USING PROTOCOL ANALYSIS IN EVALUATING RESPONSES TO STUDENT WRITING

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As writing teachers, we are paying more attention than ever before to how we respond to students' writing. Two recent issues of CCC (May and October, 1982) featured articles on evaluating and responding to papers. Our professional meetings regularly schedule presentations and workshops on the subject, and studies are underway nationwide to determine the most appropriate and useful methods of commentary. But before we can fully realize a coherent theory of response, we need to know much more about a tangential topic — how students respond to our responses. One researcher, C. W. Griffin, suggests that although a theory of responding to students' writing is emerging, we must still consider some basic but crucial questions: "How do our students respond to our comments on their papers? Do they react best to praise or censure? Can they understand all our comments? Do they find them useful? And most important, what will they do in response to them?"

Two years ago at Miami University, we began asking ourselves some of the same questions. In particular, we wanted to find out if students heed our comments and actually use them when they write subsequent papers. We turned to protocol analysis for answers to our questions. Although think-aloud protocols can prove clumsy — time-consuming to collect and difficult to evaluate — the procedure struck us as a legitimate way to discover directly from our students what goes through their minds when they receive graded essays. We believed we might learn quite a bit about how students react to teachers' comments if we could collect protocols from the same students throughout a semester, thereby enabling them to adjust over time to the artificiality of a taping session, and if we could assure them anonymity.

PROCEDURES

At Miami our freshman composition courses rely heavily on workshops, where students share drafts with one another and with their instructor. Thus we could draw students from classes emphasizing revision. The students could feel in control of their writing and see evaluation as "the natural conclusion of the process of response and negotiation," a model class situation proposed by Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch. Our students "had the opportunity to receive peer and teacher responses to their writing; . . . to revise as they wish; and . . . [to decide] that their writing [was] finished and ready to be evaluated."

The students who participated in our experiment, then, wrote and submitted papers to be graded after draft workshops and revision sessions. Their instructor, in turn, marked the papers and prepared them to return to the students. Instead of receiving their papers in class along with their classmates, the students in the experiment came to our offices, where we briefly explained the procedures for the protocol. Our main goal in all the sessions was to have students react aloud to their papers just as if they had received them in class. During the protocols, we refrained from answering questions, relying instead on noncommittal responses, or, at times, asking the students about their reactions.

After a pilot run with twelve students from two freshman classes, we chose the following protocol procedure for all subsequent taping sessions:

PROTOCOL PROCEDURE

First Stimulus: We are not sure what we need to know, just that we want to discover your reactions to our comments on your essays and to learn how you use those comments. During this session, please consider any mark, symbol, or statement on the essay as a comment.

Now I'm going to give you your last essay that your instructor has marked, and, if you will, please check the comments, look at the grade, and readep portions of the paper, trying to follow — as closely as possible — the same procedure you would follow if you received the essay in class. As you look at the essay, please respond aloud, saying anything that comes to mind about the comments, the grade, about anything related to the essay or the remarks on the essay.

We want you to be as honest as possible, so say anything that occurs to you and try to keep talking. This is not a test or trap, and your instructor will not see your response.

In a few moments, I will ask you a few questions, but, for now, please react aloud.

Second Stimulus: Now, I want to ask you a few questions about the comments and your response. Once again, feel free to say anything that occurs to you, and please try to be as honest as possible.

1. Are there any comments here that you don't understand? Any you would like to discuss with the teacher? Why?
2. Are there any comments here that surprise you? Why?
3. Are there any comments that you particularly like? Particularly dislike? Or have any strong reaction to — either negative or positive?
4. Which comments do you think will be most helpful when you write your next essay? Which do you think probably won't help you very much when you write your next essay?

Thus far we have collected taped protocols from 17 students, amassing 150 pages of transcripts from over 16 hours of tapes. All the students taped were enrolled in second-semester freshman composition classes which placed equal emphasis on reading literature and writing critical essays. Excerpts we print here are taken from five students in one class. We focus on these five students, in part, because their instructor responds to papers in keeping with the best pedagogical advice currently offered in our professional literature. That is, she limits her commentary to two or three major points per paper, balances constructive criticism with positive reinforcement, notes students' improvement from paper to paper, and generally avoids abbreviations and correction symbols.
Sample Paper and Protocol

The following paper will help us illustrate our protocol procedure. We include the essay here exactly as it was written and marked:

HEART OF DARKNESS

Through the eyes of an ambitious steamboat captain named Charlie Marlow, Joseph Conrad reveals a continent under siege:

To tear treasure out of the bowels of the earth was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.¹

A continent which at the time (late Victorian) held more secrets from its visitors than the farthest planets in our solar system conceal from us today. And from Marlow’s perspective, as well as the author’s, we are forced to view a mysterious land whose inhabitants were regarded as being as inhuman as our most contemporary concepts of alien life on other planets. Africa was a land of beasts on two legs as well as four! But to dismiss the brutality exercised then, on the basis of such misconceptions, would be far too easy, and far too naive an act. Thus Charlie Marlow’s journey upstream, into the core of the jungle, becomes simultaneously, a trek via a different medium (the mind) into the heart of human nature. Therefore, Joseph Conrad’s story is symbolic of the journey in which two parallel yet distinct routes are traversed. The obvious course is Marlow’s travel upstream aboard his steamboat. It is empirical in scope— as evidenced by Marlow’s frequent and vivid descriptions of the jungle landscape and the natives’ plight, throughout the story. The other route traces the journey that takes place within Marlow.

-And since the journey takes place within another dimension of space and time, the nature of its scope must also assume a different form. For this trek cannot be measured in increments of miles or days because such units have no meaning within the environs of the mind. Therefore the introspective journey that takes place from within can only be measured by what Marlow experiences from within:

As Marlow explores the spaces of the dark continent, he probes the depths of his unknown self to discover what is real.²

Thus the author has created a story around the juxtaposition of two unique journeys while linking them to one common destination — Kurtz — the author’s walking, talking, personal embodiment of human nature itself! And it is through the coupling of Marlow’s two modes of travel, the introspective with the empirical, the journey within with the journey beyond, that Conrad allows us to reach Kurtz. The empirical encounter with him is primarily a sensual exercise while the introspective encounter is nothing short of a meeting of the minds!

But Marlow has had his illumination, and like Gulliver come back to England, he cannot stand the smug faces of the people walking down the streets, unaware of the challenge and the danger. Their knowledge of life seems “an irritating pretense.” They do not know that they are and therefore they are not. Marlow scorns them because in the quest for Kurtz he has discovered the dreadful burden of human freedom. His full illumination, his grail, is not transcendent being but the heart of man. Yet it demands the same tests in the journey of purification and produces an illumination equally awful.

Obviously, Marlow’s encounter with Kurtz and all that his concept embodies, has altered his own perception of civilization greatly. However, Marlow’s encounter with Kurtz is but one highlight of a story set in the midst of cultural mutilation — where the limit of man’s inhumanity is exceeded only by the limits of his imagination. And Joseph Conrad seemingly brings us near the limit of inhumanity via the imaginations of those, who when motivated by ruthless exploitation, commit acts of violence and cruelty at a magnitude that defies comprehension.

The greed of conquest necessitates a structured system whose framework justifies the means by which such atrocities occur. Consequently, we are witnessing orchestrated mutilation and pillage based on a system of double standards — a system that justifies not only its own perspective, but that of the author as well. Therefore horror becomes a justifiable means to a profitable end. And thus we begin to see how capable the grizzly acts of conquests can be. Capable of vanquishing entire tribes that once hummed with activity. Capable of preventing children from appreciating the efforts their parents expended in maintaining the painfully simplistic fashion in which they lived — though modest in comparison yet adequate in function. Such are the horrors of inhumanity when profits are sought over humanity — when profits are sought in spite of humanity! And it is the incessant appetite for exploitation that motivates men to travel thousands of miles to an unknown continent and suddenly toss aside all of their scruples of existence, in search of wealth to steal and extract from the earth. Perhaps the greatest horror is what happens inside such men who, like Kurtz, become victims of their own senseless greed — when the motive supersedes the end — when the benefactor becomes his own victim.

