ways to improve it through a richer understanding of the larger conversation in which it plays a part.

NOTES

ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INVENTION AND PRE-WRITING

John T. Gage
University of Oregon

I have been aware for some time that the terms “invention” and “pre-writing” are being used as virtual synonyms, both in discussions of theory and in textbooks. I have also been assuming that the preference for “pre-writing” was merely due to the harmless desire to avoid a pedantic word in favor of a plain one, or to escape the countless distinctions associated with “invention” that are not only ponderous in their Latin terminology but quite useless in practice. In the course of reviewing the “pre-writing” theorists, however, I have realized that many of those who advocate “pre-writing” in preference to “invention” as a term to describe a process of discovery actually have in mind a very different kind of process from that which interested classical rhetoricians when they spoke of “invention.” This is not surprising, but the difference has consequences in what and how we teach that have not been adequately addressed, and that may not be adequately addressed so long as we treat the two terms as essentially interchangeable.

Few people who use these terms seem to have noticed that in the recent translation of “invention” into “pre-writing,” a significant element of invention theory has been left out. The invention systems of the classical rhetoricians, for all the complexity of their distinctions and vagaries of their variety, all began from the common identification of a “stasis.” The recognition of a stasis, as the point of disagreement between a writer or speaker and an audience, was the point of departure for any method of invention. The assumption behind such methods, then, was that the process of invention only begins when writers find themselves in a given rhetorical situation, a situation comprised of a “question at issue” on which they find themselves in some form of disagreement with a particular audience. This situation, including the question which gives rise to the stasis, is not the invention of the writer. The audience, as part of that writer’s situation, is just as responsible for inventing the stasis as the writer, who writes because he is compelled to do so by a stasis that already exists. In classical rhetoric, then, the writer was assumed to have been given a topic by virtue of being in a situation which compels the act of writing itself. Writers do not have to look for topics on which to write. They write because a topic, on which they have a stance, confronts them. “Invention,” then, referred to the process of discovering the means of persuasion on a given issue, as in Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric, rather than the process of discovering something to want to be persuasive about.

“Pre-writing,” as the term is most frequently used, makes no such assumption. In fact, it commonly refers to the process of “finding a topic,” a process which the classical idea of stasis precludes. While the methods that are being advocated for teaching students to find topics may be very good ones for that purpose, I wonder what is sacrificed in the loss of the idea of stasis, which includes the idea that writers begin with a topic already, that the pre-existence of a topic is what provides the real motive for writing in the first place.

The notion that student writers need first of all to discover something to write about, and then find the means of doing it, assumes for one thing that the desire to write precedes the sense
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of any need to write; or, to put it differently, it assumes that a writing situation, like any of the other options the writer faces, can be invented. Compelled to write before they are compelled to say something to someone, our students are implicitly taught that writing is a skill that can be accomplished with equal effectiveness in the service of ideas about which they care little and for which they therefore have to search, and in the service of those ideas about which they care most because they confront them as problems shared by others. And while this might in some ways define the situation of any writing class, where writing itself is more important than the solution of such problems, yet this assumption clearly has consequences for how our students learn to view the nature of the writing options we teach them.

I do not think that writing can be accomplished with equal skill when the writer is not motivated by a pre-existent need to say something to someone, i.e., when the writer does not face a real rhetorical situation which compels the act of writing. My reason has to do with the common sense relationship between means and ends. The idea of choosing appropriate means of doing something implies the existence of an end that those means will serve. End, in the case of writing, is a matter of the intention of saying something in particular. It is possible, of course, to choose to have an intention, but in that case the act of finding an intention, and the fact of having it, will be means to some other end, namely, the end of fulfilling a writing assignment. This is not the relationship between means and ends that motivates any other sort of writing than that assigned in a writing class. In life, so to speak, our intentions grab us. We want to say something first, in response to an issue of some sort, and then we begin our search for adequate means. We may, in that search, discover a new thing we want to say, of course, but it is the wanting that makes the search for means necessary and which gives us a basis for knowing which means are adequate and which are not. If we do not care whether we say something to someone or not, then it will hardly matter whether we find the best means of doing so. If what we most want to do is fulfill a writing assignment, then we will first have to find some intention which will serve that end. Needless to say, in that case, since it is possible to write about anything, any intention will do. And if one intention is about as good as another, then so is any means of achieving it. Our students, then, are placed in a position something like that in which Lewis Carroll places Alice when she asks the Cheshire Cat which way she should go, without caring where she gets to. As the Cheshire Cat says, you’re sure to get somewhere, no matter which way you go. Like Alice, our students are asked to make choices in the absence of any commitment to the end that those choices serve. Given this predicament, it should not surprise us when these students do not have reasons for the choices they make.

Asking students to produce writing by first inventing intentions will satisfy a minimal requirement of a writing class, namely to provide a context for the exercise of writing options. The exercise of options can, no doubt, lead to their mastery. But the mastery of any potential option is only a part of the writer’s ability. Unless our teaching also leads to the ability to know which of the many options a writer faces is the best one, and how to adapt it to a particular need, the exercise of these options constitutes no more than the practice of filling empty forms with arbitrary content. When we teach only the options, only those ways of writing which might serve some intention, we do not provide students with the ability to transform those options to fit the needs of a given rhetorical situation — even though we may tell them frequently that this is what they should do. To teach a structure before the matter of the function of that structure in a given rhetorical situation arises is to teach form exclusively as a set of abstract paradigmatic patterns. But form, we like to say, follows function, not the other way around. In the teaching of empty paradigms, function is assumed to come later, as if it can be filled in after one has mastered the paradigm itself. The mastery of form, into which content can be inserted, is not the same as the ability to know why some form is best if a given function or effect is what is desired.

It is true that the classical tradition of rhetoric also included the teaching of a good many empty forms, as I have called them. The virtual force of the idea of stasis, in fact, drops out of invention theory during the classical period. It was that idea, nevertheless, which made classical invention more than an empty exercise, because it was aimed at teaching the ability, or “faculty” as Aristotle called it, of knowing how to choose and select a given case and how to adapt them. This is a sort of knowledge that cannot be taught by maxim. It is, to use a distinction in recent philosophy, knowledge how rather than knowledge that. This sort of knowledge — knowing when this way or that way is best in a particular writing situation — can only be taught when the experience of that situation is real, not invented. We teach formal strategies of writing as if their use were a matter of knowing that they exist. We teach pre-writing as “finding a topic,” then, because we require some arbitrary substitute for rhetorical intention in order to put students through the paces of selecting and exercising first this form then that one, so that they will learn, not how to use them, but that they exist.

I could speculate on other reasons we teach these empty forms and motivate their selection by a search for equally empty “topics.” But such speculations would take me too far afield from my own thesis here, because they would have to do with the competency model of education that has generally replaced the humanistic goal of teaching measurable faculties such as “judgement.” This goal, needless to say, is what Quintilian, that purveyor of endless distinctions and cumbersome terms for invention, sought in his desire to educate the citizen/rhetorician, not the skill of persuasion for its own sake. We, on the other hand, desire to teach skills that can be measured and tested — perhaps in part as a response to the outcry over the illiteracy indicated by test scores. We teach writing, then, as a matter of knowing that, because we can measure and test this competence. Our ability to measure and test knowing how (knowing how to think, for instance, as well as knowing how to write) is dependent on our own judgement, our own knowledge how, which we seem somehow to have come to mistrust as a pedagogical resource.

