RESEARCH ON WRITING COURSES: A CAUTIONARY ESSAY
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This is an essay about the problematics of research on writing courses, about the ways we seek to understand the workings of our courses, and by extension about the ways we presume to explain their outcomes to ourselves, our colleagues, our administration, and the general public. My current interest in such problems arises out of my work over the past five years as director of the Institute on Writing, a joint project of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of Iowa that has resulted in the development of forty-two experimental freshman writing courses. Each of these courses was designed at the Institute by a college or university writing director to meet the needs of a particular school, and each has been offered in pilot form during the years immediately following its preparation. Given the unprecedented scope of this enterprise, it is hardly surprising that persons throughout the profession are eager to hear about its results, especially eager since the forty-two schools represented in the Institute reflect a cross-section of American higher education—public and private, large, medium, and small universities, 4-year colleges, and community colleges, ranging from Dartmouth to Kapiolani Community College in Hawaii, from the United States Air Force Academy to Mississippi State University. Similar institutions, similarly beset by problems in writing and the teaching of writing, are naturally curious to examine these experimental courses and to learn about their effectiveness. Specialists in the field of composition are legitimately curious about their theoretical assumptions and pedagogical policies, not to mention the methodology that will be used to carry out research on the courses. And, needless to say, the Endowment itself is interested in these very same matters. So, of course, an accounting must be made.

But when I think about making such an accounting, I feel quite as uneasy as when my colleagues and friends confront me with well-meaning questions about the results of the Institute—"Well, how did it all work out? Are they teaching better? Are they writing better?" Faced with these overwhelming questions, I hem and haw like Prufrock, and like him think I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas, in a world without writing and writing instruction. I mutter about the primitive state of research on the teaching of writing, about the perils of seeking definitive answers from limited evidence and experience, about the dangers of seeking to generalize about forty-two different academic institutions, and conclude with a question of my own—"So how should I presume?" And that Prufrockian question is the one I should like to reflect upon in the following discussion, not, I should make clear, simply to conclude that it is unanswerable, but rather to suggest the many different ways it can be answered and the implications involved in any particular way of answering.

Before addressing the question, however, I feel compelled to provide some descriptive information about the courses that were designed at the Institute, for how can one presume without knowing what one is presuming upon or about? Here, then, is an overview of their common assumptions, policies, and practices. To begin with, as noted earlier, each course is attuned to the complex set of academic conditions and requirements that exist at the particular school for which it is designed. They are designed, for example, to fit academic terms and freshman writing requirements that vary from one quarter, to one semester, to two quarters, to an entire academic year. Likewise, they are designed for staffs that range from being entirely full-time to entirely part-time, some made up wholly of tenure-track faculty, others wholly of graduate students, and others of a combination of the preceding constituencies. Similarly, they are designed for students who vary considerably in the mix of their aptitudes, backgrounds, academic interests, and career plans, ranging from the cadets at the United States Air Force Academy and the women at Hollins College to the widely mixed student populations that turn up at such schools as Michigan State University and West Virginia University. So, it follows that these courses are bound to have different emphases and orientations, given the profoundly rhetorical nature of any instruction in writing.

Still, it is the case that these forty-two courses do share a set of assumptions and practices which flowed from shared convictions that developed among the directors and staff members who took part in the Institute and engaged in extensive reading and discussion related to issues in composition pedagogy before designing the courses themselves. These assumptions and practices might be summarized as follows:

1. That instruction in writing should be guided by knowledge about cognitive development, particularly as it relates to the development of language abilities. In this respect, the courses are heavily influenced by the theories and research of Piaget and Vygotsky, particularly as they are embodied in the developmental model of Britton, who regards expressive discourse not only as the matrix out of which other more mature forms of discourse arise in the growth from childhood to maturity, but also as a fundamental source of learning and form of exploration for any kind of writing at any age. Thus the overall plot or plan of these courses follows a general pattern of movement from expressive to transactional discourse, or to use the model of Kinneavy, from expressive to referential to persuasive discourse, though not in a simple linear fashion, but rather according to a movement that reiteratively engages expressive writing as a prelude to transactional tasks.

2. That instruction in writing should be guided by knowledge about learning, teaching, and educational arrangements, particularly as it relates to the development of language abilities. In this respect, the courses are heavily influenced by the theories and research of John Dewey and Jerome Bruner. Accordingly, they emphasize learning by experience rather than by authority, and therefore engage students in problem-solving assignments rather than in tasks that call for adherence to models and rules. The assignments, in turn, are organized according to a
sequence that is spiral rather than linear in movement, a sequence that embodies the principle of repetition with a difference, or what John Warnock has called "profound redundancy."³

3. That instruction in writing should be guided by the experience of successful writers and teachers of writing. In this respect, the courses are heavily influenced by the work of the Artists and Writers Collaborative, by the Writers in the Schools Project, and by the Writers Workshops at the University of Iowa and at other schools throughout the country. Accordingly, these courses are based on the interrelated assumptions that people learn to write by writing frequently and by receiving frequent and constructive response to their writing from a variety of sources. Thus these courses call for writing at least once a week, often twice a week, sometimes more often, and the writing of the students, rather than a textbook, is the focus of class discussions that operate much like writers workshops.

In varying degrees and in various ways, these assumptions and practices are manifest in all of the forty-two courses. I have merely stated them in brief, without attempting to explain or defend them at length, since to do so would result in another paper entirely. Besides, I suppose that one of the principal purposes of any research effort must be to explore the influence that results from courses that are based on these assumptions and practices. So how should I presume to defend them when I have not yet conducted research on the courses in which they are embodied?

Still, I did promise to survey some ways I might presume to report on how these courses are working out in practice and to reflect on the implications of each particular way of reporting. So, without further ado, I might begin by reporting that in all but a handful of the forty-two cases, these experimental courses were initially offered not only by the director but also by collaborating instructors, ranging from about 5 to 100 percent of the total freshman staff. And I might add that in virtually all of the cases, the percentage of collaboration has increased from one semester to the next, one year to the next. The significance of these statistics may not be immediately apparent unless I also report that directors who applied to the Institute were required to provide written assurance from their department chairs and deans that they would be permitted to offer pilot sections of their courses, though it was also made clear that this stipulation applied only to them and not to any of their staff members. I should also make clear that in sessions of the Institute the directors were urged not to apply any pressure to staff members to collaborate with them, not only for reasons of good political sense and academic freedom, but also for reasons related to the research effort itself, which must perform with the intelligibility and the acceptability of the courses and their methodologies to large numbers of writing instructors. If such prior conditions are not met, it would seem to follow inexorably that the courses are not feasible or practicable. And that, of course, is something we wanted to discover. It is also something of special interest to the Endowment, which for good political reasons must defend its educational projects in terms of the size and scope of their influence.

But beyond the scope of the influence, one must, of course, be concerned with the quality of the influence, which is my principal reason for being interested in whether or not these courses can maintain or increase the percentage of staff collaboration in each case and overall. Presumably, the percentage of collaboration would not hold or increase without an affirmative judgment of the courses by participating faculty members, a judgment based not as in the prior case on intelligibility and a sense of intellectual coherence in the abstract, but upon classroom experience with the course. Still, the reasons for an affirmative judgment by faculty—a judgment measured here by something like a vote of confidence—may actually have nothing to do with the quality of the courses. Instructors may be stimulated by the challenge of offering a new course, or by the excitement of taking part in an educational experiment, and their enthusiasm may be so infectious that it engages the interest of other colleagues, even inspires the students to perform better than they might under normal circumstances. So, I am not really content to attribute a great deal of significance to percentages of staff collaboration over the short term of a year or two. I would be more convinced by such statistics over a five to ten year period, though it is presumptuous, of course, to expect that any agency or foundation would be willing to fund research over so long a period.

Yet, there must be some significance in the statistics even for the short term, particularly when it is recognized that these courses deeply challenge the educational practices of many instructors, requiring them to unlearn old ways and assumptions in favor of radically new ones—new ones which often involve much more work than the old ones. What is it that faculty members perceive in these courses that move them to assume these undue burdens? And how might one discover those perceptions? One way, of course, is from personal testimony, and I have received much of it from interim reports of the directors, much of which speaks to a sense of increased fluency and rhetorical flexibility on the part of the students, to a greater sense of pleasure and engagement in writing on the part of the students, to a deeper synthesis of experience and knowledge in the writing of the students, and by extension to a greater sense of accomplishment on the part of the instructors than they had experienced in their prior teaching of writing. But we all know how random and unreliable it is to base judgments on testimonials alone. So, I have encouraged the directors to have their collaborating instructors respond to a questionnaire modeled on one developed at the Institute, which is designed to survey issues, aspects, and elements of writing that instructors perceive as being emphasized to various degrees in the experimental courses they taught and the degree to which students improved in these areas.