Notes


I really like what you have here. I find your analysis both thorough and interesting! Your control of the language is excellent. But, even with such good analysis, you need to include analysis of the text itself. You do, but
in a round about manner. Within your introductory paragraph, or soon, include "Conrad" and Heart of Darkness; and within your text, quotes to link your analysis, the critics' and HOD.

The student — let's call him Jason — had submitted this paper as his fourth essay in the course, and the remarks below come from his third protocol. He entered the interviewer's office, was reminded once again to react aloud as naturally as possible, and the taping began.

Jason's first reaction was typical of most of the students we taped: instead of flipping to the last page to see his grade, he began on the first page, methodically reading all the marginal comments, page by page, until the end of the paper. Of the 17 students we studied, only two chose to look at their grade first.

Furthermore, all the students assured us that if they were in class, they would follow the same procedure. Two students routinely made a game of guessing their grade, based on the teacher's comment, before they reached the end of the paper.

Two excerpts from Jason's protocol are particularly revealing because they are typical of many we heard. The first excerpt is Jason's response to his instructor's end comment, where Jason is praised for his control of language but urged to include in his essay further analysis of the text. We venture a guess that most writing teachers find the instructor's end comment relatively clear, straightforward, and easy to understand. Given the clarity of the comment, a student could then be expected to use quotations and other direct references to the text more fully on future essays. But Jason's actual response indicates that some students will not find the instructor's comment so transparent. His response occurs in the protocol after he has read the end comment aloud once:

Jason: This, uh, "your control of the language is excellent, but even with such good analysis, you need to include, you need to include analysis of the text itself." Okay. . . . "You do, but in a round about manner. Within your introductory paragraph, include Conrad in the Heart of Darkness and within your text quotes." Oh, boy, this will be — I'm not sure what she means here. This could mean — I guess she's saying then is uh, that . . . "even with such good analysis, you need to include analysis of the text itself." . . . "You need to include analysis of the text itself." Okay.

Interviewer: Do you know what she means?
Jason: I get the impression she's saying I'm — I'm just rambling in the paper. This is true to a certain extent. This was a tough one to write about. Horror I wrote about in the other paper. I'm about wore out on what I could say. I've exhausted . . . Uh . . .

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Yes?
Jason: Analyzing the text. That's kind of hard to figure out because this is more or less an interpretation. It's not so much dealing with — it's not a summary. I guess a summary is the best way to deal with the text, you know, in the paper, and I tend not to summarize. So, uh, I guess I'm confused in that what worked before. . . .

Interviewer: You think that's what she's inviting . . . a summary?
Jason: I thought that, uh, just based on what I heard her say in class that she doesn't like us to summarize. "But even with such, you need to include analysis of the text. You do, but in a round about manner." I analyzed things in a round about manner. Well, let's go back to the footnotes and see if they apply. Apparently they do. No comments around the footnotes, so I'm assuming they're all right. I guess they fit in with the rest of the paper. . . .

Jason draws two erroneous conclusions from the teacher's end comment. First, he concludes that his instructor thinks he is rambling. Then, ironically enough, he decides that she invites him to summarize the story, precisely the opposite of the analysis she wants.

During the same protocol, Jason responds in a second revealing — and perhaps more troubling — way to his instructor's comment on a sentence fragment in the concluding paragraph:

Jason: Page three. Ah, here we go. Editing time. "Fragment, but it works stylistically, quite well in fact." [""Capable of vanquishing entire tribes that once hummed with activity."] This is fragmented though. I thought she'd — ("Capable of vanquishing entire tribes. . . .") Well, in essence, the word "capable" here when you start off a sentence, that, I'm trying to link the two sentences with this word. Apparently, uh, the point wasn't interpreted that way, though. That's why, I guess it appears to be a fragment. Right?

Interviewer: Well, you'll probably want to ask her about that.

Jason: . . . A fragment. Uh, I think it means something that — it's just — it isn't really related to the preceding sentences. It's just — it's out of place. It may be relevant, but it's just in the wrong place.

Although Jason's class had worked with sentence fragments, even discussing examples of fragments used appropriately, Jason has apparently forgotten what a fragment is. In attempting to make sense of his teacher's comment, he strays far afield from her intent — to make him aware that he has used a sentence fragment and, in this context, used it effectively. Jason's misinterpreting the comment may seem relatively unimportant, but his confusion and his attempt to decipher the comment exemplify a pattern we found in almost all the protocols. When a teacher's comment is not immediately clear, students often spend considerable time and effort trying to understand it — and frequently fail. Neither student nor teacher realizes the problem, and yet students rely on their understanding of the comments for subsequent assignments, as the following excerpt from another student illustrates:

Interviewer: What do you suppose this circle means?
Student: I have trouble with . . . I love commas. I will put commas anywhere!
Interviewer: What did she do to point out commas?
Student: Oh, well, for instance . . . she'd circle them sometimes, or well basically . . . Oh, here's another one. . . .
Interviewer: Do you know what that means?
Student: Yeah. Either it would, depending on the sentence, go there or it wouldn't go there, or I need one or I don't. Usually when it's circled, it's not supposed to go there, but sometimes she circles the ones I use well I think.
Discussion

We are still tabulating data, particularly examining to what extent students use teachers’ comments from text to text, yet we have found enough consistency in the students’ protocols to answer some of our questions. Many of our findings are not new; they simply reinforce what teachers and researchers have known intuitively for quite some time. And, obviously, data we derive from the protocols are often impressionistic and anecdotal, not quantifiable. What we can offer, however, is a wealth of student testimony to support our claims.

Students consistently comment on the importance of a positive classroom atmosphere, and they react favorably to encouraging remarks. As one student comments:

I’m not so sure that . . . I’m sure that the comments she writes on our papers are very helpful, but the atmosphere which people write in is very important. Uh, personally, I’m . . . ideas in writing, although I think I’ve improved some this semester, don’t come extremely easily to me. And it takes time. It still does. They’re coming faster and faster, thank goodness. But the atmosphere is a lot different. It’s more relaxed here. It’s a lot more conducive to writing. Uh, in and out of the classroom. Uh, if there are negative comments, as there have been on all my papers, uh, there is a tendency on my part to look at the comments and without, without, without, uh . . . without feeling ostracized. I just . . . I just wasn’t comfortable in the atmosphere that I was in in the previous teaching. I was, I just wasn’t comfortable. I don’t think the atmosphere was relaxed . . . Instead of being encouraged to write, I was being told . . . exclusively what not to do. “Don’t do this.” Not necessarily to explore or try ideas and you know, if the ideas are wrong.

Encouraging remarks help establish a classroom atmosphere in which students are motivated to write. Indeed, we cannot overstate how highly students value positive comments and how clearly they remember them from draft to draft. During 16 hours of tapping, not one student indicated that positive comments—even single words of praise such as good or nice—were not useful. One student claimed rather emphatically: “You definitely need the positive reinforcement along with the negative criticisms, but it’s no good to get a paper back and have you know, just criticisms, because it’s no good. . . . I don’t know. . . . You look at the paper and say ‘Oh hell, why did I waste my time writing it?’” Another stated, “Before I hadn’t had much constructive criticism. All I’ve had is just so many negative things like, uh, I don’t know. . . . Even in classes where I got higher grades. Just seems like I got all negative criticism, not too much of what I was doing right. If I was doing anything right at all.” If our study has confirmed any single principle of response, it is that positive reinforcement is the most important tool in an enlightened composition classroom. Teachers should give at least as much effort to praising good writing as to marking errors, suggesting improvements, or any other kind of commentary.

On the other hand, students noted that one word or short phrase comments, such as “unclear,” “explain,” or “be more specific,” were the least useful comments they received. For example, one student questioned about the least helpful comment on her paper pointed to a passage, saying “Right here where she says ‘Unclear.’ . . . (C)The sentence meaning is unclear? I would like to know why it’s unclear, because it’s clear to me and it would be clear to anyone who read the story!” The student’s dis-grunted tone shows that the more global, less personal, comment not only confuses but insults her. Our findings support Muffy Sielke’s conclusion that experienced teachers frame their comments more personally than inexperienced teachers. Most of us became aware early in our marking careers that short labels like “awkward,” “logic,” and “vague” are not genuinely helpful to our students.

More often than not, students found any marginal comment not anchored to the text by an arrow or circle particularly confusing. For instance, one student spent nearly a minute trying to decipher a marginal “What?”