Rather than speculate further along these lines, however, I will briefly discuss two more consequences that I think follow from this difference between invention and pre-writing, and then ask, in a somewhat different context, why invention seems to have been taken over by pre-writing in our pedagogy. The first of these consequences is that the idea of pre-writing as “finding a topic” encourages us to lose sight of the difference between a “topic” and a “thesis.” A topic, in the sense of a subject to write about, brings with it no inherent restrictions on which aspects of that topic will be relevant in a piece of writing and which will not. Any topic is potentially infinite as an object of analysis — even one which has been properly “narrowed” — and any of its infinite parts are potentially relevant so long as the intention is to write about it. Given a pre-writing strategy for finding some topic to discuss, then, the next step becomes
applying further procedures to that topic that will provide a means of selecting parts to include in the writing. The prewriting procedures which have been devised to satisfy this step are many and varied, but they accomplish little more than adding arbitrary constraints to a writing intention which has already been arbitrarily defined. A thesis differs from a topic in necessarily being an assertion, or proposition, which must therefore be in the form of a declarative sentence, whereas a topic can be expressed in a noun phrase. If this thesis results from the existence of a thesis, or question at issue for a real audience, it will bring with it inherent restrictions on what aspects of the issue will be relevant, namely only those which are necessary and sufficient to lead that audience to assert to that assertion. Assertion systems in classical rhetoric, for all their complications, were not meant to provide a means of arriving at the discovery of yet unthought-of “things to say,” but were designed to provide a way of knowing whether a given thing to say would get one closer to being able to assert a thesis with adequate justification, since the audience (as partial inventor of the writer’s thesis) will assert to some means of arriving at that conclusion and not others. The terms of a thesis, if it is in the form of an assertion in answer to a question at issue, will itself define the parts of the subject which need to be discussed, and may even define the order in which those parts must be taken up. This suggests another consequence that I think results from the current preference for pre-writing over invention. Prewriting concerns topics, the existence of which is independent of an audience. Of course, we stress that students should write with an audience in mind, and that their topics should be interesting, but the methods of pre-writing contain no procedure for bringing such maxims to life. These methods are such that can be carried out on any topic without reference to one’s audience. Any of the techniques for exploring the parts or the relations of a subject which have recently been advocated can be carried out with equal efficiency whether an actual reader is a real concern or whether the reader is merely a distant abstraction which the writer feels free to ignore. These techniques ask students to direct their inquiry at the subject. The techniques of invention, however, ask students to direct their inquiry at their audience. The possibility of ignoring one’s reader is ruled out by invention as I have been using the term, derived from a thesis, because it is only by consciously consulting one’s idea of one’s reader that it is possible to answer any of the questions that invention, from this point of view, demands. By definition, then, invention can only be carried out in the mental presence of an audience — it is a dialectical process involving more than one mind. The techniques of pre-writing, however, seem to work equally well with or without this presence. While teachers of writing do not neglect to tell students that they must consider their audience, nevertheless the procedures of pre-writing make this advice possible, even easy, to forget. They may even encourage it, as they become more complicated in themselves. Invention, on the other hand, is impossible without thinking about a real audience, and encourages dialectical means of thinking about what to say.

Finally, I am led to ask whether our way of teaching prewriting does not follow from the unstated assumption that our students do not have anything to say or that they are in agreement about the things that matter to them. I call this assumption “unstated” because I do not find it asserted in writing about composition, although it often functions as a “missing premise” for assertions that I do find; I have frequently heard it stated openly by teachers of composition in their conversations. This seems to be a sort of errant assurance among many writing teachers that their first task must be to stimulate students to discover something outside themselves worthwhile to write about, as if whatever they think already is not worth or does not need saying. (The opposite extreme is the assumption that students must search for truths hidden inside themselves which they never knew before.) Perhaps this sense has been confirmed for these teachers by the experience of having read many papers on simple-minded subjects or on stereo-typed opinions about “drugs, sex and rock and roll,” as I heard one lamenting teacher put it. While it may be true that our students write about such things, unless we make them “search” for others, the fault is not theirs for not having anything else to say. The fault is ours for not putting these students in rhetorical situations in which they have reasons to say what they know. Our students, and I except none of them, have important ideas of their own on important questions. If we never find these revealed in the papers they write for composition, it is because they do not write these papers out of any sense of the necessity of making themselves heard and believed. And this necessity can only be felt when a writing assignment grows, not out of a topic which must be looked for, but out of an issue which must be confronted.

Such issues need not be confined to the “large questions” which we perceive as suitable for argument, such as are found debated on editorial pages or in philosophy texts. In fact, it is better if they are not. Issues with equal potential for effective writing come and go in every conversation. When introduced in class as problems — however non-earth-shattering — that require defensible solutions, rather than as topics to be analyzed, such issues demand that students confront what they know and why they think they know it, as well as what others know and for what reasons. We may think that our students have nothing to say because we do not ask for this confrontation with questions that are at issue among them. The trouble with earth-shattering questions is not that students aren’t interested, but that they, like us, will give up hope of their resolution. We cannot know what our students’ ideas will be until we confront them with each other and the real need to say what they think. This cannot be done, I think, by sending them in search of topics, by teaching pre-writing as a process of searching for something to say. But it can be done by re-infusing this process with the concept of stasis, i.e., by placing students in real rhetorical situations where what they think already is both important and needs saying because others think otherwise, and where these situations can be looked into for strategies of resolution.

Stasis is not a mysterious concept or an anachronism. Each of us experiences it every day. And when we do, we know what we want to say; we do not have to look for it. Bringing this concept back into the theory of invention would eliminate the need to put our students through the contortions of the various prewriting strategies that make our textbooks look like repair manuals, and invite those same students to think about the available forms of discourse as flexible choices they must adapt to their ends in order to make their thoughts count. It would invigorate those empty forms we teach, by making their selection depend on the need to find a way to say something that needs saying well.

NOTES

1 "Stasis," or sometimes "status," is variously interpreted: Harry Caplan calls it "the conjoining of two conflicting statements, thus forming the center of the argument and determining the character of the case," Rhetorica Ad Herennium
Wayne Booth's frequently reprinted article "The Rhetorical Stance," *Now Don't Try to Reason with Me: Essays and Ironies for a Credulous Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 25-35, is also an appeal for teachers of composition to rediscover the centrality of this idea. A response to this appeal, with some conclusions about pre-writing that are consistent with my own, is A. M. Tibeht's "Rhetorical Stance Revisited," *Composition and its Teaching: Articles from College Composition and Communication During the Editorship of Edward P. J. Corbett*, ed. Richard C. Gebhardt (Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, 1979), pp. 67-71.


Josephine Miles writes that the "first need, then, is to talk about ideas as sentences, that is, predating the subjects, saying something about something, establishing relations... There is no such thing as too large or unwieldy a subject; what the student wants to say about the subject is what needs estimation." From "Essay is Reason," *The Borzi College Reader*, eds. Charles Muscattne and Marlene Griffith (4th ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pp. 15, 16.

See Miles, ibid., p. 15, and Lawrence D. Green, "Enthymemic Invention and Structural Prediction," *College English* 41 (Feb., 1980), 623-34.


4This is not a call for teaching only "persuasive" writing as a separate mode. The idea of a thesis arising out of a question at issue is one which all modes of writing share. This may be a reason not to consider the choice of mode itself as anterior to the definition of intention.

THE CONFERENCE-WORKSHOP METHOD AS A MEANS OF DISTANCING WRITERS FROM FIRST PERSON NARRATIVES

Peter M. Johnson
University of New Hampshire

Last semester I had a student, Linda, who had a number of ways of putting me off in conference, her bottom line statement being, "Well, that's your opinion. As we both know, there are as many ways of writing as there are people." How could I argue? She had appropriated that last line verbatim from the first day of class. I usually make that statement in an attempt to loosen up students, lower the fear level a bit, and make them realize that although their ideas on writing might not always be as informed as they would like them to be, they still need to express those ideas and work them out.

Specifically, I had trouble with Linda's papers because they were first person narratives, which needed more focus, more tension, too. During the first two weeks of conferences I tried to explain to her that it wasn't enough for us to sit with her for five pages on a bus, or to view the posters in her boyfriend's dorm room through the eyes of someone who loved him. She listened, and then patiently and politely told me that she respected my opinion, but that it was just that—opinion. After all, all of her friends at the dorm could "really relate to it."