Beyond surveying faculty perceptions of how the courses have influenced student writing, it might also be appropriate to ascertain how the courses have influenced the collaborating faculty members themselves, particularly with respect to the way they think about writing and the teaching of writing. In this respect, let it be admitted, I am concerned with a way of thinking about how the courses have worked out that is not ordinarily taken into account when people ask me those grand questions about the results of the Institute. Still, the point is an important one—specifically, that if the course is experimental one should be interested not only in how it works upon the students, but also in how it works upon the faculty, and not only how it works

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Freshman English News is published three times a year at Texas Christian University. Subscription price for one year (three issues) is $3.00. Reduced rates for graduate student group orders are available. Articles, subscriptions, queries, should be sent to the editor.

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upon them in their teaching of writing, but in their teaching of literature, or anything else for that matter, since the assumptions and practices of the experimental courses apply not only to the teaching of writing, but also to other related areas in the humanities. Any course, after all, is a reciprocal affair, and thus one wants to know the quality of influence on all parties to the affair. Pre-course and post-course questionnaires would be the conventionally accepted mode of surveying attitude and concept formation, particularly in the social sciences, but believing as I do in the formative and self-defining value of writing, I have also encouraged the directors, and suggested that they in turn encourage their collaborating staff members, to keep on-going course logs, in which they record observations and interpretations of activities and events that take place in the course. Course logs together with questionnaires together with plans and materials from other courses they teach subsequent to their involvement in the experimental courses might provide some insight into the influence of these courses on the educational assumptions and practices of collaborating faculty. Thus far I can report only a general observation drawn from interim reports of the directors to the effect that collaborating faculty at many of the schools have evidently grasped the guiding concepts and practices of the experimental courses well enough to design alternative versions of them on their own for subsequent offerings. That is a notable achievement on the face of it, though it will, of course, need to be verified by examination of the course documents themselves.

But even if this claim could be verified, it might not, after all, be considered a notable achievement if it does not in the end work a healthy influence upon the students, whom I cannot presume any longer to ignore in this discussion. So, how might I presume to report the effects of these courses upon the students? I might begin by reporting that the students have overwhelmingly positive in their reactions to the experimental courses. In their written evaluations, as in questionnaires, they repeatedly indicate that these courses have enabled them to develop a sense of comfort and pleasure in the activity of writing, as well as an awareness of its significance as a mode of learning and a means of achieving various rhetorical purposes. Here, as with the collaborating instructors, I am inclined to attribute their strongly affirmative response at least in part to the enthusiasm of being allied with an educational experiment. I am curious to know whether these newly developed attitudes towards writing and conceptions of its significance will be strong enough to sustain them in subsequent academic courses. Yet, I have no idea as to how this question might be reliably investigated. Still, there is no denying the authenticity of their responses and the fundamental importance of such affirmative attitudes towards writing. They may not count for much with folks who measure the achievement of a writing course exclusively in terms of the students' writing performance, but they do matter to me since I regard the courses as being concerned not only with the development of proficiency in writing, but also with an enhanced understanding of its formative, intellectual, and social values.

Performance, however, cannot at last be ignored, so how might I presume to report about the influence of the courses on the writing abilities of the students? I might begin by reporting that at several of the schools — those, in particular, which administer end of term pass-out examinations — students in the experimental courses performed at least as well as those in the standard courses according to the chief criteria for judging the examinations, namely competency in mechanics, grammar, and conventional modes of exposition. And, at a few of the schools, students from the experimental courses performed significantly better in these respects than their counterparts in the standard courses. A fascinating outcome, to say the least, especially since the experimental courses do not directly address mechanics, grammar, and conventional modes of exposition during class discussions, and treat them only as a subordinate issue in written comments on papers. Discussions and comments are oriented, instead, primarily to rhetorical and substantive issues in the students' writing. An equally fascinating bit of corollary information may be found in some of the student questionnaires, which show students as perceiving an improvement in their mechanics and grammar while also recognizing that mechanics and grammar were not emphasized in the course. Does this, perhaps, corroborate what many specialists in the field have been claiming for several years now — that direct, continuous, and prescriptive instruction in mechanics, grammar, and conventional patterns of exposition are less effective means of developing competency in these areas than a mode of instruction which emphasizes rhetorical and substantive issues, and thus arouses the students to see their writing as being so purposeful and important that they become committed to improving it in every respect, including grammar and mechanics? Perhaps, but I don't wish to presume without looking at much more evidence than I have seen thus far.

Beyond my diffidence about the sufficiency of the evidence in this respect, I should also admit that I am uneasy about the research model that is implied by this way of reporting about the influence of the courses on the students. The model, to put it plainly, is the controlled study familiar to the sciences and social sciences. Controlled study, as I can testify from research in my vegetable garden, works out just fine when it is applied in the appropriate domain. I've discovered, for example, from a controlled study extending over the past three summers that the new Ace Hybrid Pepper variety vastly outproduces any strain of California Wonder Peppers under the stressful conditions of my south facing garden in Iowa City. And, to my pleasure, I can also report from readings in horticultural research that my findings have been corroborated by agricultural specialists in pepper plant development and research, who have studied the same pepper varieties in conditions similar to mine. But I'm not about to be deluded by my research on peppers into thinking that I can use a similar methodology on my students or those of any other instructor. In fact, my experience with those peppers has made me poignantly aware of how much I can control the conditions for research in that domain, and by extension how little the conditions can be controlled in research on writing instruction and student writing. This being the case, I'm reluctant to put much stock in those observations about the comparative performance of students from experimental vs. standard freshman courses.

I'm also uncomfortable about those observations because they're drawn from an uncommon, and I might add, unnatural writing situation, which prevails only in the academic circumstances of a written examination. Oh yes, I know that students are always being tested in school, as are people in real life. But it is also the case that much of the writing that students do in their courses, and most of the writing that people do in real life — upon which they are being judged in one way or another — is not done under such constrained and pressured circumstances. The constrained circumstances of testing inescapably short-circuit the composing process and thereby compel the production of finished discourse without sufficient opportunity, possibly without any opportunity, to engage in the thoughtful explo-
ration and revision of ideas and written material that necessarily precede effective discourse in any transactional aim or mode.

Aside from the eccentricity of the testing situation, I am also uneasy about it because it does not offer evidence directly related to the assumptions and practices of the experimental courses themselves. How, for example, can a single piece of discourse be used to measure the achievement of students who have been enrolled in courses which have an explicit goal of developing rhetorical fluency in a variety of aims? How can a piece of discourse written under circumstances that short-circuit the composing process be used to measure the achievement of students who have been enrolled in courses which have an explicit goal of developing experience, understanding, and practice in the composing process? How can I presume to use this kind of evidence when it is not related to the assumptions, practices, and goals of the experimental courses? Notice, that in the phrasing of that last question I have clearly not ruled out the possibility of using a single sample of writing produced under highly constrained circumstances as an appropriate test of writing. But I do think it would be appropriate only in a course which offered sustained and continuous practice and instruction in writing under such constrained circumstances. And how many of those exist around the country today?

By this point in my discussion, it might well be asked whether there is any kind of evidence that I would regard as valid in demonstrating how the Institute-designed courses seem to work upon the students and their writing. And I would have to answer that there is probably none sufficient to justify the formulation of indisputable claims about the influence of the courses. But I would hasten to add that substantial insights about the workings of these courses and valuable inferences about the nature of their influence might well be gained by the painstaking kind of contextual research that is involved in case studies. Accordingly, I have recently launched such a study in collaboration with Professor Nancy Jones of the Institute staff. This study, as will become evident from my concluding remarks, has raised serious policy questions for everyone in the field who cares about the kind of research by which we seek to understand, assess, and make intelligible to others the nature of our instructional activities in writing, not to mention the nature of our influence in professional, curricular, and institutional development projects such as the NEH-funded institutes. So, I would like to explain the design of this study, not only for whatever use it might be to persons conducting research on writing instruction, but also to reflect upon some of the policy issues related to it.

This study will focus on Institute-designed courses at seven schools: Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, Kapiolani Community College in Honolulu, Michigan State University, St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, the United States Air Force Academy, and the University of South Alabama in Mobile. We have chosen to study courses developed for these seven schools because they reflect the broad range of institutional situations represented in the Institute, and by extension in American higher education at large. Given this broad variety, it is hardly surprising that the courses under study have differing emphases and goals. Yet it is also the case that they share the set of assumptions and practices concerning the teaching of writing that I have outlined earlier in this essay. The broad purposes of the study are two-fold: (1) to make inferences about the common effects of these courses on student writing; and (2) to describe, so far as is possible, what appear to be the distinctive effects of these courses on student writing.

This study will involve an in-depth examination of three sample sections from each of the seven courses. In order to conduct a detailed and highly-contextualized study of these twenty-one sections, the following materials were gathered from each section during the past fall semester: (1) Course syllabi, textbooks, reading assignments, writing assignments, and any other supplemental materials distributed by each instructor; (2) Course logs prepared by each instructor providing a brief description of each class session throughout the duration of the course; (3) Responses by students to two questionnaires, one designed to survey their perception of aims and emphases in the course, the other designed to survey their sense of improvement in these areas; (4) Responses by all instructors to a parallel set of questionnaires; (5) Pre-course and post-course compositions produced by all students in response to an identical set of tasks for all sections under study; and (6) Complete portfolios of course writings produced by a representative sample of five students from each of the twenty-one sections. Overall, then, this study will examine in detail the writing of 105 students and will take into account the pre-course and post-course performance of approximately 420 students.