Uh, hmm. Well, let’s look and find out what that question mark and that “What?” meant. I will—I mean I can’t pay too much attention to it because I really didn’t know what it’s all about, but ah . . . It’s in between two lines and I can’t figure out which it goes to.

Another student complimented for “good use of rhet. quest.” had difficulty understanding the comment. It was not anchored by an arrow or circle to the rhetorical question the teacher praised, so the student—after a moment—decided the teacher must have liked her thorough “rhetorical quest” in the paragraph.

And equally useless to most students was any suggestion to find a different word or to improve diction. One student commented,

I started out a paragraph “Stanza 3 contains many meanings.” And she thinks I could use a better word for “meanings.” I . . . She just says, “I think another word would be better.” . . . I don’t know. “Meaning” is the word I wanted. I suppose I could look through a thesaurus or something and find a different one.

The example illustrates how a teacher’s comment can “appropriate” a student’s text, to use Nancy Sommers’ term, and “take students’ attention away from their own purposes in writing.”

Conclusion

We agree with Sommers that our response must show students their options as writers, not limit their choices or deflect their attention from what they can accomplish to what we want them to say. In the best instances, our response proves a significant motivating force, inspiring students to revise, to take risks, to improve. Still, how can we convey cogent, unmuddled messages students understand? Cassette response and grading speeds up the process, initiating a dialogue between student and teacher. And of course brief conferences remain one of the best ways teachers and students communicate directly. But from time to time, teachers might ask students to write reactions to the comments on their papers. Such reactions, taken the day papers are returned and then again one to two weeks later when students are at work on subsequent tasks, reveal what students find useful enough to remember. As a theory of evaluation and response emerges, we must begin to devise means to determine how our students perceive and act on our responses to their writing. One beginning is to recognize that each response we make to a student’s writing involves a rhetorical situation as sensitive and as complex as any that we, as teachers, are likely to face.
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Notes

1 C. W. Griffin, "Theory of Responding to Student Writing: The State of the Art," College Composition and Communication, 33 (October, 1982), 300.


3 Our special thanks to Ruth Jenkins, whose enthusiasm, interest in composition, and unstinting hard work make her one of the best teachers we know.

4 Muffy E. A. Siegel, "Responses to Student Writing from New Composition Faculty," College Composition and Communication, 33 (October, 1982), 304.

5 Nancy Sommers, "Responding to Student Writing," College Composition and Communication, 33 (May, 1982), 149.

LITERATURE AND THE FRESHMAN WRITING CLASS

Frank Devlin
Salem State College

Literature and composition have frequently proved uneasy bedfellows, with neither served particularly well by the union. Often a kind of Gresham's law takes over, and one of the partners, usually writing, gets shunted aside. But even when parity occurs, the combination generally misfires. "As far as literature is concerned," complains Ross Winterowd, "the critical expository essay has been disastrous for English classes." Not has the mix usually affected good student writing. Too often the papers are the kind Walter Staroff labels "perfunctory exercises, not much distinguishable from one another." These, and similar assessments, lead to a melancholy conclusion: that efforts to join literature and freshman writing frequently produce the worst of both worlds—alienated readers and indifferent writers. Faced with this prospect, many instructors have apparently banished literature from freshman writing, convinced perhaps that only radical surgery remains a viable option. A better alternative, however, is not to excise the literary materials but to change the way we have typically tried to combine the two. More specifically we need to reconsider the approach of our standard literature/writing texts, which are largely responsible, I suspect, for the current reluctance to use literature in freshman English. In reshaping our methods, modern composition theory and reader-response criticism perform a double task: they highlight limitations in our present practice and supply guidelines for fashioning a new procedure. This paper will later illustrate, through specific assignments, how these guidelines translate into practice, but to clear the way we first need to see how our textbook assumptions clash with contemporary theories of reading and composing. To see why, in other words, a genuinely effective integration of literature and freshman writing has remained so elusive.

The standard literature/writing texts share remarkably similar assumptions about literature, about readers, and about writing, though some articulate these assumptions more explicitly than others. In treating literature, their modus operandi is decidedly formalistic or new critical. They begin with the premise that a literary work is an autonomous verbal construct, a pattern of "words composed in such a way that there is harmony of all related parts to the whole" (Rohrberger and Woods, 5) and that its "truth" or "full meaning," as another text phrases it, resides in the work itself and can only be uncovered by examining its elements and sensing their relationships (Roberts, 2-3). The richness of a piece may, of course, prompt multiple interpretations, but the work itself is the final, and often it seems the exclusive, arbiter of any reading. Formalism thus determines both subject matter and aim: to discuss and illustrate various literary devices so that students can unlock a literary work, unearth its meaning, and hopefully appreciate its artistry. This overriding purpose also accounts for the characteristic format or signature of the texts, their division into discrete discussions of various literary techniques. Some texts may collapse their discussions or rearrange the parts, but in Stanislavskian terms, they all retain identical "spines."

Their ideal reader, a digger for truth who is objective, detached, meticulous, also displays new critical roots. One text even compares the reader to the scientist breaking down a chemical compound, a singularly apt comparison since literature itself is assumed to be a verbal compound inviting (even demanding) analysis. The texts are equally clear about what disposition the reader should avoid. Subjectivity, involvement, feeling are the apparent bête noires. One book asserts: "Subjective involvement can blind a reader . . . [by] a blocking of the thought process" (Cohen, 7). Another claims that an aesthetic (and thus appropriate) response to literature requires psychological distance from the piece (Rohrberger and Woods, 5). And under the heading "Bad Responses to a Poem," a third text tells students to avoid personal associations and values when reading poetry (Gordon, 86). Though they sometimes refer to reader "reactions" and "responses," by both example and precept the texts disavow the subjectivity and feeling implied in these terms. Consider the evaluation of emotion implicit in this statement: "The approach stressed in this book requires a direct confrontation of the literary work—an intellectual or analytical response to your reading so that you can have something worthwhile to say about it" (Cohen, 6, italics mine). Turning Keats on his head, the texts suggest that the reader flee the hot touch of feeling. The impersonal, the removed, the objective is clearly the desired stance.

When they turn from reading to composing, the texts reflect what is commonly called current-traditional rhetoric, a compositional theory that directly complements critical formalism. Both paradigms make similar assumptions about the nature of reality, the role of reader and writer, and the process each should follow. The texts' treatment of the critical essay evokes a basic tenet of current-traditional rhetoric: that reality is empirical and truth discoverable by inductive inquiry. Though the texts deal with a specialized portion of reality (i.e., the literary piece), they assume that writing about literature, as a mode of critical discourse, represents "the communication of truth that is certain and empirically verifiable," an assumption that nicely fits the new critical view that literature possesses its own self-contained reality, penetrable only through a kind of scientific method. In these complementary perspectives, the writer's role simply mirrors the reader's. The reader as detective ferreting out clues becomes the writer as lawyer presenting evidence. And to communicate the "truths" unearthed by their reading, writers need a form that demands verification of these truths and carries an obvious appeal to reason and understanding. The prescribed structure is a familiar one: introduction with thesis, supporting body paragraphs with topic sentences, and relevant conclusion. The form itself becomes both test and proof of the writers' knowledge and reasonableness as it challenges the writers to demonstrate their case and, if successfully managed, it conveys
the feel of scientific authority." To develop the form requires a similar orderness: read the selection carefully, choose the topic (generally some technical aspect of the piece), formulate the thesis, assemble the textual support, work up an outline, and finally write the paper. The key to this procedure lies in step one, which demands a methodical attention to technique (in the case of a poem, for instance, one text advises consideration of rhyme, meter, imagery, symbols, rhetorical devices, and larger patterns — Bryan and Davis, 11-34). Given the view that truth is fixed in objective reality and thus retrievable through inductive analysis, the recommended method is both appropriate and necessary, and the strictness of form and procedure merely prerequisites for avoiding whatever is shadowy or subjective.