For the next few conferences the same pattern continued. Each week Linda would walk deliberately into my office, place her paper on my desk, and then, for the next fifteen minutes, we would get very little done. I was even starting to believe in the logic of her comments. Perhaps I was wrong about her narratives; perhaps I had no right to comment on the way she presented her experiences because I wasn't with her when these experiences occurred. But hadn't I developed a little bit of "taste" over the last ten years of reading and writing? By now, couldn't I tell when the 'I' voice in a paper was so introspective that other readers wouldn't be able to empathize with it?

More improbably, my conversations with Linda made me question the worth of the conference-workshop method we used at the University of New Hampshire, especially the conference part of it. Our program, which includes a student-centered classroom experience and weekly fifteen minute conferences with two or six students, is designed to increase the quality of communication between students and teachers. It was set up to replace the old method of writing copies, often unreadable,
comments on papers. Instead, in face-to-face conferences, students can question teachers’ comments on their papers, and then they can mutually agree on what the paper needs before the students leave their conferences.1 I was confused because Linda wasn’t playing her role correctly. I wanted to tell her how the program was supposed to work. “You see, Linda,” I would say, “every week we’re supposed to have a fifteen minute chat about your paper, and then agree on certain points. This way everyone ends up happy, and you become a better writer.”

But Linda wasn’t happy with her conferences, and she let me know about it the following Tuesday morning when she sat down next to me with her fifth paper, another first person narrative piece, this time about one of her high school experiences. It seems that the night before the big football game, she and her fellow cheerleaders decorated the football players’ doors with streamers. She described how she and her friends made the streamers, and what was going on in her mind as she drove in a car over to a certain football player’s house. The paper ended with her explaining that all of the work involved in such a “crazy stunt” was worth it, because “now the football players will visit our doors.”

I told her that her command of language and grammar was extraordinary. And it was. As far as writing style was concerned, Linda was one of the best students I had ever taught.

“But you see,” I said, “you exclude a lot of people from your audience when you write about something which only cheerleaders around your own age can appreciate.” I insisted that it wasn’t so much the topic that caused the problems, but the point of view. Or perhaps it was the topic. Perhaps no one could really do much with a topic like this.

Once again she said she respected my comments, but “that’s your opinion. All of my friends thought it was great.”

I told her I could appreciate that, “but certainly, Linda, you can see how the ending just didn’t work. It’s too... well, it’s too cutey.”

“That’s your opinion,” she repeated.

“No, Linda, really, it’s a bad ending. It sounds like something out of The Bobsey Twins Go Hawaiian.”

“That hurt,” she replied, getting out of her chair and leaving my office.

Although that comment may have upset Linda, after that conference, I had very few problems with her papers. She challenged herself, and avoided subjects like “My Trip to Such and Such,” or “How I Helped the Old Woman Next Door and Proved I Was a Beautiful Human Being.” She’s doing well now, too; she’s one of the better reporters on the school paper.

So I did a good job? Had I embarrassed her into considering an audience, into looking outside of herself, into distancing herself from the voice in her paper, so that her future narratives begged for reader participation?

Not quite. I think I was lucky with Linda, since I really did have trouble explaining to her why her previous papers weren’t working, and, more importantly, how to make them work. I was also lucky because I guessed her personality well enough to believe she could accept some rather rough criticism. I couldn’t have used a similar technique on most of my other students, who feel that a critique of their writing is often a critique of their person—a feeling with which we can all sympathize.

Perhaps part of the problems I face with I papers are of my own making. I want students to go inside themselves and find their own voices, and then I find myself ashamedly cringing when those voices come out. I wind up following them on their drunken trips to Florida, rushing with them at fraternities, and taking a walk with them into the woods, as the sun, “like a great orange ball,” slowly descends in the west.

What makes dealing with weak I papers even more frustrating is that, theoretically, I know what causes the problem. Usually students who go astray in first person narratives are victims of their own egocentricity, which isn’t a terribly pejorative word when defined as the “writer’s assumption that the reader thinks and feels as he does, has had the same experiences, and hears in his head the same voice the writer does when he is writing.”2 This is the type of egocentricity built into the writing process; and it is not peculiar to the inexperienced writer. We all fall prey to it whenever we forget that there is a living, breathing, and easily bored creature out there called the audience.

At first the solution to egocentricity seems easy: we should help students to understand that writing, like any other form of communication, is an interpersonal activity, based on a working relationship between writer and reader, with the piece of writing providing the terrain on which these two forces meet. Unfortunately, many of us who believe in this theory have trouble translating it into practice, and so we end up resorting to old methods of strengthening weak first person narratives. We tell students to remove the I from their papers, and encourage them to use concrete, specific detail. Both of these methods, in very different ways, aim at transforming first person narratives into “objective pieces,” the types praised by so many old and new rhetorical handbooks; and more often than not they fail, though for opposite reasons.

When students remove the I from their papers, these papers tend to become more abstract than they were before; in place of the I we find a number of depersonalized actors (“the writer,” “the skier,” “the student,” etc.) or no actor at all, an absence which usually invites a horde of passive constructions (“it must be noted,” “it was constructed,” etc.). At its worst, this method of “improvement” can force a student to take a simple statement like, “I saw a drunk staggering across the street,” and revise it as “a drunk was noticed by the writer as he staggered across the street.” Not only is this sentence weaker than the previous one, but it also brings a new problem with its appearance, since we don’t know who is staggering in it, the drunk or the writer. After three or four pages of these constructions, even something as concrete as someone’s first experience of mixing cement by hand can become empty and ethereal because of the hollow language used to describe the experience.

Encouraging students to use concrete, specific detail is a less harmful suggestion to the narrative writer, though it, too, can create new problems.3 Although almost any kind of paper can be improved or “fleshed out” by adding detail, very often the narrative writer, especially the first person narrative writer as observer of an action, in an attempt to strengthen a paper, overuses description of inner and outer realities. In a novel like Robbe-Grillet’s Jealousy this type of accumulation of detail works because it is a novel, a longer piece of literature, and we naturally give it a longer time to reveal itself, a longer time to show the significance of its detail. But in a four or five page first person narrative, if encouraged, young writers flood their papers with realistic description and details, which, though sometimes very powerful, are still often irrelevant to what’s going on in the piece.

In short, what results from forcing students to remove the I from their papers or encouraging them to overuse detail are, in truth, “new” papers, but ones which in my experience say very little to anyone because students don’t care about them anymore. They can’t understand why they must change the form (first per-
son narrative) that the content of their papers naturally adopted, or why they should "pad" the paper with meaningless detail. It's as if they realize the artificial distancing being forced upon them by teachers.

We cannot answer the difficult questions raised by weak first person narratives by forbidding students to write them, any more than we can enliven weak objective papers by encouraging students, as Ken Macrorie does, to write confessional "knock-out" pieces, an approach Vopat has rightly attacked because it "encourage[s] and reward[s] the sensational rush at the expense of the considered response." When we raise the objective approach to writing over first person narratives, or vice versa, we make a mistake, because we center on the differences and not the similarities between the two approaches. That is, we refuse to acknowledge that the essayist and the first person narrator go through similar processes when they write, processes which include the organizing, presenting, and interpreting of information. Therefore, if first person narratives fall as pieces of writing, they do so not because they are first person narratives, but because their narrators have not succeeded in some part of the writing process. And this lack of success usually stems from egocentricity — writers assuming too much or not enough about their topics and audiences, which was Linda's problem in her early papers.

As of now, James Moffett seems to have hit on the best solution to egocentricity in the writing process; he argues that it diminishes by constant comparison, by placing students in situations where they have to play their ideas (form and content of their papers) off of the teacher and other students. According to this philosophy, students distance themselves from their papers by conversing with other students, and not by using artificial devices (removing the I, adding details), which only treat the symptoms of weak first person narratives.