The 105 portfolios of student writing will be analyzed in depth, in order to trace patterns of conceptual, rhetorical, structural, stylistic, and grammatical development over the duration of the course. These portfolios will be examined not only in and of themselves, but also in relation to the sequence of assignments to which they are a response, so that inferences may be made about the influence of the assignments on the developing abilities of the students. These portfolios will also be analyzed in the context of the instructors' written comments and in the context of the instructors' course logs, so that inferences may be made about the influence of class sessions and instructional response on the developing abilities of the students. Additionally, these portfolios will be examined in the context of the student questionnaires, so that inferences may be made about the development of the students' abilities to perceive, interpret, and assess their writing performance. And, finally, these portfolios will be studied in comparison to the students' performance on the pre-course and post-course writing assignments, in order to make correlations between their developing abilities within the course and their performance in writing outside the course.

The pre-course and post-course compositions produced by all 420 students consist of responses to a set of three assignments: (1) a personal/narrative task, (2) an explanatory/analytic task, and (3) a persuasive/argumentative task. These tasks were chosen because they reflect aims and modes of writing that are studied and practiced not only in the Institute courses, but also in freshman writing courses throughout the United States. The students' responses to these tasks will be analyzed and assessed in terms of their conceptual and rhetorical proficiency, their structural and syntactic coherence, and their grammatical and mechanical competency — that is, in terms of criteria that are relevant not only to Institute courses, but also to freshman writing courses throughout the country. The method of analysis and evaluation will draw on procedures used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in connection with its periodic national assessments of writing. Finally, performance on the pre-tests will be compared to performance on the post-tests, in order to make inferences about the effects of the courses on the students' writing.
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Needless to say, the results of this study will have compelling significance for the colleges and universities whose courses are the focus of it. And, by extension, the results will have significant implications for the other thirty-five colleges and universities represented in the Institute, since their pilot courses embody the same educational assumptions and practices that are reflected in the seven under study. But I also presume that this study will be of interest to writing teachers and program directors at other colleges and universities throughout the country, partly because it will provide them with detailed information and inferences about the kinds of influence they might anticipate from similarly designed courses, and partly because it will provide them with a model for case study of their own courses.

Despite the broad implications of this study, the National Endowment for the Humanities refused to fund it, and their refusal had nothing to do with recent federal cutbacks in the Endowment's budget. Indeed, funding for this proposed project had been provisionally allocated by the governing Council of the Endowment, pending staff and reviewers' approval of its design. As it turned out, three of the reviewers approved the design without reservation, the other two raised objections, and the staff suggested that we revise the project to overcome these objections, which were defined as follows:

The proposal seems to confound the assessment of student writing with the attribution of that writing to specific forms of instruction. A research design which would accomplish the latter would require consideration of external variables, controls outside the institute courses, and testing of the significance of the findings. It is important to select for measurement variables that in fact measure or represent the things you are hoping to find out. We suggest that you secure the services of a consultant from Iowa's Statistics or Educational Psychology Department who can help you design a plan of study that will enable you to make credible judgments about the effects of the writing programs you hope to study. Such a design would assure that the judgments were valid and would lend them the authority to make their own case outside the institutions in which they were first developed.

Our response to this suggestion was as follows:

We agree that our research project should be carefully designed to ensure credible inferences about the effects of the Institute courses under study. But we do not believe that a controlled study of Institute and non-Institute courses is a feasible method of achieving credibility. A study of this kind requires that all conditions of the subjects under investigation be controlled so that variables can be isolated for manipulation. Yet it seems to us impossible to achieve the requisite control given different instructors with different philosophical assumptions about writing and different practices in the teaching of writing, not to mention different mixes of students with different abilities, backgrounds, interests, and goals. The possibilities for variation within any two groups under study are dizzying in their combinations and permutations. A controlled study of two different writing courses also assumes that once the independent variables have been isolated and manipulated, it is possible to isolate and determine their effects. But given all the components of any writing course, such as reading assignments, writing assignments, class discussions, written comments, and evaluations, not to mention all the possible influences that might work upon a student's writing in other courses taken during the same semester, it seems virtually impossible to single out an individual cause for a particular change or quality in a student's writing. In general, then, we believe, as do many other researchers in writing instruction, that the elements and activities of a writing course are so complex as not to yield to a controlled study of the kind you have suggested.

As is evident from their suggestions and our reactions, there were profound methodological and philosophical disagreements that set us at odds, and during the correspondence and discussion that ensued neither the Endowment nor my colleague and I yielded in our positions. Thus the project was not funded, and we are now carrying it forward on our own with the assistance of research grants from the University and, we hope, from other outside agencies. So, the research will be done, though perhaps it will take us longer than we had initially hoped.

But the disagreements remain, and they should be of concern, I believe, to everyone in the field of writing, for they involve not simply a difference in research methodology—between controlled study and case study—but all that is implied by these differences which turn, at last, upon how we define our discipline, whether as a scientific or humane field of endeavor. Do we see ourselves, that is, as guided by and searching for universal laws which we can verify and replicate by experiment, which we can analyze mathematically and report statistically? Or do we see ourselves, instead, as seeking to understand singular and complex human processes, which can never be replicated, and can only be understood through such methods as those of history, ethnography, and rhetorical analysis? These are not simply abstract philosophical questions, for however we define our discipline and our research methodology will inescapably determine what we seek to achieve through the teaching of writing both for our students and our culture. Research policies, after all, are not only value-laden but self-fulfilling. If we commit ourselves to scientifically controlled study, for example, we will, I fear, be tempted to design our courses and teach our students so as to emphasize those skills that can be isolated, mathematically analyzed, and statistically reported. If we commit ourselves to case studies, instead, we will, I believe, be free to design our courses and guide our students so as to nurture the full range of abilities and understandings that are involved in writing, but we will never, of course, be able to verify with certainty what we have accomplished. Clearly, we cannot have it both ways, so the research issue that I have raised seems to me one that each of us must face, and face with a full awareness of its ramifications.

Notes

1 This essay is a synthesis of papers that were presented at the Wyoming Conference on Composition and Literature, Laramie, 1981, and at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Francisco, 1982.

2 A collection of these courses will be published by the Institute in 1983.


4 This study is modelled in part on a recently completed case study by Nancy Jones of one Institute-designed course at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, New Jersey: "Design, Discovery, and Development in a Freshman Writing Course: A Case Study," Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Iowa, 1982.

5 Excerpt of a letter dated March 30, 1981, from Cynthia W. Frey, Program Officer, National Humanities Institutes to Carl H. Klaus.
TEACHING THE RESEARCH PAPER: A NEW APPROACH TO AN OLD PROBLEM

Linda Shamous
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We assign research papers in composition courses hoping the experience will help develop research and writing skills students can use in other courses and, eventually, in their professions. But we serve our own purposes, too. Research can provide the content necessary for a long essay, so we feel free to require a paper much longer than the usual five hundred words, making the project the capstone for a course and asking students to display techniques of organization, development, and style introduced earlier. Yet the results are often disappointing. We seldom get the kind of papers we want — clearly written and informative, with a distinct critical edge or "aboutness" to propel the argument — even when the subjects are in areas students can master easily or when the topics are literary ones about which we can give useful advice. And the complaints of students and colleagues alike are reminders that the skills we try so hard to nurture frequently do not travel beyond our classrooms. Our response too often is to employ refined teaching techniques, trying to do the same thing again — but better. We turn to one of the step-by-step programs outlined in professional publications and specialized texts, or we decide to work individually with students, guiding them through each stage of research, planning, and writing. Good teaching helps, of course, but only to a limited extent. The real problem lies in the answers we give to student inquiries about the purpose and form of the research paper.

When the research paper assignment is first announced in class, students ask questions like, "How much does it count towards the final grade?" "When is it due?" "How long must it be?" "What about footnotes?" The questions are rarely substantive, except for inquiries about topic; they reflect a narrow, almost hostile view of the task. The students see themselves as at a calculated disadvantage, being asked to discuss freshly and lucidly a topic about which they know relatively little but about which, they assume, the teacher knows a great deal. In such circumstances, even writers who usually respond in a creative manner to all aspects of a rhetorical problem are likely to adopt a restricted, protective approach characteristic of poor writers, concentrating on superficial features of text (length, style of documentation) and context (due date, grade weighting). As a result, students leave themselves little room for fresh approaches to the subject or for effective writing.