The literature/writing texts thus evidence a dual consistency. As a group, their assumptions and approach are virtually interchangeable, and their individual treatments of reading and composing rest on analogous perspectives: formalism for reading and current-raditional rhetoric for writing. But consistency, as we know, is no guarantee of virtue, and these mutually supportive paradigms are also mutually limited, inadequate for nurturing engaged readers and involved writers. Fortunately, new perspectives are available to replace these paradigms—in literature reader response criticism and in writing modern composition theory (or, as it's sometimes called, new rhetoric). With shared principles for reading and composing, the new paradigms have double value for the literature/writing teacher. They pinpoint the inadequacies of the current texts and, at the same time, provide a new framework for assimilating reading and writing.

As the term implies, reader response criticism shifts attention from text to reader. No longer an autonomous verbal construct, the text as literature does not exist without a reader to give it life, to play, in Norman Holland's phrase, "the part of the prince to the sleeping beauty." For the literature/writing texts this shift is a powerful jolt, a therapeutic change in priorities which redefines the nature of literature, the role of the reader, and the reading act itself. Reader response affirms what the texts slight: the emotional power of the literary work, its capacity to evoke response, to trigger feeling, to stir imagination. Cut off from its energy source, by concepts like the affective fallacy, literature loses much of its intrinsic value and appeal. Reader response also returns to the reader a wholeness and balance lost through the textbooks' tyranny of mind over feeling and in the process dramatically reconstructs the reader's function. Reaffirmation of sentiment, of personal experience, of private associations replaces the textbooks' fear that subjectivity distorts and devalues literature. Here fullness of response requires emotional engagement, a capacity to connect literature and life, not separate the two. Stimulated and guided by the text, readers assume a new role, as creators rather than examiners. Instead of searching for meaning, they shape it. Aesthetic truth, in the final analysis, resides "in the live circuit set up between the reader and the text" and not in the work itself.

This model obviously abandons the impersonal rigor of analytic induction. Fueled by individual personality and experience, reading becomes a more complicated, a more idiosyncratic and, at the same time, a more human endeavor. As they respond to textual clues and private associations, readers shape and often reshape expectations and judgments, engaged in a recursive process quite different from the clean and straightforward procedures described in the literature/writing texts. Such procedures actually invite what Louise Rosenblatt would term an "effenter" rather than an "esthetic" response. Rosenblatt maintains that a text can be read either efFerently or aesthetically, depending on the reader's stance and on the activities pursued during the reading. In effenter reading, attention is "directed outward, so to speak, towards concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading." In aesthetic reading, however, the reader's "attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (24). Though aesthetic reading involves "continuing awareness of the text," it also implies attention to a wide range of responses, largely personal and affective, which are evoked by the piece. Ironically, when the question of aesthetic response is occasionally raised, the literature/writing texts acknowledge its primacy and its affective core (see, for instance, Rohrberger and Woods, 4-5), yet their technical focus and their distrust of feeling effectively undermine this response and train students instead in non-aesthetic or effenter reading.

Modern composition theory similarly discredit[s] the rhetorical assumptions of the literature/writing texts. Like reader response criticism, new rhetoric posits a variable reality, interpreted and shaped by individual response. It is largely a rhetoric of process, in which the dynamics of composing are more important than the features of the finished product. Eschewing the notion that composing is linear, new rhetoric constructs a highly subjective and fluid model, where discovery, planning, drafting, revising often operate simultaneously and seldom in a totally predictable order. This compositional model mirrors what Wolfgang Iser calls the reader's "dynamic process of recreation" and obviously challenges a paradigm which sees composing proceed through a series of discrete stages, each taking the writer a step closer to the completed piece. Modern composition theory also assumes that the writer, like the reader in reader response, initially processes experience through a highly subjective amalgam of personal feeling, past experience, and private associations. For the writer, then, expressive language illuminates, not distorts, as the literature/writing texts imply. By stressing invention, through either heuristics or more free-wheeling probes, modern composition theory further encourages creative inquiry and dismisses the texts' view that "careful note taking" is largely sufficient for discovering truth. Underlying this concern with invention is the belief that writing itself is a powerful heuristic, a unique means of self-discovery and learning, and as such possesses a utility far greater than the texts would suggest, restricted as they are to the critical essay and its communicative function. More clearly than anything else, however, the implied pedagogy of the literature/writing texts measures its distance from modern composition theory. The pedagogy is decidedly product-oriented, as witness the abundance of critical essays most texts provide. These sample compositions, with corresponding discussions of structure and content, imply that writing is learned largely through imitation, that being able to recognize good (or at least acceptable) prose is sufficient for developing one's own writing skills. New rhetoric, with its emphasis on invention and the composing process, clearly disputes this claim.

By standards of reader response and modern composition theory, the literature/writing texts fall in their treatment of both reading and composing. And this, as we have seen, is a shared failure, as one flawed approach simply reinforces the other. Though the reciprocally here is obviously negative, it does underscore an inescapable reality: that whatever their philosophies, literature/writing classes which try to balance reading and composing are always two-way affairs, one activity invariably influencing the other. The stance students adopt toward their reading, the extent of their engagement, the degree of their sensitivity, all reflect in the writing they do. And their compos-
ing, in turn, objectifies and defines the nature and intensity of their response, first for themselves and later for others. Whether reinforcement will occur is not the issue (some exchange seems inevitable if both activities receive more-or-less equal attention); it is the character of the reinforcement that spells the difference, as the literature/writing texts demonstrate. Formalism abetted by traditional rhetoric (and vice-versa) compounds rather than resolves problems. The detachment of one simply feeds the impersonality of the other. The challenge, then, is to reconstruct the nature of this relationship, so that reading and composing become mutually creative efforts, with reciprocal energy and commitment. One obvious kind of reconstructive surgery would involve introducing drafting, peer-critiquing, and revising into the course, activities which are largely ignored in the literature/writing texts. Useful as they are, especially for promoting the notion of writing as process, such procedures won’t by themselves radically affect business as usual. What most needs to be changed is the approach we invite students to adopt when they read a literary piece and the way we go about combining reading and composing.

The exercises that follow attempt to deal with both issues, that is, they try, sometimes separately, sometimes as a unit, to engage students in activities which encourage an aesthetic stance (in Rosenblatt’s sense of the term) and which tap the heuristic potential of writing, each principle fundamental to either reader response or new rhetoric. Though originally designed for the first four selections in a second-semester Freshman English course, the exercises illustrate procedures adaptable to a variety of readings, as the commentary following each assignment underscores.

Assignment I: “The Open Window” (H. H. Munro)

I’ve divided “The Open Window” into three sections and under each have listed issues I’d like you to write about. Don’t start reading the next section until you have responded in writing to the preceding one.

Section I (from beginning to paragraph on p. 348 starting, “She broke off with a little shudder.”)

1. When you finish this section, talk on paper about your impressions of Mr. Nuttel and the young girl. For each, do the following:
   — describe the character
   — compare the character
   — associate the character

2. Talk on paper about how you think the story is going to develop and why you think this.

Section II (to the last two lines on p. 349 starting, “I expect it was the spaniel. . . .”)

1. Based on what you’ve read in this section, talk on paper about your impressions of Mr. Nuttel and Mrs. Sappleton. For each, do the following:
   — describe the character
   — compare the character
   — associate the character

2. Review what you’ve written about Mr. Nuttel in Sections I and II. Talk on paper about similarities/differences you see in your responses and about what you think might account for these parallels/contrasts.

3. Talk on paper about:
   — how you think the story is going to end
   — why you think this

— whether your expectations have changed since Section I

Section III (to end of story)

1. Talk on paper about your reaction to the last two paragraphs of the story.

2. Read over your responses and talk on paper about what you think might account for your reaction.

Commentary. As the initial assignment in the course, the exercise has two related aims: to encourage aesthetic reading and to make students more conscious of what this process entails. Various features of the exercise address either one or the other of these aims. To stimulate an aesthetic response, which requires that the reader attend to personal associations, feelings, and expectations aroused by the text, the exercise employs two strategies, one less obvious than the other. The more indirect tactic involves a pair of common heuristics: writing freely (“talk on paper”) and shifting perspectives (“describe,” “compare,” “associate”). Both procedures, but especially the second, frees the students’ response and prompts them to explore the private images and associations evoked by the characters. Simply having students react to the characters would not likely generate a similar responsiveness, particularly early in the course. The second tactic, asking students to speculate about plot development, is more obvious but no less important, since forming personal expectations is essential for aesthetic engagement and the active participation it assumes. In other places, the exercise shifts from developing the aesthetic response to heightening the students’ awareness of the process itself and what it involves. The distinction is hardly a firm one (by articulating expectations, for instance, students are being reminded that they shape not merely decipher meaning), but some aspects of the exercise more clearly concern expanding understanding than strengthening responsiveness. A good example is its interruption of the reading process by having students write about one section of the story before continuing on. This intervention increases the students’ awareness that they are in fact participating in an ongoing process, a continuing interaction between themselves and the text. Such awareness would be diminished, perhaps even lost, if the students responded only at the end of their reading. Asking students to consider if and how their perceptions shifted also alerts them to the fluid relationship of reader and text. The final ploy for increasing sensitivity to process is having the students engage in a kind of metadiscourse, where they speculate about the reasons for a particular response or impression. Such discourse encourages students to see that they react both to the external meaning of the text and to the private associations they evoke, that they are, in effect, involved in a process where both they and the text share equal billing. Overall, the exercise employs strategies easily transferable to other selections and illustrates how writing can support and nurture the process of aesthetic reading.