Obviously, the program best suited to such a philosophy as Moffett's is a conference-workshop method, like the one employed at New Hampshire, because it maximizes the quality of conversation occurring in the conference and classroom. Why it didn't work in Linda's case, I'll explain later. First, I wish to point out how first person narratives fit into our program, a basic Freshman English Composition course designed to teach students to perform the kinds of writing tasks they will encounter in other courses and exams, and one which also includes the use of a book of readings, mostly non-fiction.

Most instructors in our program accept the narrative as a part of a larger process of writing; and very often we encourage students to write them in the beginning of a semester, hoping that once they have found and accepted their writing voices, they will find it easier to approach other writing tasks. Thus, we attack egocentricity in first person narratives head-on, in the belief that once students deal with egocentricity in one type of paper (the narrative), they can apply what they have learned about themselves and their writing to other types of papers.

The conference-workshop method we employ gives us the confidence to approach narratives in this way because, consciously or unconsciously, it works in such a manner to break down egocentricity in the writing process by making students aware of the interpersonal nature of their writing. There is a constant dialogue between the student and teacher, the student and other students; and it is virtually impossible for students to hand in papers, get grades, and never have spoken about their writing with another human being. Besides providing students with a more personal approach to writing, this method also furnishes teachers with an assortment of ways in which they can attack writing problems, especially those peculiar to the type of egocentricity I have been talking about.

In Linda's case, for example, I made a mistake by restricting the dialogue on her paper to us, so that our conferences became a psychological game at times, with the focus being more on our respective personalities than on the paper. When she was having trouble understanding my point of view, I should have referred her to a non-fiction piece we had been reading in class, asked her to read it over carefully (more as a writer than a reader), and then encouraged her to tell me what she thought about the piece the next week in conference. Did it have anything to do with her own paper? Was the I in the essay an active participant in the action, or an observer? More importantly, I should have asked her if we could discuss her paper in the next workshop, to see if everyone really could "relate to it"; and if they could, perhaps that meant it was time for me to reexamine the criteria by which I read and write.

In short, if the conference-workshop method is used to its full potential, a number of dialogues can be established during a semester which are mutually reinforcing, and which, because of their interpersonal nature, can help to break down egocentricity in first person narratives. In Linda's case, for example, I could have been discussing her I paper with her, asking her and the entire class to read an essay like "What Life Means To Me," by Jack London (a personal reminiscence); and then using her paper in class for a workshop — all in the same week. As a result, Linda would have been involved in a personal exchange with me, with her paper, with the London piece, and with what the other students in the class thought about the merits of all of these sources of information. And as I and the other students moved closer to her narrative (the piece itself and what she thought about it), she would be forced to distance herself from it, to weigh her ideas against ours. She would be growing, listening to the similarities and differences between her own mind and ours.

I am not arguing here that the conference-workshop method gives a definitive answer to students struggling with first person narratives or any other writing problems stemming from egocentricity. On the contrary, more often than not, from conversations with me and other students about their papers, student-writers are given a number of answers, a number of ways of revising their papers. They must eventually decide, on their own, which ones to choose; and, as far as I'm concerned, the choices they make are not as important as the processes they go through to arrive at those choices — processes based on verbal and non-verbal exchanges with forces outside of themselves (texts, other students' papers, and conversations with students and teachers). To raise the quality of these interpersonal exchanges, teachers in the conference-workshop method can do a number of things. They can choose a good book of readings; they can learn to listen to their students in conference, so that conferences don't end up being show and tell sessions, with the teachers doing all of the showing and telling; and they can develop and experiment with new workshop techniques which may increase intelligent discussions of student papers. For example, before I use a student's paper in a workshop, I ask that student to write a one page non-technical description of the difficulties he or she had with the longer five page paper. Was there one paragraph particularly hard to develop? Was one section boring to the writer? Did the ending dissolve into nothingness? I make copies of this paper and distribute them to the class, asking the class to respond in a non-technical and constructive manner to the student-writer's one page paper, and then to add any of their own problems with the student-writer's longer paper.
Although these one-page papers can be used to stimulate workshops on any type of paper, they are especially useful for dealing with the egocentricity peculiar to I papers. It is impossible to convince student-writers to consider developing an I voice in their papers, a voice which is so much a part of their egos, unless the quality of feedback they receive from other students is of a high caliber and believable to them. In the one-page papers, because students have thought out their responses and written them down (and possibly because these responses will be collected and read by me), the comments they make in class are usually more informed. Therefore, the student-writer does not feel under attack in workshop, forced to bear the brunt of random and sometimes brutal criticism. Instead there are genuine personal exchanges taking place between the student-writer and other students. Questions are being asked (I encourage students to present their difficulties with papers in the form of questions) and alternative ways of expressing information are being offered in a non-technical manner. Often in a workshop atmosphere like this one, when I ask whether or not the I in a first person narrative works, the class slowly divides into two camps: those who like the I and those who think it needs development. At the end of the class I ask the student-writer some questions of my own, not as an authoritative personality, but as a concerned writer; and I explain to the class what I think about the narrative, pointing out how its I is similar to or different from the I in other student narratives we have done in class, or essays we have discussed in our texts of readings.

My job, then, is to clarify the information which comes out of a workshop, while it is the student-writer's job, and the class' in general, to make their own decisions on this information. Student-writers may decide not to develop the I in their papers; they may even refuse to consider it. But at least they have made their decisions after speaking with the teacher and other students, twenty-six other people with different backgrounds and ideas.

This Thursday I have a student, Mark, coming to a conference. He handed in his paper early, so that is ready already; in fact, I have read his paper five or four times. It is a first person narrative about his first skydiving experience, which climaxes when he jumps out of a plane and "bolts of energy seethe through" his body. From the way most of the paper is presented, it is obvious that Mark thinks we have all skydived, and that we also know a lot about his family background. He mentions names and dates without telling us their importance.

When Mark comes through my office door I'm going to ask him if I can use his paper in the next workshop. I'll explain that I want to know what the class thinks about the narrator in the paper. I may even refer him to a narrative we read a few weeks ago, but, in Mark's case, I think he will respond better to a conference and a workshop than to analyzing literature.

I don't know what will happen in the workshop. Perhaps no one will like the paper; perhaps everyone will like the paper. What I do know, however, is that Mark is going to hear a number of people tell him how they feel about the narrator and the paper in general. They are going to tell him what they liked about the piece, and what confused them.

Sometimes I have the urge to tell Mark that first person narratives are not appropriate for this course, and not to write any more of them. I have the power to make this decision. But Mark genuinely loves to skydive, and, on his own, he chose to write about it in the narrative form. To tell him that his paper is unacceptable because it is a first person narrative is unfair. He and I both know he deserves better than that.

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NOTES


2 Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, p. 195.

3 Richard Ohmann discusses the drawbacks of overstressing detailed, concrete language in "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," College English, 40, No. 4, December 1979, 395–6.


5 Moffett, Student-Centered Language, pp. 34–5.


7 Moffett, Student-Centered Language, p. 34.


THE WRITING WORKSHOP: BOON OR BANE OF THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM?

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The term workshop has been applied liberally to many different activities. Workshops vary as to size, purpose, composition, and situation. For purposes of this discussion, we will define workshop as a small group, in-class approach to the process of writing. To increase student awareness that writing is more than a finished product dutifully handed in on time, we divide our freshman composition classes into small groups to work on the various stages in writing a theme. These stages include: 1) gathering ideas and information for theme topics; 2) ascertaining reactions to first drafts — approach to subject, consideration of audience, adequacy of thesis, use of evidence, and organization; 3) revising — checking grammar and punctuation and criticizing style; and 4) evaluating the finished theme.