Teachers need to convince students that the research paper is not simply another weapon in the instructor's grading arsenal. They need to help students conceive of the task in a fruitful way by letting them know what kinds of thinking lead to effective research and what patterns of expression will satisfy an audience's expectations. A teacher about to assign a research paper is, of course, likely to enter the classroom with a view of research as a creative discovery procedure and with a practical knowledge of how the results of research can be organized and presented in a clear and effective manner. Jeff Rackham's upbeat address to students is typical:

For those who have been through the experience, the excitement of discovery, of learning, of creative play with ideas more than compensates for the hard work. Research papers written in college tend to remain in memory long after class work and exams are forgotten. These are the papers to which the whole self is given for days or even months. These are the papers that help you discover that the merit of the mind lies not so much in what it knows, but in that it knows how to learn. Yet despite their enthusiasm, most instructors lack the kind of critical awareness necessary to convey their view of the research paper simply and directly to students who have had little, if any, contact with research or research writing. The aims and forms of research writing in the various academic disciplines remain a mystery to most teachers, having only recently become the object of serious study.

So little has been done to identify the elements of thought and expression common to writing in various fields of inquiry, that most writing instructors, if pressed to identify exactly it is that students can hope to gain from writing research papers, speak vaguely of "the habit of research and analysis," and "skills in using the library." Even textbooks willing to make broad claims about the transferability of skills acknowledge by implication that the expertise of most composition instructors is limited to their own discipline and does not cover academic discourse in general:

A critical essay is one that attempts to analyze, interpret, and evaluate its subject. . . . It may deal with any subject worthy of serious study — a book, a film or television program, a painting, a building, a political or social movement. But since the favorite subject for critical essays in an English class is literature, this chapter will be limited to that subject. Some scholars, moreover, have begun to suggest that our knowledge of the literary research paper is more practical than theoretical, a matter of knowing how to do it rather than of knowing what it is we do and why.

Most instructors do not introduce the research paper as a special form of writing with its own purposes and conventions. Instead, they emphasize links between research writing and the other kinds of writing covered in a composition course, and they provide training in the process of gathering, sorting and arranging information, hoping by this two-pronged approach to bring purpose and depth to their students' work. In stressing the continuity of writing skills, instructors follow the lead of most current textbooks, which treat the research paper as an offshoot of the standard thesis-and-support essay, telling students that it "may be a little more technical" because of its length and the need to document sources, but that it is "not drastically changed" in matters of form and content from the informative (expository) and persuasive essays they have been writing. Most texts include a step-by-step introduction to library skills and note-taking. They also provide sample thesis statements, suggested strategies for development, and, quite often, sample papers which are directed for the most part to a general audience and are expository or persuasive in intent. Good though the advice in these texts is, it involves a lot of looking backwards at exposition and argument rather than forwards at the kinds of writing students will be asked to do in other courses.

As studies of writing in courses outside English have begun to show, content area instructors seldom ask for papers with aims like the ones we assign in writing courses or the ones we ask stu-
dents to read as models. Students in content area courses are required to analyze events and problems, to discuss the logic of propositions, to evaluate scholarly approaches to a subject, to write critical analyses of non-fiction texts, and to produce detailed observation reports with commentaries. They are, moreover, expected to do these things in a manner which shows a general acquaintance with the conventions of academic writing in the particular discipline and familiarity with current discussions of the subject.7

While a well-documented argumentative paper on divorce may please a writing instructor, a sociology professor is likely to return it with negative comments: "too emotional;" "well-written but not sociology;" "not analytical enough;" "needs to use sociological method to investigate the subject and make its point." A similar difference in expectations probably underlies our frequent disappointment with research papers on literary topics: they may be informative, even insightful, but they generally lack the serious analytical approach and ability to marshal evidence that we consider, because of our academic training, as the mark of serious writing about literature.

In practice, then, most college instructors agree with the distinction James Kinneavy makes between research writing ("scientific discourse") and discourse that is informative or persuasive in aim:

... scientific discourse consists in a consideration of one facet of an object and the making of certain kinds of assertions about this facet. These two characteristics, however, are certainly not enough to isolate scientific discourse from other discourse. First, the assertions must be referential. This means that the main concern of the discourse must be the reality under consideration. Therefore, the personal feelings and emotions of the writer are excluded (except as they intrude unconsciously or accidentally). Second... the reader as a target of persuasion, emotional or otherwise, intrudes only indirectly and implicitly. ... Informative Discourse is actually the answer to a set of implicit questions or expectations; but there is only assertion, not accompanying proof, in simple informative discourse. It is stated as certain, but the certainty is not verified. In scientific discourse there are accompanying proofs of certainty or high probability. The presence in the discourse of proof is, therefore, one distinguishing attribute of scientific discourse.8

In short, research writing concentrates on a particular chunk of reality — a poem, a painting, an event — and attempts to shed light on its nature, structure, or relationships as opposed to persuasive writing, which aims primarily at moving the reader to action (internal or external), and to informative writing, which concentrates on presenting new and interesting information.

Some assignments in college courses ask for persuasion or exposition, of course. The average student will be asked to write reaction papers, case studies, abstracts, book reviews, simple reports, and short exam essays. Nonetheless, research writing occupies a distinct and special place in academic activity as the primary vehicle for conveying and validating the results of scholarly activity. While academics and professionals spend time writing summaries, evaluations, and textbooks, they nonetheless accord the highest status to research writing as it is practiced in journal articles, convention papers, and monographs. And it is for this kind of writing that most composition instructors view the research paper as an appropriate form of preparation: "Research is what scholars do. The conventions of research are the ways that scholars talk to one another.... By initiating students into the methods of research, we are giving them the key to the world of scholarship."9 If this is what we want our students' research papers to do — and similar statements appear in most freshman rhetorics — then we need to be able to distinguish the research paper clearly from the other kinds of essays we ask students to write and we need to guide students through an appropriate writing process.

Research papers not only differ in aim from informative and argumentative essays, they also generally follow two sets of conventions that affect matters such as logic, organization, and style. The first set of conventions consists of strategic patterns of inquiry and expression appropriate to the central tasks of most research writing: testing a hypothesis (thesis) or responding to and applying other research or theory. When combined with the resources of expository writing, broadly defined, these patterns make up the rhetorical options available to writers of research papers regardless of discipline. Though the strategic patterns of research and research writing have not as yet been the subject of intensive study, recent textbooks have begun to pay attention to them and to provide some preliminary — and useful — descriptions of the patterns.10

The second set of conventions consists of stylistic and organizational strategies characteristic of particular disciplines. These conventions are at once quite noticeable because of their impact on the surface features of essays, yet at the same time not as important as they first seem for a student who is beginning to learn about research writing. The conventions cover, among other things, (1) the use of personal pronouns, (2) the identifying marks for sections of papers (i.e., "introduction," "method," "discussion") and special ordering of the sections, (3) the formality of opening paragraphs (e.g., may a personal anecdote or other rhetorical device be used, or must reference to previous research start off the piece), (4) footnote style and bibliography form, (5) need for abstract. The wide variation in these matters from field to field — and from professor to professor — means that writing instructors may need only to point out the presence of the conventions to students, leaving it up to subject area instructors or texts devoted to writing in particular fields to introduce the style appropriate for different academic and professional fields. Moreover, once alerted to the importance of these features, most students can pick up the conventions of a field just as professors do, by observing the style followed in the secondary sources they use in research.

Teachers may wish to begin introducing their students to research writing through reading, alerting students to the aim and conventions of scholarly articles, of successful student papers, or of models prepared especially for the occasion. But while this procedure can be helpful, it is only an introduction. The best way for students to learn how to make use of the conventional features of research writing in their own work is to encounter them as options, as answers to theoretical and practical questions that arise during the research and writing process.

The teacher's task at this point is to arrange activities in and out of class that will encourage students to put their new insight into the aims and conventions of research writing to work in research papers of their own. Activities can take various forms, including questions to make students aware of the strategic patterns they are following or the specific methods of investigation they are using, and short writing tasks that utilize a limited number of secondary sources to help students develop mastery of the conventions of particular fields.

Accordingly, as soon as a student has begun to explore a topic of interest, the teacher should begin to direct attention towards any problems raised by the topic or any facets of it that need to
be elucidated. It is important at this time to avoid questions like “What is your opinion about the issues raised by topic X?” (argumentative) and “Is your topic narrow enough so you can explain it within the assigned limits of the paper?” (informative), and to ask instead, “What interesting chunk of reality have you isolated?” “What do you want to understand about it?” and “How would different patterns of inquiry and expression help you to understand this chunk of reality?” The differences in attitude conveyed by these different kinds of questions may appear small, but they are significant. The second set of questions directs the writer’s attention from the known to the unknown, which is the essential direction of research. A writer assembling material for an argumentative or informative essay stays within the realm of the known, gatherings support for value judgments or intriguing facts to present to the reader. But the writer who is looking instead for new understanding does not bring her research to early closure once she has found enough material to fill five or ten pages; she keeps exploring, progressively discarding areas about which much is known, looking for facets of a phenomenon that call for further understanding or seem to invite exploratory hypotheses. The teacher can further encourage this process by asking, “What aspects of the subject are you studying?” “How is this part related to the whole subject?” “How is the subject related to similar phenomena?” “What is the subject’s structure?” “What is its function?” “What are its causes?” “What are its consequences?” “What is its history?” Answers to these questions, which are based on strategic patterns of inquiry and expression underlying most research writing, will provide students with many fruitful paths for research.