Assignment II: “The Use of Force” (William Carlos Williams)

Respond fully to either (1) or (2) below.

1. Think back to your earliest significant memory of an incident when you directly resisted someone in authority, other than a parent or guardian (for instance, a doctor, a policeman, a teacher), but were finally forced to do what he or she wanted. Talk on paper about this incident, responding to these questions:
   — what did the person want you to do and why?
   — why did you resist? what form did your resistance take?
— how did the person react to and finally overcome your resistance?
— how did you feel at the end of the encounter? why?
— looking back at the incident now, what is your understanding of the person's motives and your reactions at that time?

2. Talk on paper about an incident where you've been in a position of authority and had your authority challenged. Select an incident where you've had to make another person do something which he or she didn't wish to do. In your writing, respond to these questions:
— what did you want the person to do and why?
— why did the person resist and what form did this resistance take?
— how did you feel about this resistance and how did you overcome it?
— what were your feelings at the end of the encounter? why?
— looking back at the incident now, what is your understanding of the other person's motives and your reactions at that time?

Commentary: In two ways, one substantive and one tactical, this exercise differs from Assignment I. To prime the personal response assumed by the aesthetic stance, the exercise conditions students to connect the reading to their own lives, to see in the selection reflections of their own experiences. To do this, the exercise pursues a tack quite different from the approach in Assignment I, where writing always followed reading. Here students are asked to write before they read the selection. In fact, in this example and the next two exercises, the students initially write without knowing what reading will follow. This procedure invites an honesty and spontaneity that might be missing if the students explored their experience against the backdrop of the story itself. Such assignments have two requirements: that the situation they pose be broad enough to accommodate each student's individual experience, yet specific enough to parallel a central issue in the selection that will follow. By prompting students to associate the reading with their own lives, exercises like these trigger a more intense response to particulars that might otherwise distance students from the piece. In "The Use of Force," for instance, the preliminary writing encourages students to associate the doctor/patient conflict with their own encounters with authority and thus occasions a deeper reaction to the fictionalized struggle, even though its specifics might not match (or even approximate) anything in the students' own lives. The exercise also creates opportunities for discussion and further writing. In "The Use of Force" example, the students separated into groups (according to what part of the exercise they had completed) to discuss their individual experiences with authority. For the next class, they read "The Use of Force" and talked on paper about parallels and contrasts between their encounters (and those of their group) and the conflict in Williams' story. The additional writing reinforced the personal perspective already nurtured by the initial exercise and further encouraged the kind of individual engagement essential to the aesthetic response.

Assignment III: "My Oedipus Complex" (Frank O'Connor)

Part I.

Write about one of the following two topics. Be as specific as you can, but don't try for a polished piece of writing. Just talk on paper for as long as you can about the topic you select.

1. If you have any brothers or sisters between 4 and 10 years younger than you, talk on paper about how you felt when he or she was born and about how you felt when your brother or sister was still an infant. What was your attitude toward your parents' treatment of your new sibling? Why?

2. Describe a situation which you as a young child had strong feelings about (either positive or negative). Perhaps a birthday party, or an incident at school, or a special present, or . . . Describe what your feelings were at that point in time and explain why you felt that way.

Part II. (Don't do Part II until you have responded fully to the topic you selected for Part I)

Now switch perspectives and consider your reaction from your present viewpoint, that is, from the perspective of an adult who is looking back at how he or she reacted and felt at a particular time in the past. Talk on paper about:
— what you understand now about the situation that you didn't when you were a child.
— what your attitude is now toward the way you reacted as a child.
— how you now see yourself and the situation differently from how you viewed yourself and the incident as a child.

Part III.

Suppose you were going to write a short story about the situation you've been discussing. First review your notes and decide in general terms what it is you would want the story to show about yourself. Talk on paper about how you would characterize yourself in the story.

Then consider the issue of point of view. Suppose that you were going to use the first person "I" point of view. Would you want the narrator to be you as a young child or you as an adult?

In terms of what you want your story to show, discuss the advantages and/or limitations of each of these points of view. Then select the one you think would be more effective for your purpose and explain the reasons for your choice.

Commentary. This exercise, like the preceding ones, encourages the students' personal identification with the reading but also engages them in questions of literary craft. Such issues are not, in themselves, inimical to the aesthetic perspective, which assumes responsiveness to a whole range of concerns, including the writer's technique. The problem arises when examination of craft takes priority over personal response, when attention to style is detached from the students' overall experience with the text. To maintain this balance, the exercise makes students approach the technical issue through an experiential framework. Part I of the exercise, which resembles Assignment II, initiates this process by having students explore a personal experience that parallels the reading to follow. Parts II and III build on these explorations and illustrate how a preparatory exercise can expand to include considerations of technique, in this case point of view, a central issue in "My Oedipus Complex." The procedure here is quite different from the standard textbook approach, where definition and illustration generally precede application and where the students, in all likelihood, would first be told what point of view is and then asked to consider how it functions in a particular selection. This approach immediately distances students from the technique. Point of view becomes a term to be learned, a device used by professional writers, whose craft, so far as the students can tell, emerges from some mysterious amalgam of talent and skill. By leading students through an experiential exam-
inination of point of view, the exercise reverses this procedure and in part demystifies the process that shapes a writer’s technique. More specifically, in Parts II and III, the students adopt a writer’s perspective and decide for themselves questions of craft. Working with the material developed in Part I, the students first resee this childhood incident from their present perspective as adults. This re-evaluation, in effect, elicits the kind of exploration that often helps writers determine point of view, and in the process it also lets students experience the double vision that underpins O’Connor’s ironic humor. Part III narrows the focus and directly addresses the question of point of view. Using their earlier explorations, the students now assess the value of alternative points of view, in light of what they intend their hypothetical stories to convey. In this way, they engage decisions relevant to O’Connor’s piece, and to other fiction as well. Parts II and III thus provide an exercise in experiential learning as the students explore for themselves (and through their own experiences) the meaning and significance of point of view. And by priming their response to both content and craft, the assignment prepares students for a more intense, and thus more aesthetic, reading of “My Oedipus Complex.”

Assignment IV: “The Eighty-Yard Run” (Irwin Shaw)

Part I.

The following clipping appeared in the August 26, 1971, Michigan University Banner.14

Yesterday afternoon, Michigan University police arrested Steve Gardner, 32, for disrupting football practice. Gardner, a 1960 Michigan graduate, was booked for public intoxication and disorderly conduct. Gardner was a member of the university football team from 1957-60 and a star prospect when he came to Michigan as a freshman.

Police report that Gardner, while intoxicated, attempted to join the team drills. When asked to leave, Gardner became distraught and university police had to remove him from the stadium.

According to police, Gardner, who lives in New York City, had not been back to the university since he graduated, and police gave no details about why he was in Ann Arbor yesterday. They did disclose, however, that Gardner’s car contained a number of clippings from his college football days as well as stories about his exploits as a high school All-American.

Suppose that after reading this clipping you decide to write a short story about Steve Gardner. The only facts you know are those contained in the news account. Your story will make use of these facts, but obviously you’ll need to do a lot more thinking about Steve Gardner and his life.