In the past twenty years, the singers of praise for workshops have been most verbal; the detractors have been fairly silent. This may simply indicate that there are more credits than debits to the workshop approach. However, now that the workshop seems well entrenched as a teaching method, it is perhaps healthy to subject it to a close and critical inspection. As a small
step in this direction, we offer some of the advantages and disadvantages of the writing workshop.

The Fruits of Feedback

The overriding advantage of the writing workshop has been too well publicized to need much explanation here. It is simply that students learn more effectively from each other than they do from teachers (Kenneth Bruffee, Peter Elbow, et al.). Freshmen in a writing class need immediate feedback for their ideas — and the instructor obviously cannot offer this immediate feedback to a class of twenty to thirty students. Peer reinforcement is imperative at each stage of the writing process. Group play with initial ideas for themes can not only stimulate invention but also eliminate dead-end topics — especially those about which students are more knowledgeable than most instructors. (A bonus for the instructor, of course, lies in the constant updating he or she receives in student interests and mores.) Later, in working on their first drafts, students should have a more vivid sense of audience than they would if they knew the paper is to be read by the instructor alone. With practice, group members become more and more skilled in collecting evidence and in organizing their points because they have been helping others struggling with the same problems. A similar improvement is seen in the last two stages: revision and evaluation of the finished paper.

It is, in fact, the students’ tremendous gain in self-confidence as writers that I consider the most exciting benefit of the workshop. For reasons we need not pursue here, most of the freshmen in my classes seem more timid and discouraged about writing essays than were the ninth graders I taught twenty-odd years ago. Those freshmen enrolled in my basic (remedial) course are especially uneasy and need constant reinforcement from both instructor and peers. They are working on paragraph development at the same time they are drilling on grammar and punctuation exercises. Reading their first drafts aloud to each other makes them aware of audience response to their choices of language and structure. Later, proofreading sessions sharpen their skills in mechanics. But I intersperse individual in-class writing assignments among the group projects to prevent too much student interdependence and to check the progress of each.

Although I have been using one version or other of the workshop method for more than twenty years, it was an exciting 1973 Penn State summer session with Vietnam veterans that showed me how powerfully feedback can develop self-confidence, invention, and skill in both organization and mechanics. These veterans were without exception high school dropouts, convinced they would never be able to write — yet they were intelligent, imaginative, eager to be admitted to the University. We broke the ice with free-writing exercises a la Peter Elbow (Writing Without Teachers) and soon the men, seated in a circle, were peering over each other’s shoulders and chuckling at the results. They became less and less inhibited about reading aloud their efforts — which gradually became better and better structured. At first they were wary of responding to each other and me (I was part of the circle). “Yes, man, that’s real good!” was the cautious first response. Then as they began to trust each other (and me), they became more critical: “Better explain how that equipment works” or “Don’t take so long to get to the point, man!” Editing sessions were slow and sometimes tedious, but effective, as the students learned to respect clear, honest writing. By the end of the summer, most of the group were judged admissible to the freshman composition course.

When I talk with my students about the difficulties of writing good essays in exposition or argumentation, I emphasize the importance of the process over the finished product. I tell them I am watching for improvement more than for an unrealistic perfection. As I spend a great deal of time with individual students and their folders both in workshop periods and in office hours, they know that I am becoming quite familiar with their interests and individual styles. They are aware that their group members are following the development of their ideas as well. At the end of each major paper a class period is set aside for each student to write an analysis of his own paper. In the argumentation course, for example, I ask each writer to identify his main sources of argument, the kinds of evidence he has used, etc. These analyses weigh increasingly heavily in my assessment of the total writing project. So it is not surprising that I find very little evidence of plagiarism in these classes. We have all been following the progress of each paper too long to have many surprises sprung on us. In a well-knit group there seems to be a pride in workmanship that can be discouraging to free-loaders.

A final bonus for the instructor is receiving better papers. Those with gross errors will simply not be accepted. The instructor is, of course, perfectly aware of the weaknesses who get more help than the other members of their groups; as a matter of fact, their Comment Sheets frequently express their appreciation for the help they have received. Turning in as “clean” a paper as possible seems to me to be more incentive for self-improvement than getting back one depressingly besmirched with red or black corrections. Success breeds success.

Writing workshops do not make less work for the conscientious instructor. This is not their purpose. A great deal of time and emotional energy must be invested in this method of teaching. Unless there is rapport among all concerned, it can be an exhausting ordeal. But when the ingredients are right, the rewards are rich. In writing workshops, immediate feedback can broaden students’ views, stimulate their imaginations, increase their self-confidence, reduce their need to plagiarize, and produce more effective essays. Isn’t that what we all want from a composition course?

Martha A. Fisher

Pitfalls and Problems

By taking the negative side of an approach that has become so popular in the classroom, I realize that I am inviting the cruel slings and arrows of the staunch believers in this instructional tool. Let me immediately be dubbed a complete naysayer, I should make it clear that my attitude is far from all negative. Over the years I have used different forms of the workshop approach with varying degrees of success. The results of these experiments have caused me to alternate between infatuation and disenchantment with the workshop technique. I now find myself drawing the conclusion that the workshop is randomly successful but cannot be counted on as a perpetual instructional aid. I believe there are too many variables on which the success of workshops depends to make their use a regular part of the curriculum. The biggest factors in workshop success are obvious: the students and the teacher. In addition, the subject matter and the general atmosphere of the campus and era have some effect. Add to these basic factors such unpredictable variables as student motivation, ability, background, and mix, and you begin to see some of the problems involved in the successful use of workshops. It is not my intention here to discourage instructors from ever using this approach; instead, I hope to warn them of the pitfalls and problems they can encounter and, thus, help them to a discreet handling of what can be a valuable instructional aid.

Inadequate Instructor Qualities
The workshop method requires some very particular qualities and talents of the instructor; therefore, only a limited number of people are really qualified to use this method successfully. To lack these qualities does not mean one is not a good teacher; instead, it should be a warning that the person might not be well suited for the workshop approach. The most important factor is for the instructor to feel comfortable with the workshop method. If this approach does not come naturally to an instructor, that discomfort will most surely be reflected in the uneasiness of the students. The next most important factor is for the instructor to be able to deal on the spot and quickly with problems and questions. Likewise, the instructor must be able to change thoughts quickly as he/she passes from group to group. The instructor’s ability to juggle is also essential to the successful overseeing of several groups at once. And last, the instructor must be especially tactful in dealing with human behavior. When selecting members for the groups, he/she must do so without showing any prejudices which might make some students feel inferior and others superior. Shrewd foresight can also promote easy adjustments to the groups instead of painful complaints about certain group members. Without the above qualities, the workshop can be an unpleasant and strained experience, if not an outright flop.

Inadequate Class Mix

The workshop approach requires particular ingredients in the class make-up for maximum effectiveness. Obviously, in all classes there will be some students who profit from the workshop method and some who don’t. If there are more non-profitters than profitters, the instructor is in trouble in attempting this approach. The problem is that one must try out the workshop to see if a class is suited for it and, even then, the results can be deceiving. Classes that at first do not appear to “take” to the workshop method sometimes come to enjoy it and profit from it more than sections that seem well suited to it. So there is really no predicting whether a semester’s efforts with the workshop will pay off or not.

The workshop approach is also complicated because most classes are a mix of students of different levels of writing ability and of students with a wide variety of writing problems. In both these situations there are two approaches: segregate students of equal ability or problem into separate groups or mix them randomly or according to some predetermined pattern. Either choice has difficulties that make the success of the workshop approach shaky. Since the adequacy of class mix for effective workshop usage is almost impossible to determine early in the course, the wisdom of using this method cannot be adequately judged and, at best, the instructor’s choice of it rests on faith.