Once a student has isolated a subject and chosen a general approach to it, the teacher can help focus the survey of secondary sources by asking “Who else knows about this subject?” “What do they know?” “What are they currently finding?” “How have they pursued their research?” Students should be required to answer these questions in some detail because the attitudes and interests of other writers can help with the narrowing and defining of a research project. The exercise also helps students recognize what things are common knowledge, what things need to be documented as the original insights of others, and what areas of current debate are particularly promising. Students will become aware through research that they are simultaneously acquiring specialized knowledge and a potential audience that is articulate about the subject and has the same need as the writer to understand the phenomenon. Finally, by asking how others have researched a topic, students can see how much of research is derivative, drawing approaches and tactics from the work of others—something students can do in their own work.

This emphasis on methodology will not come as a surprise to students in the sciences or in technical fields, for they learn early the importance of method in research. Students in the humanities, too, need to be aware of the role method plays in all phases of research, initial inquiry through final writing. In the physical sciences, experimental designs and measurement strategies, mathematical and phenomenological, provide ways to explore a phenomenon and at the same time provide standards for validating assertions about it. The social sciences strive to measure phenomena statistically, no matter how cerebral the manifestation. In the humanities, too, counting has its adherents, but there are standard patterns of inquiry like classification, comparison, and analysis, that can be used to probe a poem, a period, or a painting. There are, in addition, enough theoretical approaches to satisfy almost any persuasion, Jungian, Marxian, or Structuralist.

The student thus attuned to method will see that it is a way of exploring reality and that it serves the purposes of research by allowing the trained mind to operate within a research pattern and by providing a vocabulary for communicating the results of research.

At this point teachers can provide practice in the surface conventions of the research paper by calling for samples of source material that can be analyzed in class for style and manner of documentation. These can then be used as models for writing. Using these and other sources teachers can ask their students to write two or three possible openings for papers on the same subject but using different research patterns.

Students can also indicate through summary or outline the kind of paper which might follow each opening. This writing practice gives students a chance to receive ample feedback before they plunge into the full, final version of a project. Final papers are not nearly so overwhelming when they follow such exercises.

At this point students should be prepared to complete their own papers independently, getting the final “hands on” experience which signals that they have recognized the special requirements of research and its special modes of expression. Of course, the student will never reach this goal until the teacher analyzes, recognizes, and accepts these patterns, too. In taking an approach of this sort we encourage better research papers from our students, bring together our academic experience with theirs, and become more articulate about our own research, too.

NOTES


3Most discussions, however, either report on pedagogical experiments (Robert Weiss and Michael Peich, “Faculty Attitude Change in a Cross-Disciplinary Writing Workshop,” College Composition and Communication, 29 [1978], 797-801; Eleanor M. Hoffman, “Writing for the Social Sciences,” College Composition and Communication, 28 [1977], 195-197) or try to provide a broad theoretical background (Patricia Bizzell, "Thomas Kuhn, Scientism, and English Studies," College English, 40 [1979] 764-771.) Mike Rose, "Teaching University Discourse," unpublished paper, UCLA, has begun to describe in detail the forms of academic writing.


William G. Perry, Jr. is a cognitive-developmental psychologist who puts forward the idea that most students undergo radical change during their college years. On the basis of intensive interviewing of undergraduates at Harvard during the fifties and sixties, Perry concludes that most college students move through a predictable sequence of ways of seeing the world. Perry offers a model for the intellectual changes that take place in college; he attempts to describe the process of intellectual maturation. What makes Perry important to me is that he helps me recognize my freshmen; his model helps me understand why my demand for first-hand experience creates problems.

The best way to introduce Perry's model of development may be to quote from the intellectual autobiography which he makes up for a typical undergraduate.

I go as a child to my parent or my teacher with my little offering for judgment—my wish to go play with my neighbor, my spelling word, my arithmetical example—is it right or wrong? The large beings before me survey my offering and compare it with some model, some absolute unchanging platonic idea of rightness known to them, or perhaps engraved on some talisman in the sky, and inform me, "yes, it is right;" or "No, it does not conform." In such a world, divided down the middle, it behooves me to stay as much as possible on the side of right. In school, instances on the side of right and wrong, correct and incorrect, are all recorded, added algebraically, and the result used to indicate the degree to which I have been right or wrong, compared with my classmates above and below me, on a single scale of goodness—of success and failure.

This picture of the world receives, of course, some severe jolts. Mother may say "Yes" and Father "No." In high school, I find that English teachers disagree about the value and even the meaning of certain poems. At first, disillusion makes me suspect the competence of my particular teachers, but I find that others are no better. Perhaps the tablets of truth about poems are at too high an altitude for anyone to discern, or the sky over English teachers is particularly cloudy. If so, then I am free. I suddenly see that the world is not as I first thought, divided between right and wrong. No, it is divided between those things about which opinions can be determined to be right or wrong and those things about which "anyone has a right to his own opinion." That I continue to be graded on my opinion about poems, I ascribe to the unfairness of English teachers, an unfairness understandable in the light of their desire to hold up their heads in company with teachers of mathematics and physics, who, after all, can know what they're doing.

By this maneuver I have saved the clear dual nature of my world, the only world in which I can demand of authority that it state its rules precisely and abide by them. If English teachers cannot make these rules clear, I can then forget the material, "find out what they like," and give it to them. This is less than high-minded, of course, but they started it (pp. 30-31).

Imagine this student wafted into my freshman writing class at this point and faced with my call for "first-hand experience." I think he would understand me to be asking for "opinion"—something that is arbitrary and personal and generally inferior to the fixed canons of knowledge. He might see the class as trivial, on the level of "what did you do during your summer vacation?" I don't think he would see much purpose to the class, and I think he would be puzzled about evaluation. If I were to insist on grading his opinion, I would be perceived as a fraud with a hidden
agenda. Though I had said that I wanted his own experience, what I really wanted was my opinions, and he would proceed to try to ferret them out.

The student's story continues:

I still have no real doubts that the "right answers" themselves are a matter of morals, not of utility. I see evidence of this everywhere. It is not enough that an answer works; to be really right it must be properly arrived at, that is, by hard work. The same answers come upon by unconventional means, "guesswork" or other cleverness are counterfeit. Sammy, who is known to work very hard for the few answers he gets, is never scolded. Alex, who is discovered to have been exploiting a knack for getting all the answers without cracking a book, is taken aside and talked to for not making the most of his opportunities. The Right still reigns.

The crisis may be harder to postpone in college. In college I am older and stronger and at the same time I am severely shaken by the absence of solidarity among my peers. It may be that other students are in the same predicament, but for the first time I see that they differ from me radically in regard to the things they assign to right and wrong, and to the determinable and the indeterminable. In school the reiteration of the "right" and of authority's limits was the affirmation of friendship's bonds. In the college dormitories it appears that I must cease to reject the "wrong" if I am to have any friends at all.

Worse than this I can no longer maintain the illusion that virtue alone determines reward in the intellectual world. It is all too clear now that Sammy's efforts may fail to gain him honors and that Alex, who only reads Sammy's notes after sleeping through class, may receive an A. I get discouraged by my hours of labor over themes, which bring me only C; I procrastinate; I guiltily dash off a midnight scribble — and receive a B+. The foundations are crumbling (p. 31).

I don't have to imagine the student wafted into my class at this point; I am teaching him and his counterparts. If there are no Right Answers in writing, what about hard work? If you don't judge a piece of writing by the work that went in, what do you judge it by? I am trying to do what you want, and therefore I should be rewarded. The student is "being good." But of course the issue is not quantitative effort; the issue is seeing and thinking and speaking for oneself. Ironically, the very intensity of the attempt to please the teacher may take the student even further from reaching an authentic and individual perspective.

But now comes a breakthrough for Perry's student:

A heavy burden now falls on my teachers to justify themselves, and the breakthrough may come in my battle with them. At first the old story repeats itself. I came to college with a new faith in my teachers — perhaps now my Humanities instructor will not be so ignorant of the graven tablets of the truth. Or if the tablets are not visible, he will at least recognize "everyone's right to his own opinion." My hopes are raised when he adjoins the class not to write a mere summary of the author's views but to state our own ideas, our own opinions. I do so, my opinion being largely for the form that I like the book or I don't. I receive a D. Alas, my teacher is not to be trusted after all, and is revealed as a mere section man, wrapped up in his own efforts toward a Ph.D. and hypocritically subservient to those prejudices necessary to minions. The next section meetings will be devoted to elaborate efforts to bait him into the revelation of those prejudices.