Before you draft your story, you decide to develop a plot outline. But to do this you need to make a number of decisions about Steve Gardner, about his life, and about how you’re going to structure your story. So you first decide to set up a list of questions that you think you’ll have to answer for yourself before you can develop your plot outline.

What might these questions be?

Part II.

Your group should have decided on at least five important questions that you’ll need to answer to develop your plot line. For the next class, answer each question as fully as you can. After each answer talk on paper about the reasons for your response. For instance, suppose one of your questions is: “Where should the story begin?” First you would respond to this question, describing the point at which you think the story should begin. Then you would explain why you have decided on this starting point.

Part III.

Read Irwin Shaw’s “The Eighty-Yard Run.” As you read, make notes of the similarities and differences between Shaw’s story of Christian Darling and the scenario you developed about Steve Gardner. When you finish, look over your note and talk on paper about the major differences and similarities you see between Shaw’s story and your plot line.

Part IV.

Talk on paper about the following:

1. What struck you as most interesting or surprising in the major differences and/or similarities between your plot and Shaw’s? Why?

2. Select one or two major elements in your plot that were different from Shaw’s. Do you think Shaw’s work would be more effective or less effective if he had used these elements? Why?

3. In what ways did first composing and reflecting on your own story line affect your response to Shaw’s “The Eighty-Yard Run”? For instance, did devising your own story line before you read Shaw’s work draw your attention to anything in Shaw’s story that you might not otherwise have noticed?

Commentary. This assignment represents another variation of the preparatory exercise. Instead of beginning with the students’ own experience as a way into the reading, the exercise initially places the students outside themselves, focused on a news account that foreshadows the selection they will read next. This account, like the beginning scenarios in Assignment II and III, must be both accessible and limited. That is, it must present a situation recognizable to the students yet restricted enough to parallel the literature that will follow. In this case, the news story evokes the picture of the ex-athlete who lives in the past, an image familiar to the students and basic to “The Eighty-Yard Run.” This strategy, at the same time, extends the experiential approach to literary craft, started in Assignment III with the students’ explorations of point of view. Here the students face a more complex task since creating a story line involves questions of characterization, setting, and plot, as well as point of view. But, as before, the students work out the issues for themselves. They develop their criteria, evaluate their options, and directly confront the implications of their decisions. The exercise, for instance, does not give the students specific items to consider when constructing their plot line. To get them started, it simply suggests a common heuristic, the formation of relevant questions. The students thus proceed from the ground up, simulating the process of the professional writer, as they test and adjust their choices along the way. Though they don’t work directly from their own experiences, as in previous exercises, their story lines invariably reflect their individual perceptions and associations. And the preconceived image with which they start leads them to handle issues that Shaw deals with in “The Eighty-Yard Run.” Part III of the exercise is a natural extension of their preliminary writing since it requires students to incorporate their scenarios into the reading experience itself, thus inviting a response to the text that is both personal and attentive. The final section of the assignment closes the circle by having students reflect on their reading-writing process and through these reflec-
tions sense more clearly the creative relationship of reader and text, a relationship they have just experienced for themselves.

In theory and design, assignments like these offer a clear and attractive alternative to the literature/writing texts. And they effect, as well, marked shifts in class procedure and student attitude. The literature/writing texts invite a fragmented approach, with stretches of reading and discussion, followed by intervals of writing, mostly done out of class and generally discussed after the fact. The exercises, however, create a different structure and pace, not only because the students write for almost every class but also because the writing itself emerges with the reading, anticipating it, accompanying it, and eventually succeeding it, in the form of finished papers about the reading experience. The assignments also produce a more student-centered course, partly because they encourage group work and other kinds of student-to-student exchanges, but principally because the discussion itself evolves directly from the students' work rather than from the instructor's Socratic probes. Letting student writing generate and control discussion may appear chancy, even quixotic, since the procedure assumes that the exercises will provoke reasonably full response. If my own experience is any gauge, such wariness is unnecessary since student response is usually ample and provocative, primarily, I suspect, because the students find the assignments challenging yet not intimidating. Though they force students to do their own thinking and creating, the exercises don't presume a right answer or a hidden agenda that can freeze student thought. Working directly from the students' writing, classes thus avoid the hit or miss character of sessions where the instructor initiates questions about the assigned reading and waits, often in vain, for lively student discussion to follow.

Nor surprisingly, the students' papers reflect this heightened commitment and sense being pale clones of the textbook models, themselves generally voiceless and impersonal pieces of criticism. Though I can't document the process, a chain reaction of sorts seems to take place. The exercises stimulate a responsiveness to the literature which, in turn, carries over to the student essays about their reading. Whatever the process, the personal perspective and individual insight nurtured by the exercises clearly appear in the finished pieces. They are, overall, more honest, more daring, and more genuine than the papers students wrote when I used a literature/writing text. And, ironically, they display more sensitivity to textual subtleties than when I emphasized close reading and technical analysis. Most telling, perhaps, is their variety. Though students often write about identical selections, their papers are strikingly different, in tone, emphasis, and approach. Better than anything else in the course, this range demonstrates the individuality of the aesthetic response, that personal evocation of meaning which makes reading and writing mutually supportive endeavors.

Notes
10Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," College Composition and Communication, XXVIII (1977), 122-127.
12This is an abbreviated version of the "cubing" procedure described in Elizabeth Cowan and Gregory Cowan, Writing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), pp. 20-27. Before doing Assignment I, students spent a class practicing "talking on paper" and "cubing."
13Russell A. Hunt, "Toward a Process-Intervention Model in Literature Teaching," College English, 44 (1982), 349. Hunt suggests a number of useful procedures for getting students to attend more closely to the text, though he's concerned with the introductory literature course rather than the literature/composition class.
14This clipping was devised for "The Eighty-Yard Run" and the entire assignment covered three classes. At the start, students divided into small groups and stayed in these groups for Parts I and II.

READER REACTION MODES AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

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That reading and writing are complementary skills is a tacit assumption borne out by the traditional freshman English curriculum. Their close relationship is also demonstrated by parallel trends and research in the study of each. Reading and writing are now both viewed as processes rather than activities. It is commonly assumed that both are learned through active practice rather than passive acquisition of knowledge. Yet although prac-
tics based on rhetorical theory are now commonplace in the college classroom, the approach to Freshman English reading, especially literature, has not developed space.

In an article entitled "Culture and the Deep Structure of the Literary Curriculum," Alan Purvis delineated the three structures of the literary curriculum, valid both when literature is taught as a separate entity and when it is part of a Freshman English course:

1. Imitative structure studies literature within a social context, assuming students must know or be taught something about the cultural milieu which generated the text at hand.
2. Analytic structure which uses close internal scrutiny of the individual work.
3. Generative approach which examines the effect of a work upon the reader's emotions and imagination.

Any teacher of literature is aware that the generative approach is the one used by most inexperienced readers. It gives rise to student comments like "I found the story depressing" (emotion) or "If I had been the main character, I would have acted differently" (imagination). The generative approach is damaging to the first two structures. It is antithetical to the analytic structure as the students are not conforming themselves to the Werk an sich; it usually comes in conflict with the imitative structure as students substitute their own contemporary milieus for those which generated the work at hand resulting in culturally invalid assumptions.

Despite the dominance of the generative approach among students, instructors and literature textbooks stress one or both of the first two structures in classroom discussion, textbook teaching apparatus, and writing assignments. The inevitable clash in approach may generate confusion, frustration and hostility between students and instructor and is usually treated in one of three ways.

The instructor may opt to teach about literature rather than to teach literature. In a predominantly lecture format, the instructor introduces the students to literary terminology and structures, showing them how these may be applied to the texts at hand. Or the instructor may limit class discussion by setting ground rules like those advocated by Barrett J. Mandell in his article "Text and Context in the Teaching of Literature." Mandell outlaws from class discussion all qualitative judgments and all expression of emotional reaction, which he terms "ego-reactions," limiting the students to the confines of the Werk an sich.

Neither of the above methods give credence to the generative approach. The first ignores its existence; the second denies its validity. Neither addresses the complementary nature of reading and writing. But the Process-Intervention Model developed by Russell Hunt does both. Using modern reading and rhetorical theory, Hunt argues that reading is a complex, recursive interaction between the reader and the text at hand, learned best through guided practice and instructor intervention
to slow down and interrupt the process of reading for our students so that they (and their teachers) can reflect on the transaction between themselves and the text, modify and enrich it, reassemble and reperform it — that is, grasp some measure of control over it.