Wasting Time

Students in general are not sufficiently prepared in the subject matter and particularly in methods of criticism to use the workshop effectively in an elementary course. Therefore, they need a great deal of guidance in the form of class discussion and instructor comment before the workshop format can be a meaningful experience. In addition, then, to learning the subject matter, the students must also spend time learning how to use a new classroom method (most have not had this approach in high school). In many instances the same point that we are trying to get the student to see via the workshop can be gotten across in far less time and with far less effort during the traditional class discussion. Eventually, students do learn to criticize quite effectively and profit from the workshop, but the time to success is often more than the length of one course.

A related time waster stems from the instructor’s divided attention. When a class of twenty-five is split into five or six small groups, it is impossible for the instructor to give very close supervision to each one. Besides dividing his/her attention, the instructor frequently finds himself/herself repeating the same point to each group, another obvious waste of time. Despite the benefits claimed for learning via a workshop as opposed to learning from more conventional methods, the overall efficiency of the workshop in utilization of class time must be seriously questioned.

Boredom

For effective workshops, students’ attitudes toward the subject and the class in general must be positive and enthusiastic; they must be motivated to learn writing skills because successful participation in the group discussion will be determined almost solely by their gut feelings toward the subject. Students who don’t “like” English (and let’s be honest, most don’t) generally exhibit boredom with the workshop which manifests itself in fooling around rather than paying attention to the papers being discussed. The most common indication that the workshop is not functioning well is the degeneration of the discussion into small talk. Often last weekend’s party is a more palatable subject for discussion than the style of a group member’s theme.

Besides having a positive attitude toward the subject, students need to be fairly outgoing or at least capable of sharing themselves with others. The lazy, unambitious students have a perfect retreat in the workshop. All they need do is keep quiet and let the more dynamic, aggressive students carry the ball. My experience is that the latter type is only too happy to have a captive forum for his/her views and delights in playing “leader.” Conversely, the ambitious students who really want to improve their writing are fraught with disgust as the drones sleep or fool around, and their enthusiasm for the workshop approach soon wanes. They very quickly learn to bypass the group and come directly to the instructor, so that the teacher may find himself/herself concentrating on only one or two group member’s papers. This unconscious but natural attention to the few who want to learn only reinforces the boredom of those who couldn’t care less to start with. To keep all students interested and participating in the groups requires a great deal of dynamism, enthusiasm, and constant supervision from the instructor. Often one feels more like a recreation leader than an English instructor.

Grading

The workshop makes grading difficult for two reasons: 1) grading the individual members of the group is difficult because the instructor cannot be with each group all the time and, therefore, has only a general idea of the quality and extent of participation of each class member, and 2) grading the finished theme is very difficult if the workshop has been used extensively for gathering ideas, checking first drafts, and revising. Since under such circumstances the paper has become a group effort, is it fair to grade the individual student as if the theme represents completely his/her own work? Poorer students obviously stand to profit most gradewise from such a system since the good students have done most of their work themselves. I have found that this discrepancy creates morale problems among the better students. In addition, since instructors guide the groups in what to look for on papers, oversee the groups in progress, and make suggestions as they work with individuals in the groups, they often have the feeling that they are grading themselves rather than the students. The whole problem of grading is particularly complicated for writing since close contact with the instructor is probably the best route to improvement for most students. Perhaps the problem lies with the grading system rather than with the workshops, but in any
case, it is my feeling that the workshop is incompatible with the present grading system.

Conclusion

Before the instructor incorporates the workshop into the daily classroom routine, the above pitfalls and problems should be carefully assessed to determine if the workshop approach will be beneficial enough to warrant adoption. Although a valuable instructional aid, the workshop is not a tool to be used by all teachers or used frivolously because it happens to be an “in” method. It is not a way to save work. And above all, it is not a cure-all or ultimate answer to the English instructor’s prayers.

Joan Hocking

STANDARDIZED TESTS OF WRITING ABILITY: A PRIMER

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Rare is the college composition teacher prepared to read statistical research such as that done on tests of writing ability. But if curiosity should compel the teacher to learn what research has said about such tests, articles like those collected by ERIC or published by journals such as Research in the Teaching of English or the Journal of Educational Measurement must be read. After reading the introduction of such pieces, the teacher is confronted in the body by tables and analyses laden with statistics like \( r = .51 \) and \( p < .05 \) and jargon like “the standard error of measurement is 3.” The teacher hastily skips to the conclusion, hoping it will translate all the numbers and cant into more familiar and comforting words.

If curiosity should not compel confronting such esoterica, responsibility might. Who should establish the criteria for exemption from or placement in remedial, regular, or advanced sections of freshman composition? Who should establish the criteria when college students must be certified competent in writing? Who should be better informed and more able to assess the students’ writing ability than the faculty in the college’s English department? To assess it they could use high school grades, letters of recommendation, and samples of the students’ writing. A standardized, multiple-choice, objective test of writing ability like the American College Testing Program’s English Usage Test (ACT:EUT) could also be used, and a predetermined score on it could be one of the criteria. Before a standardized test score becomes a criterion, the efficacy of the test to measure composition ability should be ascertained.

To make certain the test is acceptable, the potential test user must be able to read and understand the data and jargon the test sponsors and researchers use when discussing it. Although the research may be unfamiliar and abstruse for most composition teachers, it is not beyond their comprehension. A primer like this one, despite the dilemma of explaining numbers with numbers, and jargon with quasi jargon, can make statistical research meaningful. The test user who knows how to determine validity and how to interpret correlations is aware of the weaknesses of standardized tests and the limitations of the statistical studies that purport to authenticate them. By knowing basic terms and understanding statistical data, the composition teacher can make better informed and more responsible decisions regarding test use.

II

Implicit in exemption, placement, or certification based on standardized test scores is the presumption that the content of the test corresponds to the content of the course. In other words, the test has content validity. The testmakers’ descriptions of the content of their tests are rarely the item by item analyses which will satisfy the users’ needs. Of the 75 items on its 40-minute test, ACT says, 13 are on punctuation, 13 on grammar, 19 on sentence structure, 17 on diction and style, and 13 on logic and organization. Although item difficulty is not discussed, ACT states that its tests should measure the scholastic skills and abilities students will need in college.1 Of this, users must assure themselves through their own analyses. The departmental faculty must secure copies of the test and analyze each item. The type of each item, the difficulty of each, and the number of each type must be determined. If the course material, its difficulty, and the emphasis on its parallel the test’s, it has content validity.

The ACT:EUT is typical of standardized tests of writing in its emphasis on recognition of grammatical usage, punctuation errors and flaws in diction and idiom. Like others, it has a few items on sentence faults and even fewer on paragraph defects. If writing a research paper, or studying rhetoric, or analyzing literature is emphasized in a composition course, the ACT:EUT would probably be inappropriate for purposes of placement or exemption. That none of the investigations of the ACT:EUT read for this article questioned its content validity is indicative of the necessity of each department’s faculty analyzing such tests and comparing their content to that of the department’s composition classes.

III

Every English department should conduct studies correlating its students’ test scores with their composition course grades. Correlations between scores and grades for those students at the department’s institution can give evidence that the test is valid. The higher the correlation the greater the probability the test has both content and predictive validity. If the test has predictive validity, the student’s score will indicate how well he or she will perform in a composition class. Because correlations can have a significant impact on a department’s choice of criteria for certification, exemption, and placement, it is imperative that each member know what correlation means and how grades and scores affect it.

The essential data in correlation studies are quite often reported as Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients, usually expressed as r. If ACT:EUT scores increase as the student’s composition course grades rise, a positive correlation exists, and it gives evidence that the test is valid. A positive correlation also exists if scores decline with grades. The greater the correlation the greater the confidence with which the test user can predict the student’s class performance. A perfect positive correlation of plus one \( (r = 1.00) \) would show that the grades and scores are equivalent measures. A negative correlation shows that as test scores or grades increase, the other decreases. A perfect negative correlation of minus one \( (r = -1.00) \) would show that grades and scores are inversely equivalent. If the correlation is 0.00, no relationship exists and, consequently, no prediction could be made about the student’s classroom performance based on his or her test results.