As part of this maneuver, I take my paper to him for his comments, to find out "what he wants." He informs me that I state too many generalizations with too little data. Suppressing my retort, "But sir, you said..." I leave to fill my next paper with data with a vengeance. The D on this next paper is attributed to my lack of ideas. "Look," says the section man, and for a moment we face each other, even across my resentment, "You must learn to show how the facts relate to each other to generate your ideas, to support them. The ideas and the facts must go together, and you must not let them fly in the face of some other fact to which you do not refer. And furthermore," he says as he shows me to the door, "the privilege of having your ideas respected depends on your presenting them for what they are, not the truth, but interpretations which you prefer among other interpretations. You may not have to spell other interpretations out but you must let your reader know that you are aware that they exist as relevant qualifications of what you have to say."

Something has happened, but it is a matter of pride not to admit it. I trudge off saying, "All right, if that's what they want, I'll give it to them." And I sit down with my next paper to "relate" facts and ideas. Perhaps it is at such a moment as this that I become thoroughly involved and after two hours' work suddenly look up to say, "Holy cats, they do relate." I can then put forward my interpretation with pride in its integrity. It is this confidence that allows me to afford the realization that the same data may appear in a different light to others and that we must still all stand judgment. Here I can experience my proper conviction that my ideas are (in a new sense) "right," and still speak with humility (pp. 31-32).

Perry's student has gone through a major intellectual revolution, and I think that at this point he would understand a writing course that called for "first-hand experience." If the student now understands that we all make sense of the world through interpretation, and that some interpretations are better than others in terms of the way that they are put together, I think that he would admit the educational value of formulating one's interpretations in writing.

Perry's student has just begun a new life:

I am unfortunately too involved in the "point" I am trying to make in the paper to notice the full implications of the new world I have recognized. But the implications will present themselves to me one by one, forcing their reiterated choice between courage and despair — unless I find some way to shut my eyes. It will be easy enough to see at the outset that interpretations of a book may lie on a range, with those demonstrating the greatest integrity near the center, and others grading off toward either side towards the relatively untenable. Next it would be very clear why very different interpretations, from either side, might be assigned the same value.

Soon I may begin to miss those tablets in the sky. If this defines truth for term papers, how about people? Principalities? Powers? How about the Deity Himself? And if this can be true of my image of the Deity, who then will cleanse my soul? And my enemies? Are they not wholly in the wrong?

I apprehend all too poignantly now that in the most fateful decisions of my life I will be the only person with a first-hand view of the really relevant data, and only part of it at that. Who will save me then from that "wrong decision" I have been told not to make lest I "regret-it-all-my-life"? Will no one tell me if I am right? Can I never be sure? Am I alone? (pp. 32-33).
Perry's student sounds like Adam and Eve expelled from the garden, making his way "with wandering steps and slow." He now realizes that there are many possible ways for organizing and understanding the world. What remains is the difficulty of choosing among the possibilities, the existential choice of commitment to a perspective. He has reached the point at which writing begins, for in writing that matters, the writer seems to be writing himself or herself into existence. Good writing is the expression of individual consciousness, and individual consciousness requires the fragmentations of the given world of truth and a personal commitment to one way of seeing out of many.

Perry believes that most students undergo the same process of development as his hypothetical case, a movement that he describes with a nine position model:

MAIN LINE OF DEVELOPMENT

The Modifying of Dualism
The Realizing of Relativism
The Evolving of Commitments

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

His fictional student has moved through positions 1-6, and now faces the necessity of commitment. Perry makes the case that most undergraduates enter college in a position towards the lower end of his scale, and graduate towards the higher, having undergone a radical transformation in worldview. I think that the very revolution that Perry describes — the realizing of relativism and the subsequent evolving of commitments — is essential in the making of a good writer. Perry helps me understand the impasse that I reach with some freshmen: they can't do the kind of writing that I want or even understand what I want until they have radically changed their view of the world.

What are the implications of Perry's model? For me, Perry's work underscores the importance of freshman writing classes. If Perry's movement is the core of liberal education, and if students must move through that same series of steps in producing good writing, then the writing class is the epimele of liberal education, directly challenging students to move towards intellectual maturity. Writing classes are a microcosm of college, a compression of what is most important in the whole process. Composition courses are sometimes challenged as being "subjectless," but because our subject is our students' understanding of their experience, we work most directly with the dynamic factor in intellectual development — the students' changing view of the world. I think this explains why it is so often a major event for both student and teacher when a student comes up with a genuinely good piece of writing. Such an event is a breakthrough, for it prefigures intellectual maturity and the achievement of identity.

At the same time, Perry's model may help temper the frequent sense of frustration and failure which visits teachers of freshman writing (at least, this teacher of freshman writing). If our goal is really as ambitious as I have indicated — intellectual coming of age, realization of individuality — its achievement is necessarily a work of time. With some students, there may be only a few signs of movement; with others, no visible signs, but it could be that the teacher's expectations have planted the seeds for future change. An individual perspective is rarely gained overnight. Ripeness is all: there will be many students who are not ready to express "first-hand experience." We are asking for sophistication and courage; Perry's model suggests that students are moving towards the end we envision, but will probably require time to get there. The long-term, evolutionary dimension of Perry's model helps me see that my demand for first-hand experience will be misunderstood, but that this is no reason to abandon the demand, for what I want is what students will eventually ask of themselves, and what most of them will finally achieve.

Besides generally affirming what we try to do in freshman writing, Perry's model should help us in thinking about pedagogy, for with the help of a more specific understanding of intellectual development, we should be better able to design courses and approaches which facilitate it. I think there are two recent pedagogical approaches which seem particularly consonant with Perry's model.

One of the main movements in Perry's model is from Dualism,

A bifurcated structuring of the world-between Good and Bad, Right and Wrong, We and Others,

into Relativism,

A plurality of points of view, interpretations, frames of reference, value systems and contingencies in which the structural properties of contexts and forms allow of various sorts of analysis, comparison and evaluation . . . (Glossary).

Students move by stages from a True/False framework to a framework which features multiple interpretations of reality. One immediate goal for writing teachers, then, might be getting students to understand the idea of perspective, to come to understand that there are many possible ways of seeing and treating a subject. This seems to be an important principle in a number of fairly recent texts, including Richard Braddock's Little Casebook in the Rhetoric of Writing (Prentice Hall, 1971), Walker Gibson's Seeing and Writing (2nd ed., David McKay, 1974), and William Coles' Composing (Hayden, 1974). In composing sequences of assignments, these books often maintain a common subject while varying the rhetorical situation, demonstrating the effect of audience and purpose on the way a writer sees and treats a subject. For example, the wind may be understood in totally different ways — depending on whether one is describing its effects on one's moods or whether one is explaining how to measure its velocity and direction. The assignments require a movement into relativism; to do them successfully, students must acquire a flexible outlook.

The other pedagogical approach concentrates on the emotional dimension of radical change. Perry's great concern, as the conclusion of his study, is that students are not receiving adequate institutional support as they undergo their intellectual revolutions. To learn individual and independent thinking and feeling is to leave the shelter of communal attitudes and to stand alone. It is a frightening and isolating prospect, which requires new kinds of choice and responsibility. It takes courage. It creates a need for encouragement and support. Perry feels that what students need most as they mature intellectually is a special realization of community, a sense that they are joining others who have decided to stand alone, to deal with life as first-hand experience. From their instructors, students need reciprocal acts of recognition and confirmation. Students need to see their instructors groping, doubting, examining their own thinking. And they experience their own growth more vividly when it is recognized, accepted, and treated as cause for celebration by their instructors. This recognition is certainly a function that good writing teachers exercise all the time, and for many freshmen, the comments of the freshman writing teacher may be the
only recognition that the institution affords his or her efforts at growth. Perry records the poignant example of the student for whom the highlight of his career was the single comment "nice point" in the margin of a paper.

It is probable that sensitive and empathetic response has been the mainstay of good writing instruction as long as there have been writing classes. But Perry helps us understand more clearly why this is true. If good writing requires revolutionary personal change for many freshmen, if good writing requires venturing into lonely territory where one's only reliance is oneself, then we can see why the support and encouragement of another becomes so vital. If we are asking students to stand their worlds on end, we must convince them that we will stand by while they do it. Lou Kelly's From Dialogue to Discourse (Scott, Foresman, 1972) is built around the idea that only after students feel unqualified acceptance as people can they begin to explore and change their views of the world. Once writer trusts reader, she will begin by degrees to deepen and complicate her worldview, often in the process of answering the questions that arise about the writing. Perry's model explains the need for such recognition and confirmation by making clear the magnitude of the change that learning to write well requires in many students.

I think that Perry's model of development matters to us finally as teachers of writing because it shows us how our work connects with the full human growth of our students. I think most of us have long been convinced that something important sometimes happens inside freshmen in our writing classes; what Perry gives us is the shape and features of that something.

Notes


2William G. Perry, Jr., Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years, 1970 ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.) All subsequent references are to this work.

"IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS CLASS?"