Methods of interaction Hunt suggests include reading aloud, using prepared texts, and making students test their expectations consciously through intervention techniques: stopping the reading process to ask questions, discuss expectations, perform exercises based on the close procedure, or rewrite the work from a different point of view.

Hunt's Process-Intervention Model is theoretically sound and pedagogically useful, though it does limit students and teachers to in-class reading of the works at hand, at least until the process becomes internalized, and thus is most effective with poems, short fiction and essays. Although in many ways it parallels modern rhetorical theory and practice, thus recognizing the connection between the reading and writing processes, it is based on the assumption that departments of English — and, by extension, traditional Freshman English classes — teach three different subjects — writing, reading, and literary study — which Hunt feels should not be confused.

Despite Hunt's strict separation, overlap is present in the last assignment he suggests. The student-generated story rewrites shifting point of view can be examined and criticized as student writing samples as well as reactions to reading. A deeper study of reader reaction using findings from rhetorical theory indicate other areas of overlap and show that the three different English subjects need not be strictly separated; that overlap is natural, inevitable, and helpful to students' mastery of both analytical reading and writing skills.

James Britton's study of student writers isolates three functional categories of writing: "transactional writing," the goal of which is to inform, persuade, or reach; "poetic writing," or language as art, the goals of which are primarily aesthetic and imaginative; and "expressive writing" or personal writing which is used to clarify the writer's own feelings and may be viewed as speculating on paper.

Bruce Peterson rightly points out a parallel between Britton's "expressive language," based on rhetorical theory and Linda Flower's "writer-based prose," the result of her research in reading and linguistics, showing both stem from an affective-personal language matrix. At the mature reader's level, affective or emotional reader reaction can be empathetic or judgmental. That is, the reader may empathize with specific characters or incidents within the work or may judge the whole in a positive or negative emotional fashion. Peterson indicates that a personal, emotional response to reading is a valid reader reaction, citing Britton's statement that "expressive writing may operate as the matrix from which differentiated forms of mature writing are developed" to conclude that the first encounter with a written text is emotional and that emotional reader response may also be the matrix from which other, more mature, reader responses develop.

Peterson's theory may be expanded to include parallels with Britton's other two writing categories as well. Transactional writing is essentially objective: intellectually and factually oriented. Its counterpart is intellectual reader response that can include reading for information as well as the intellectual analysis of formal written structure. As both are the most abstract of the categories, both are mastered last among readers and writers. Poetic language has its counterpart in imaginative reader response. Like poetic language, imaginative reader response is essentially creative and consists of speculation beyond the confines of the story, both through picturing setting and characters not specifically described or "fleshing out" the story by speculating about events and characters beyond the boundaries of plot. Both imaginative and emotional responses develop early within eager child readers as the many fantasy games based on story-book characters which children invent seem to testify.
Interestingly, all three approaches are touched upon by Mandell. He terms both the poetic and the emotional response "ego-reactions," views them as counter-productive to the reading process within the confines of the literature class and bans them from the classroom. But is this the right approach? Britton advocates that poetic and expressive writing should be seen as valid exercises within the English curriculum. His studies indicate that having students write in all three functional modes results in better writers. Might not fostering reader response in all three reader reaction modes foster better readers as well?

The correlation between Britton's functional writing categories and reader response modes demonstrates that each writing category has a corresponding reading mode. Emotional reader response is best fostered by expressive writing. Students may be asked to keep journals containing their emotional responses to the material they have read. If classroom discussion slips from an imitative or analytic framework into the generative approach, the instructor may intervene, calling for some quiet writing time during which students use their journals to express and clarify their emotional responses to the text at hand. Even if students pass in the writing thus generated or read their work in class, its status as expressive, writer-centered prose should be maintained; it should not be evaluated by the same standards the instructor uses for transactional prose.

Imaginative reader reaction calls for a poetic response. Many students, particularly weak readers, have trouble responding imaginatively to literature. Having students rewrite the story from a different point of view is a fine exercise as is having students continue the story beyond the boundaries of plot or describe scenes not explicitly treated in the narration. Recasting the work from one genre to another is also effective, especially a recasting from poetry to prose or drama. Students may enjoy constructing interviews with fictional characters, either on paper or orally in class. Instructors might experiment with other non-written classroom activities as well, having students create skits or artwork based on the text at hand. Although this is the most difficult response mode for many students, most soon find a poetic or imaginative response to literature a pleasant, freeing activity, especially once they discover that no single response is the right one and learn to appreciate their classmates' diversity of imagination.

-Intellectual reader reaction calls for transactional response and fits within the framework of the traditional Freshman English or literature class. Intellectual responses include essays, themes, and term papers — the traditional student writing of the Freshman English class.

By using a Process-Intervention Model based on Britton's functional writing categories, each type of reader response can be expressed within an appropriate mode. Rather than suppressing or ignoring some student responses — an approach which often results in student frustration and confusion — the instructor can intervene with a writing activity appropriate to student needs and can modulate from one response mode to another, generating writing activities in all three functional writing categories. A student comment like "I found the story depressing" or "I would have acted differently" need not be viewed as inappropriate or divisive. It can be used as the basis for writing activity in the expressive or poetic mode, generating further, valuable class discussion, either about the text at hand or about the nature of reader response.

Notes

4 Hunt, pp. 349-357.
5 Hunt, pp. 346-347.
8 Peterson, p. 462.

INCOHERENCE AND HAMSTER-HEADS

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In bursts of optimistic enthusiasm, teachers of composition have sometimes called their writing students "beginning writers." We do this perhaps to convince ourselves and our students that they do indeed come to us unhoned and inexperienced but ready to be writers. Thus we see our task as one of giving them experience, and from this experience we hope will emerge more skillful writers who will have something of substance to say and will be able to say it with some kind of style. Unfortunately, students are not really "beginning writers," but often come to our classes well-prepared to write in what they have been taught is the correct manner. They merely have to discover what we want from them or what we "like."

Teachers of writing have probably brought this upon themselves. When the student reads into her first college composition class, she carries with her an easily readied writing survival kit. Many students say they have been told that "good writing" uses big words to sound impressive, includes difficult sentence patterns, and fits into that binding structure, the five paragraph theme. One student even went so far as to deduce, certainly basing judgment upon past experiences, that a paper which included all of the above mentioned elements would invariably be considered an "A" paper. "English," as Ken McCarrie has so aptly termed it, has become the student's safety net. By our teaching methods, by providing criteria for satisfying the instructor, by the very act of implying that there is such thing as "correct" writing, we have protected our students from taking any risk, from realizing any means of discovery. Whether they have anything to say or not, the safety net of "English" always is there to catch them. "We instruct them in formulas and reward conformity." And if there is any doubt what kind of writing such an environment produces, notice the elements of "good writing" evident in one student's response to our first assignment that asked them to compare the tone and organization of two syllabi written by the instructor:

Personally, I like the approach used in the syllabi. A gradual building up style that leads to specific topics on how and what we will be learning. Lots of good adjectives that let the reader feel confident in the writer, of the syllabi.
The syllabi are written by a person who is determined to get their point across to the reader. It is also written with a feeling of understanding and caring.

I get a positive feeling of someone who will be there to answer questions as well as have an opinion, may it be bad or good, of our future papers.

My own writing needs a lot of work. I generally find myself rewriting papers over and over. I tend to have run on sentences and lots of miss spelled words. The idea of writing rough drafts, I like because it will give me a chance to improve my papers.

The hardest and the most surprising thing about this assignment was writing it. I have not written anything in so long and I find myself a little rusty. I was surprised by the assignment. Writing on a syllabi is not a common thing.

Aside from the obvious grammatical errors (fragments, pronoun agreement, comma splices, etc.), and spelling mistakes, the most striking characteristic of this student's paper is its lack of substance, its barrenness of any concrete details. The awkward wording of the paper, coupled with the numerous vague assertions it makes, reveals the writer's lack of involvement with the topic. Evident too is the student's uncertainty of what is expected in the way of style, and this resulted in what we as teachers often see in student papers, a feeble attempt to produce mature and impressive writing: "A gradual building up style that leads to specific topics on how and what we will be learning." Another student's paper began with the wonderfully existential but enigmatic statement, "Being that I have lived... What does this mean? To this question our student invariably replied, "That's the way our high school teacher taught us to write." In other words, it sounds good.