Correlations are not percentages. A typical and moderate correlation, of .50, \( r = .50 \), does not account for 50 percent of the relationship, for example, between whatever an ACT:EUT score and college composition course grade signify. The test and the course are dissimilar procedures that do not totally and precisely
assess composition ability. Each attempt to identify and measure some of the variables that affect the ability to compose such as knowledge of standard edited English, rhetorical skill, and originality. The .50 is a measure of the interdependence of grades and scores, two not completely trustworthy assessments.

Researchers label correlations "low," "moderate," or "high." Such labels should not be assumed to be synonyms for "unimportant" or "important." A correlation of .30 or less is very low and shows little relationship. A correlation of .31 to .40 is a low, definite, albeit limited relationship. Correlations of .41 to .60 are moderate and are typical of the relationships of scores and grades. A correlation between .61 to .70 is high and shows an exceptionally strong relationship. Correlations from .71 into the .90's are very high and show an extraordinary and rare relationship.

Statisticians also speak of correlations as being "significant" or "not significant." In educational research the .05 level of significance and sometimes .01 are used to typify a correlation as being significant or not significant. If the findings of a researcher could be replicated 95 out of 100 times if the research were repeated, probability would be less than .05, expressed as \( p < .05 \). If the researcher would not be able to replicate the findings 99 out of 100 times, probability is greater than .01, expressed as \( p > .01 \). If a correlation of .50 between a course and a test is reported, and if .50 is significant beyond the .05 level \( (p < .05) \), the researcher, given the opportunity, would report \( r = .50 \) 95 out of 100 opportunities. Knowing the level of significance can instill confidence in the test's reliability for the user. The students' performance on the test and correlations of their scores with their grades will remain essentially unchanged from one administration of the test to the next.

Knowing the "coefficient of determination" and the "index of forecasting efficiency" can help when interpreting correlations. Unlike other ways of interpreting correlations, the coefficient of determination can be readily computed by simply squaring the correlation. The result of squaring the correlation is a figure expressed as a percentage. For example, if the correlation between a course grade and test score is .50, then \( r^2 = .25 \) or 25 percent. Whatever the test measures accounts for 25 percent of the variables that determine the student's course grade. Seventy-five percent of the variation can be determined by factors such as test invalidity, chance, student motivation, and many others that are not accounted for by the test. The tremendous change effected by squaring the correlation illustrates why a researcher is much more impressed by a moderate correlation of .60 than by a very low one of .30. A correlation of .60 is not twice a correlation of .30 as it might appear at first glance.

The formula for the index of forecasting efficiency is \( 1 - \sqrt{1 - r^2} \). It is easily computed with a pocket calculator by first squaring the correlation; second, by subtracting the result from one; third, by finding the square root of that result; and, fourth, by subtracting that figure from one. If \( r = .50 \), \( r^2 = .25 \). Subtracting .25 from 1.00 equals .75. The square root of .75 is .87. Subtracting .87 from 1.00 equals .13. The test user's prediction of how well the student would do in a course would be 13 percent better than by chance — this is the contribution of the correlation. Eighty-seven percent of the time any random process like flipping a coin would just as accurately predict the student's performance.

### IV

Standardized tests on the order of the ACT: EUT are incomplete and indirect measurements. They inventory the student's knowledge of some aspects of composing, in particular, knowledge of standard edited English. They do not, however, ask the student to demonstrate the ability to write.

Results of standardized tests are reported as standard scores which are determined by various formulas based on the number of items the student answers correctly. Standard scores on the ACT: EUT range from 1 (low) to 35 (high). The mean is 17.3 and the standard deviation is 5.4. Representative standard scores and their percentile ranks for the ACT: EUT are standard score 21, percentile rank 73; standard score 18, percentile rank 51; and standard score 15, percentile rank 23.

How many of the 75 items on its test the student must answer correctly to earn a score of 18, for example, ACT does not say in *Content of the Test*, a most notable omission. The willingness of an instructor to exempt a student from a college composition course based on his or her score on a single, objective test of writing ability might be sorely tried if the instructor learned how many correct answers are needed to earn each standard score. An English department that does not ask for a writing sample and grants three or more hours of credit to any student ranking in the 90th or any other equally impressive percentile might re-examine its criterion if, for example, it discovers that on a 75-item test, the student need avoid answering any questions incorrectly and answer only three of every five correctly (60 percent) to be in a percentile like the 90th.

That test scores are only approximations is underscored by the "standard error of measurement." For the ACT: EUT it is 2. If the student's standard score is 17, his or her score is actually between 15 and 19. The chances are approximately 68 out of 100 that the student's "true" score lies between these two figures. A score of 17 places that student at the 44th percentile, but his or her "true" percentile rank lies somewhere between the 32nd and 59th percentile. On any given day this student would be in the bottom third or top half of all the students taking the test.

The reliability and validity of composition course grades and ACT: EUT scores are restricted. The objectives and grading practices of teachers can vary from one to another. By emphasizing such aspects as correctness and usage, and by de-emphasizing others such as logic and style, the ACT: EUT may be testing the student's knowledge of matters having little effect on teacher evaluations of compositions.

Low to moderate correlations such as those of ACT: EUT scores with college composition grades can be statistically significant and meaningful to a psychometrician but of no practical worth to teachers. Taking .41 to be a representative correlation and applying the coefficient of determination to it, the result is 17 percent. Applying the index of forecasting efficiency to the same correlation results in 9 percent. Should decisions regarding test selection and certification, placement, or exemption of students be influenced by a moderate correlation like .41, or must it be greater? Must an improbably high correlation like .70 have a coefficient of determination of 49 percent and an index of forecasting efficiency of 29 percent be reached before it should contribute to decisions affecting a student's education?

### V

Potential users of standardized tests like the ACT: EUT who read the research on them should be aware that not only do grades and scores affect correlation studies but also the make-up and size of the sample from which the data are acquired. Decisions to use a test based on research studies are limited inasmuch as the potential users' institution is like that from which the study's sample is drawn. Seldom can a department presume that its students and the content of its composition courses are similar to those of another institution. It is for this reason every
department should conduct its own correlation studies. The correlations other institutions or the test writers report can differ substantially. Hoyt provides examples of differences that can individualize samples drawn from student populations: education students have lower ACT scores but higher grades than their peers; business students have lower scores and grades; and engineering students have higher scores but lower grades. According to Sawyer, woman score higher on the ACT:EUT; have higher grades, and correlations between the two are higher than those for men. Additionally, students in different geographic regions of the United States score differently on the ACT:EUT. Students attending private institutions score differently from those attending public institutions, and students at two-year colleges score differently from those at four-year colleges.

Seven institutions and ACT have published nine studies on the relationship between ACT:EUT scores and college English grades. With one exception the correlations were low to moderate (.28 -. 48, typically .37) for researchers affiliated with institutions. But for researchers affiliated with ACT, they were moderate (typically .51). Despite the differences, none of the correlations can be judged to be more accurate or revelatory than another.

Acceptance of scores on a standardized test of writing ability as a criterion for certification of competence in composition and for exemption from or placement in freshman composition courses by an English department must be contingent on the faculty's analysis of the test and reading of the research on it. By knowing just the modicum of information in this primer on statistical data and jargon, the department members can more confidently and responsibly identify the inevitable weaknesses and limitations of both the tests of writing ability and the research on them.

NOTES

2 Forecasting Academic Success in Specific Colleges, ACT Research Report No. 27 (Iowa City, Iowa: ACT, August 1968), pp. 21-23.
4 The following are the nine studies:

REVIEW

Cleo Martin
University of Iowa


Some questions are hard to answer in an absolute way: "Anything good for dinner?" (after we've spent hours preparing a nutritious feast). "I had to miss your class yesterday. Did I miss anything?" (after we've had a particularly fruitful class discussion). The most reasoned response to such questions is "Well, that all depends on what you call 'good' or 'valuable.'"