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The title of this essay is also the title of a recent book of reader-response literary theory by Stanley Fish. It inspired me because it struck me as entirely relevant to composition, a discipline whose theory and practice are so inextricably linked that its textbooks deserve — and receive — frequent consideration. Our texts appear to be the focal points of our courses and theory. We assume that they have guided the teaching of rhetoric and composition since people began to compose written discourse. We often define our courses, and each other, by textbook selections. We debate the relative merits of the theoretical bases of various texts. We write them.

But if we try to understand texts as texts — that is, if we examine them in relation to the theory that Fish and other contemporary thinkers engaged by problems of understanding writing are now testing — we won’t too hastily answer Fish’s question. Questions about the uses of textbooks, as well as about the nature of textbook authorship, may not have easy answers.

Thus it is not only Fish’s title, but also his perspective, that applies to basic composition texts. On the face of it, reader-response criticism like his and that of Norman Holland, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser and hermeneutic interpretive theorists might appear to be the only perspective applicable to this discourse. Textbooks depend entirely, from pre-contractual review to remainder sales, on the responses of readers. But there is more than a prima facie case here, for this school and the post-structuralist (or post-modern, or deconstructionist) philosophical context in which it stands address all texts as open questions, just as we do when we teach writing. We and these theorists share assumptions about the nature of writing that should bring us together.

Some of the premises of this recent critical theory should, therefore, be spelled out. It represents contemporary uncertainty, but the principle uncertainty of existential phenomenology rather than the modern era’s disillusioned complaint that proper hierarchy, stability, and certainties have all been dislocated. Reader-response criticism is a Postmodern, Nietzschean celebration of the freeplay of interpretation possible in a newly perceived, anarchical world. The implication for us is that readers no longer assume they can find the one meaning of a text, or decode it, but instead are seen to be making its meaning; it is, after all, only marks on a page. Those marks, writing, can only signify in relation to their difference from other similar constructions. This second premise is based on Saussurean rather than Chomskian linguistics. It extends Saussure’s phonology to semantic and discourse-level applications by positing that not only sounds, but also written meanings, are arbitrary signs, that we can understand only because they differ from other sounds, or other words, or other discourses.

Now from this basis some other, highly controversial principles follow:

1. Nothing alive is unchanging; but writing, the act of inscription, requires a definite, decisive choice and is, therefore, at the moment of written utterance, dead. By making our thoughts these marks you can see, we’ve precluded the possibility of saying what we mean. Writing must therefore be completely self-referential; all words that are written down are, in effect, in quotation marks that refer them and their readers to all of the other times they have been so inscribed. We may write — perhaps — only what we do not mean.

2. The author is dead. All writing comes from and becomes part of textuality — that is, part of the freeplay of all prior and consequent texts. Each word alludes, and attempted authorship represents only the will to power, which encloses by written, definite marks always thwarted. The writer is limited by writing because each utterance locks his or her meaning into the pattern of allusions and references and prior attempts that preclude authorial originality. As Roland Barthes puts it, "There is never... but the writing of a writing: writing sends back always finally to another writing, and the prospect of signs is in a way infinite." 13

3. Readers may only deconstruct texts; they do not locate their one, privileged interpretation. Readers are always discovering the possibilities that the text itself, by virtue of its definiteness, precludes. They are not capturing what it "said," or finding a text’s absolute, totalistic meaning. The meaning that is absent, not the meaning captured by writing (which, as I’ve said, captures no meaning), is the meaning each reader will make of the text.

I hope that I’ve done justice, if swift justice, to explaining this critical program because it comprises presuppositions compatible with the classroom teaching of writing, if not with most rhetorical philosophy or literary new criticism. These principles
assert that all writing is open rather than closed — that neither reading nor writing down a thought implies achieving perfection, or a universal, absolute meaning. They give us a perspective apart from the one focused only on the artifact that is a literary work, a space within which we and our students might find a coherent developmental philosophy for composition. But more immediately these premises suggest, however radically, what I think is the best phenomenology of the textbook in the writing class. Put bluntly: no one reads them, no one writes them, and that is how it should be.

Composition textbooks are not read. They are, in everyone's parlance, used. Book salesmen, program directors, teachers, and students talk about “using Harbrace” or “using Hairston,” but they do not commonly refer to reading the textbook. Textbooks are “assigned,” their chapters are “covered,” their exercises are “worked” or “done,” but no one much thinks of reading the book. Textbooks are “explained” in class, they are “questioned” by students. But they are not, again, read. While we do exemplify the textbook's material, we do not expect that it will be remembered. We might quiz students about the name of Hamlet's friend or the setting of Dimmesdale's self-renunciation in The Scarlet Letter, but we would not, commonly at least, ask students to identify the topic of the student essay examined in chapter three or to recall the subheadings of many other chapters. However we rely on a textbook (an open question for the nonce), we neither think of what we do as reading nor remember it as we do most other books.

It might be argued that all instructional discourse remains in this sense unread, or that we should not involve ourselves in the text of the textbook any more than we do in a manual instructing us to install a dishwasher. But textbooks in composition are not programs for actions. They do not often claim to be step-by-step instructions in writing, and are (at least if students may be expert witnesses in this regard) notably shy about the question of how to write. They tell why to write, they explain how other people have written, they either explicitly or implicitly discuss thinking about writing, and they offer suggestions about revising to have written better. But how-to-do-it (a process form that many “cover”) is not the matter they explain or refer to.

Even when we compare composition texts to other explanatory discourse — for example, a history of the Civil War — we find them distinctly unread. We do not pick them up with the same mind to parsing a narrative, reasoned account of a subject. We are not intent on constructing what this particular author has made of a topic. Instead, the textbook is the topic, or subject. The dishwasher would exist, the war would have happened, without the manual or the historical account. But composition courses and teaching and textbooks as mutually inclusive; the textbook is not “about” the course, but is the course. Reading it, in our commonly understood sense of the word, is impossible. We do not care about what it says, but about what it alludes to and suggests. It is neither manual nor account.

That radical contradiction is perhaps more difficult to swallow than the second assertion contemporary theory leads me to. It is already fairly well recognized that no one authors our textbooks. Aristotle's Rhetoric is someone's class notes. Cicero and Quintilian authored the texts bearing their names, but the versions we have of them are not books that those men composed as much as they are the transmitted versions of those books. Similarly, Hugh Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres are transcriptions by him of his lectures. But as they were used for almost a century after this writing, Blair was not their author. Adam Smith's important lectures on rhetoric exist, as Aristotle's, only in the form of class notes discovered in this century as surprisingly and adventurously as were Boswell's manuscripts.

The authors of these classic texts were literally written by writing down their words. Writing itself, transcription, rather than authorship, in the sense of having and revealing an intended, stable meaning, produced their books. "Aristotle says" is a meaningless, at best metaphorical, description of the words of the Rhetoric. Blair may have himself read his lectures after writing down what he would say and had said, but their popularity in England and in America well into the nineteenth century indicates not that Blair "wrote a textbook" in the sense that you or I, approached by a publisher, suppose that we may do so. Instead, Blair's lectures, his saying(s), were desired in times and places at which he could not be. Reproducing them called the memory of Blair's course into current presence, but duplicating the lectures did not simply publish his authorial intent. In his case, printing rather than writing created the author.

More immediately, the current best-selling English textbook, The Harbrace Handbook, is sometimes thought of as the work of a Mr. Harbrace. Certainly Hodges's retirement, replacement as author by (someone whose name I would have to look up) and her later replacement after Hodges's death, have not prevented the book's reputation from belonging to Hodges, just as Samuelson retains the reputation of an economics textbook he has not written in years. But Hodges has not seen the book now sold and used under his name; it could as well be a Mr. Harbrace's as be thought of as actually having an author whose intentions are available to his readers.

The curious but explicit textuality that contains the composition textbook and prevents its authorship is at present even more complicated by print technology. A plurality of books of the same kind are possible as responses to the advent of an enormously inclusive rather than elitist and exclusive rhetoric market, the freshman class. While the classic textbooks were records of a teacher's class, they and their current imitations now become the sources of teachers' lectures and the sources of other new textbooks. When a publisher brings out a new textbook, it "covers" the subjects of other texts, or takes some time to explain why it omits those subjects. Textbooks that claim to take an original point of view are usually books that compile and summarize the theories of a subset of theorists who were not considered by earlier textbook authors.

But such books do not represent an author's original thinking about composition, and in a curious way they cannot. The only thinking about composition that most new authors know is thinking already recorded in textbooks, and even the iconoclastic composition theorists and authors are borrowing work from disciplines other than their own. In the sense that we commonly understand, no one writes textbooks. They have sources, reviewers, and editors, but not authors. They are initiated by publishers who must compete in each category of a large market's needs, but they are not initiated in any sense of the word that might individually and uniquely control their content.