When PEN editors asked me to react to some recent books, the implied question was, "What is valuable here for students and teachers of writing?" My best response seems to be, "Well, that depends . . ."

Our profession is not so full of certainties that we can speak with total assurance when we make judgments about the work of our colleagues. As with so many things, the more we know about the writing process, the less simple it seems. We are certain that progress in writing (or lack of it) is hard to account for; that various methods of teaching seem to work for some teachers, not for others; that there are still some mysteries about it all.

In this review, then, I have deliberately taken a "well-that-depends" posture. No book offers absolute answers for all of us who engage in the exciting profession of working with student writers; yet the four books under discussion here clearly have some value for most of us. So much "depends" on the kind of help we're looking for.

Readers' reactions to these books depend on several considerations. I'll mention only three: What are my assumptions about the nature of the writing process? Out of what theoretical base do I operate as a teacher or learner of writing? By what means do I believe that a person becomes a better writer — specifically, what is the role of textbooks and other books about writing?

If you are convinced, as I am, that writing is a way of learning as well as a means of communication, then you will welcome Writing in the Arts and Sciences. The book speaks strongly to the
point that writing is not a piece of equipment—an empty cup
constructed in English courses to be then carried from one situa-
tion to another and filled with biology or history. The writing
process, the authors say, informs both writers and readers. Write-
ing is potentially an integral part of learning that occurs in or
outside all classrooms. Having myself endured several decades in
which writing was equated with something vaguely called
"English," I find this approach exciting.

The book is grounded in a set of principles introduced early
("Preface," p. xii) and emphasized throughout the book's major
sections, "Writing to Learn" and "Learning to Write." The prin-
ciples are worth thinking about, whatever our present assump-
tions about the teaching of writing:
1. Writing, like learning, is not an entity but a process.
2. Writing is a way to learn, not merely a means of commu-
nicating to others what has already been mastered.
3. Writing and learning are connected interactive processes.
   Students, therefore, need instruction and practice in cooper-
   ative procedures for learning from each other.
4. Writing in every discipline is a form of social behavior in that
discipline. Students must learn the particular conventions of
aim and audience within each discipline, and they must also
learn to control the common conventional features of the
written code: spelling, punctuation, and conformity to stand-
ard English usage (p. xii).

The assertion of these principles is especially noteworthy
when we consider that the book is a collaborative effort by teach-
ers (all at Beaver College) who represent varied academic dis-
clines: Elaine Maimon, English; Gerald Belcher, History; Gail
Hearn, Biology; Barbara Nodine, Psychology; and Finbarr
O'Connor, Philosophy. The attitudes and knowledge which peo-
ple of varying perspectives bring to the subject of writing can
certainly inform many in the academic world.

The sections of the book, taken altogether, deal with a won-
derful variety in kinds of writing—lecture notes, essay exams,
literary analysis, analyses of performances and paintings, case
studies, lab reports, course journals, research papers for various
courses—to name only a few. The book also includes annotated student papers written in response to assignments in history,
sociology, psychology, and biology. The common notion that
"writing ability" is a single set of skills for all seasons is rightly
exploded here. Furthermore, the book constantly emphasizes
that writing is a process that ends with some kind of product. In
all sections, the authors give attention to private journal writ-
ing, making lists, getting started, drafting, getting response
from others, revising, and editing. Finally, and importantly,
students are invited to share with one another drafts of their
writing at various stages. In my opinion, the book makes a fine
contribution to a growing movement to make writing signifi-
cant in multiple contexts.

My only problem with the book is that it is explicitly
intended for use in a freshman composition course. I wonder if
comp teachers can give proper attention to this material and still
give students time for the extensive writing and response to one
another's writing that are necessary in a writing course. In the
ideal world—toward which teachers at Beaver College and Hol-
lins College and Simpson College and elsewhere are helping us
move—a student would experience a variety of kinds of writing
to-learn while moving through a variety of courses. Writing
courses could then make their own contribution to the writing
experience of students, emphasizing perhaps, that expressive
writing is the root from which other kinds of writing emanate.

James Britton, for one, would, I think, be pleased with such a
state of affairs.

I want to talk now about Peter Elbow's *Writing With Power*
and Ken Macrorie's *Searching Writing*. As in their earlier work,
these authors deal with fundamental assumptions about the
learning and teaching of writing. Our own favorite practices and
theories may be shaken or even exploded by these books; or our
views may be supported, extended, and refreshed. In any case,
I'd be surprised if any reader came away totally unaffected.

I often think of Macrorie and Elbow together, though each
speaks to me with a distinct voice, of course. Their advice to
writers—in and outside schools—is so solid and sane; their own
writing so alive; their knowledge of writers and writers' problems
so informed. In addition, as their new books suggest, the
two authors share some basic views. Among them:

People can't write well about things they neither know about
nor care about.

Writing is a natural activity; everybody has something impor-
tant to say.

Students and their writing deserve respect.

Writing is at once difficult and exciting.

Writing is a complicated process that includes various
"stages," depending on the purpose of the writing activity.

Schools and rules and writing courses can kill people's nat-
ural impulse to write.

Peer and teacher (or group leader) response is a vital part of
the writing process.

Such ideas seem to me worth thinking about, no matter what
our present views. In short, I strongly recommend that writers
and teachers of writers read *Searching Writing* and *Writing With
Power*.

Having said that, I am not disposed to summarize the dis-

tinctive characteristics of the two books. Readers need to expe-

cience the wedding of what is said with the manner of saying it

that occurs in both of these books.

I will add that *Searching Writing* should be required reading
for every teacher (English and other) who has ever talked about
how students' research papers are unimaginative, boring, for-
mulaic, and paste-like. Macrorie forces us to acknowledge
that some of the unfortunate traits of research papers are our own
fault. We have failed to encourage the wonderful curiosity that
is present in most humans. The I-Search Paper creates a centra-
focus in a book that ranges widely into many aspects of the writ-
ing process. Macrorie describes and illustrates the I-Search as a
processing involving four main steps:
1. What I Knew (and didn't know about my topic when I
   started out).
2. Why I'm Writing This Paper. (Here's where a real need
   should show up: the writer demonstrates that the search may
   make a difference in his life.)
3. The Search (story of the hunt).
4. What I Learned (or didn't learn. A search that failed can be
   as exciting and valuable as one that succeeded) [p. 64].

Macrorie says that this procedure produces student writing that
is alive and real. I believe him.

One further note about *Writing With Power*. Here Elbow
extends and elaborates his *Writing Without Teachers* to include
writing in various kinds of situations. He explores the tension
between a writer's need to "create" and "criticize" what has been
created. He suggests that the two activities should usually (but
not always) be separated. Elbow calls his approach "a kind of
cookbook strategy," with optional "recipes" for getting through
the stages of the writing process and for "approaching the mystery of power in writing" (p. 8). The book includes an extraordinarily fine section on peer response.

Elbow speaks specifically to all writers — in and out of school — who are struggling and who are not very happy with the results of their struggles. Which probably includes all of us.

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**TEACHING ENGLISH 101**

I am your doctor,
A shaman with a pen in my hand.
You bring your split infinitives,
Your dangling participles,
Your fractured verbs;
I am to cure your words,
Teach you to write.

I look in your eyes;
The pupils show no light.
I take your hand and can find no pulse;
I speak and my own voice
Is the echo of an answer.

You have a case of interminable rules,
What you need is a dozen leeches;
It is good to bleed.
Drink eight glasses of your tears,
Swallow every sunser,
Listen to the Bob White call.
Go forth,
Walk the sharp edge of your life;
Fall off.

Sue Walker
University of South Alabama

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*Freshman English News*

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**THIRD CLASS**