I promised that this particular story would come out all right — that neither reading nor writing textbooks is the way that it should be. Stanley Fish's former student, the one who asked "Is there a text in this class?" of a subsequent teacher, made the statement that summarizes why the status of the textbook is well understood in the terms I've described. When her new teacher replied, "Yes, it's the Norton Anthology of Literature," she said, "No, no. I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?"
In this class, the composition class, to believe in the coherent stability of a textbook apart from its reader's situational, purposeful, constructive use of it—or to believe in the primacy of textbook writers' personal authorial intentions (uniqueness, originality)—would get in the way of "just us," teacher and student. As rhetoricians, we have long ignored positivistic views of a verifiable, reliable meaning in written language and arguments that language is a structure of stable norms rather than that language is always situationally perceived as a structure of stable norms. Each student writing in each new situation is discovering not the stable norms of written language, but rather the concept of discovering various situational norms. The ability to write in a variety of situations, under a variety of constraints, for a variety of audiences—to produce a rough and inventive draft and a polished, conventional "publication"—comes about not by learning the text but by trying it out, or ignoring it, or working it. The ability to teach students to write in a classroom depends on appropriating the flexible strength of a boxer, light on his feet and quick to react, not on following the programmatic strategies, plans, or rules of a new chess-playing author.

If it were true that the composition course is "about" the book, not reading it would be an egregious mistake. But on the contrary, in a course whose purpose is facilitating a mental act that requires physical practice (rather than instilling a body of material), real learning would have to derive from activity, not from reading. Internalizing the personal metaphors, models, and strategies that result from practice, repetition, application, and interaction defines learning to write. Students will learn what is, by virtue of its idiosyncratic nature, necessarily omitted from the book.

All that is written down in the textbook will have to be unwritten by the practicing writer. It will be lifted from the textuality in which writing has embedded it and transformed into lived experience. Its reification in the writing of the book will be unravelled into the strands from which it was woven by the teacher explaining and discussing and assigning as well as by the thinking, drafting, rewriting, revising, editing, practicing student. Any reading of the book will result in a deconstruction of its immediately applicable, unstable meanings.

At its best, the textbook might be like Heidegger's fabled hammer, a ready-to-hand tool picked up unself-consciously as part of the action of writing, a ready reference? But one does not imagine any writer referring to the textbook, step-by-step, to write an essay or story. It is difficult to picture even a beginning student looking up "getting started," although his or her remembering a teacher's discussion of that chapter easily comes into play.

Consequently, there is no "book" in this course. The perfect, idealized world made up of the sample compositions in most textbooks, the neatness of the pictured notecards, the cool categories of the outlines, and the horror that greets any proofreading errors—all of the common features of textbooks and their receptions—is a world unlike the sloppy chaos around the student writer. It is a world to be approximated, but never read. Just as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza complained in Volume II that they had been made caricatures by having been put into a book, so also would the writing student appropriately lament the intense, constructive involvement that actually reading the textbook would require. The composition student is a centipede learning to walk by forgetting to count; the classroom teacher meanwhile seeks metaphors for the process and lays aside the abacus.

Similarly, the idiosyncratic, always immediate situation of individuals who are writing (and of an individual's writing) suggests that the faceless, conventional, voiceless authorship of composition textbooks is an appropriate setting within which learning to write occurs. Composition textbooks have, of course, styles. But to have authorial voices, to put forth distinct and individualized views of the subject, and thus to suggest a plurality of perspectives from which a beginning student writer must choose would be to war with the descriptive pedagogical purpose to which the textbook is put. The textbook that asserts that it will reveal complex gnostic truth about writing can unsettle both teachers and students, not because they are all educational fascists or even especially reactionary, but because such a voice would intrude on the personal, unavoidably harried processes of teaching and learning how to make one's own choices. An author's private views disturb the quiet background for the noisy fragmentation of learning to write. The authority of a basic textbook in composition derives from its author's absence—not intruding, assertive presence.

In sum, there is neither book to be read nor an author's text to be interpreted in this course. By virtue of rehearsing common knowledge in generalized and precise conclusions, textbooks allow both teachers and students to write their own course rather than read another's. All that is absent from the textbook, what is not read, will have to be learned. By virtue of avoiding authorial presence, textbooks allow the emergence of authorial voices in their intended audience. By virtue of avoiding specific writing assignments and generally sketching the subject of how to write, textbooks allow teachers and students to enter the virtual, almost theatrical, space in which these processes are practiced and learned. As Mike Rose put it recently, textbooks "are, by nature, static, and insular approaches to a dynamic and highly context-oriented process, and thus are doomed to the realm of the Moderately Useful."10

Obviously, this conclusion has implications for those who consort with the already written textuality of textbooks, with their own dissatisfaction as classroom teachers, and with a publisher. Some of these people end up transcending textuality to "write" and, of course, ipso facto, are not basic textbook "authors"—until, of course, their books are imitated and/or duplicated, and they become, like Aristotle and Blair, written by a tradition they have originated. (In my view, Ann Berthoff, William Coles, Ray Kyrle, Ken Macrorie, and Roger Sale are examples.)11 Richard Lanham and Joseph Williams currently might claim this status, but now that the other has written a new textuality of textbooks about revisions has begun.12) The unread status of the text of the textbook also has implications for those choosing a book that a number of teachers of the same course will "use." They might well relax some of the tensions typically associated with that selection process if they were more conscious of the relative flatness that basic textbooks actually achieve.

But what is really at stake here, and more theoretically interesting, is a new view of the nature of the composition course itself. Most histories of composition teaching are histories of the use of textbooks—of their printings, adopt ions, rises and declines.13 Such histories inadvertently imply that composition pedagogy, classroom practices and methods, and writing courses in general have slavishly followed textbooks and that the way to change the teaching and learning of composition necessarily depends on changes in composition textbooks.

If I have been at all convincing, there is an alternative to this assumption and, therefore, an alternative set of questions that
might better be asked about how students have learned to write. We might instead assume that popular classroom practices (e.g., the nineteenth-century method of teaching writing by having students translate from Greek to English, or the current method of having students keep journals) have depended not on massively adopted textbooks, but on the prior or tacit knowledge and opinions of teachers interacting with students. Considering that people who have written English in the last five hundred years (give or take a century or two) have left us written texts that show them to have been successful writers (relative to current standards of usage and readability), we might conclude that we know very little about the process of learning to write when we describe it only in relation to the variety of rhetorics used in that five hundred years of writing instruction.

The history of composition may remain to be written. Of course doing so would involve considering documents (e.g., records kept by students and teachers) that are difficult to locate or systematize, and asking questions whose answers often represent only speculation. Some already existing discussions, like Ong’s or McLuhan’s investigations of orality and literacy, or Dell Hymes’ description of an ethnography of written language, would contribute to this history. Questions about the history of consciousness, the phenomenological stance of various social and economic groups toward reading and writing, and about the ordinary availability of paper might well call forth variously reliable answers that would also contribute. A chronological account of authors’ and critics’ comments about the composing process itself would tell us more than questionably teleological accounts of the development of prose style and readability (like E. D. Hirsch’s in The Philosophy of Composition) can about the development and nature of the courses in which people have learned to write.

By offering a theory of reading and writing textbooks, I have tried to illuminate, and perhaps release, some of the tension that seems to occur in all of us who either adopt or write them. If there is no text in this class, we may understand how to teach better not by examining, favoring, or condescending to our textbooks, but instead by directing energy to parts of a thorough study of the historical continuity (and possible current discontinuity) of composing as it has actually been learned, and taught, in English.

Notes

1 Thank the Center for Twentieth Century Studies and the College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for the time as a Senior Fellow that made writing this essay possible.

2 Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).


6 I’m suggesting that the rage on the part of “traditionalists” that greets this view of texts— vividly described by George Levine in a recent review of Gerald Graff’s Literature Against Itself and Frank Lentricchia’s After the New Criticism (C.E., February, 1981, 146-80) — is another version of the distaste exclusively “literary” English faculty express about our composition teaching and research. Both emotional reactions have to do with a sense of betrayal caused when students or literary texts are perceived as “unstable,” “open,” and imperfect. Both contemporary literary theory and composition theory are stimulated, rather than made insecure by, a theory that assumes the open status of the text.

6 Is There a Text in This Class?, p. 305.

7 E.g., as Fish points out, “The air is crisp” may “mean” something about the autumn, may “mean” something about Mozart. The point seems self-evident, but only to those who do not argue a narrow new critical view that written language is, apart from author and reader, a stable structure whose meaning is intrinsic and decisive.

8 In the essential phenomenological description of interpretation, Being and Time trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 185f., Heidegger distinguished “equipment that is ready-to-hand” (that we preconceive and grasp in advance) from equipment we see as itself and therefore are conscious of. The carpenter’s hammer is oneself-consciously part of his actions— unless its heaviness, or size, draws attention to it as hammer. The textbook’s descriptions of writing are not, however, usually oneself-consciously used by the student writer.


12 E.g., Edward P. J. Corbett, “A Survey of Rhetoric,” in Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), Second ed., pp. 594-630. Numerous articles about the rhetorics of Blair, Campbell, and Whately assume that the number of editions of these books are an implicit history of


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