In a fit of frustration and after many hours of reading through more of the same empty prose, we excerpted sentences, phrases and whole paragraphs from student papers, hoping that by presenting them with examples from their own writing of trite phrases and cliches, they would see how cluttered their writing was:

Dear Class:

After reading the many different examples of student writing that I received from the class I somehow, get the feeling that some of the various people in Writing Workshop I, English 1203, are somehow not taking the class and/or assignments very serious. But also I feel sort of like everyone who turned in a paper wasn't really exactly truthful. By this I mean, personally, I think the students were not writing from the particular viewpoint of their own individual experience but rather used the concept of what good writing is or should be or was expected to be received from teachers in previous English classes. Though this is a very difficult problem, there are many other and various though different examples, so to speak, of good aspects to be gained from the general information that I was presented with in these similar but somewhat different papers. I'm really learning a lot.

The initial response to the letter was that "It was good," though some students later admitted some confusion near the end of the jumbled paragraph. What the students could not see was the letter's vacuous style and convoluted sentence structures. They were so conditioned by previous writing experiences that they were unable to distinguish between clean and cluttered compositions.

Though one of us had been using assignments from a textbook and working with a day-to-day syllabus and the other based her class on sequenced assignments, we both realized that neither method was helping our students to write any differently. The assignments were ineffective in confronting the fundamental problem in our courses, and we knew that we needed to provide our students with a writing exercise created to jolt them out of their safe and well learned responses — a "violation of expectations—presenting someone with an unexpected response or situation which calls the brain to attention." Art comes from creativity, and undoubtedly the five-paragraph theme began as a foundation for future writing exercises. However, the form has become dry and predictable. We now expect artistry from often artless assignments. Students become very adept at producing bland but "correct" writing. Rewarded for their artless efforts for years, freshmen will chuckle at the teacher who asks them to try something new. Therefore, we developed a pair of assignments based on our desire to tear down their expectations, assignments which we hoped would not allow students to produce the same empty and confusing prose they had mastered so well. "Innovation does not come about when everyone is programmed to come up with the standard 'right' answer, but when each person applies his individual intelligence and perceptions to a problem, searches out the alternatives and discovers a creative solution".

Hamster-head assignment:

You are sitting in the local Taco Bell eating a burrito when a woman wearing a large hamster head walks in. She orders her food then sits down at a nearby table.

Suddenly, in the middle of her meal, she jumps up, and throws her taco into the air.

"I'm an ambassador from the planet Jupiter," she screams.

You quickly finish your burrito and Coke and, after depositing your trash in the wastebasket, hurry toward the door.

You push the door but nothing happens; the door is jammed. You hurriedly run for the other door and try it. It's jammed too.

The woman is now doing a strange dance on top of a table and chanting in an unknown language.

You look behind the counter and notice all the employees are gone. You and the crazy woman in the hamster head are the only people in the Taco Bell.

What happens next?

Incoherence assignment:

Write incoherently for five minutes. Try to avoid making sense. After you are through, trade papers with your neighbor. Using what he or she has written, make a coherent piece of writing. Look for some sense in the nonsense. Create meaning.

At first reading, the aim behind these two assignments is obscure. Incoherence and hamster heads seem to be incongruous with established composition theory. But the students' responses to the assignments proved that our seemingly irrational antics were effective because we were "presenting them with an event for which the standard par answer is inadequate." Suddenly the table that the crazy woman in the hamster head is dancing on breaks and she falls through. As she screams the table closes back in on her and her hamster
head is caught on top of the table, while her body is underneath, trapping her.

She screams at me to help her, then choking and pointing at me. I decide to touch her. So I run around the counter and start making tacos, barritos and cups filled with beans. I bring all the food out to her. Even though she's trapped, I cautiously move toward her.

I can now see her long hamster like teeth that create such a tremendous over bite! I grab a straw and pry her hamster mouth open. I start to pour the bean cups down her throat. She chokes a little but one after the other, they all slide down her throat.

Then her beady little hamster eyes suddenly became big, black pits. I kept pouring the beans, then I felt something grab me under the table. She had a hold of my leg and was pulling. I felt hitting my head on the bench.

After several minutes I woke up to find myself surrounded by long green stuff. I looked around some more and noticed the green stuff was surrounded by a square metal container. I realized what had happened. She had shrunk me down and threw me into the lettuce that they make tacos with.

Then for the first time the crazy woman with the hamster head asked in English. She said, "Here come some customers, let's see if they want to order some tacos."

Three people walked in, and when they did the hamster woman's head looked normal. The people stepped up and gave their order. "We want two barritos, three bean cups and four tacos... with lots of lettuce." The hamster head crazy woman turned around and smiled viciously at me and said, "coming right up."

There are still grammatical and spelling errors but the paper is alive with concrete details. Instead of a vague statement, "I ate some food," we now have, "I ran around the counter and started making tacos, barritos, and cups filled with beans." The student's writing has become filled with details rather than hollow generalizations: "I can now see her long hamster like teeth that create such a tremendous over bite!"

The student's verb choice also reveals the distance of the writer in the first paper and the involvement of that same writer in the second. In the first paper, the student chose dull, lifeless verbs such as like, let, feel, needs, have, and was. Contrast these with the highly charged verbs in the hamster-head paper: dancing, screams, trapped, ran, grab, torture, chokes, and shrunk. We feel action and movement as the writer dashes toward the climax of the paper, where the hamster-head woman turns to her in her newly shrunk, gone state and "smiles viciously."

Perhaps more importantly, the student has crossed the barrier of stylistic expectations. In the first paper, the writer tried to fit her writing into what she thought was a mature style. But, presented with an unexpected and novel situation, the student just "wrote," her own style growing naturally from the prose itself. In this way, the style is a benefit to her paper, not an obstacle to overcome.

Without expectations, and therefore without stock responses, the writer must become involved. Sentences become clear—sentiment vibrant. At first we have: "I get a positive feeling of someone who will be there to answer questions as well as have an opinion, may it be bad or good, of our future papers," a sentence with many words that says very little. After the shock of the hamster head assignment, we get short but powerfully vivid sentences: "Then her beady little hamster eyes suddenly became big, black pits," and "The hamster head woman turned and smiled viciously at me. . . ."

The incoherence assignment was an attempt to reveal to the students their own internal creativity. By providing them with senseless words that were written by another person, and asking them to create a meaning from that incoherent writing, the assignment allowed them to realize that they had the ability to generate ideas without specific prompting by the teacher (i.e., giving topics):

First student's writing:

Today before bar we went. Mad mad write sick tired to be leaving week parents.

Second student's response:

I really needed a drink before class today. I'm finding that I need alcohol in my body more and more to keep me steady. I don't know what is happening to me, I used to be a good, down to earth person with my life ahead of me. Now when I look at myself, I see nothing. Believe it or not, I never even had a taste of alcohol until last September. . . .

I went to parties every weekend during school and Laura and I often went out after cheerleading practice to drink too. I started bringing flasks of alcohol to school in my pocketbook just to relax and have a good time. Not once did I think I was becoming dependent upon it. This morning however was the first time it really hit me. I finally looked at myself a year later as a freshman in college.

This student, when asked what her worst writing problem was, said that she lacked creativity. In fact, a number of the students in this class felt the same way about themselves. The incoherence assignment, by its non-directed call for students to create from nonsense, proved to the students that they did have their own ideas and didn't need to be told exactly what to write. They were forced to pull meaning from the nonsense, and, therefore, from themselves.

One word of explanation and perhaps justification. We have no sense that these techniques will work as a semester-long method of teaching. It may well be that any mention of "informative writing, formal writing, theme writing," or whatever we choose to call it, will automatically cause students to fall back on their stock of pat responses. But we still see a value in what we have presented here. Students have a definite sense of good writing — of mature writing. And they are quite certain that their teachers have the same notions. What assignments like the hamster head or incoherence assignments attempt to do is violate the expectations of freshman writers. The quality of the students' responses is not only clear to their teachers but to the students themselves. The clarity and vitality is obvious even to the most insecure writer. They have written clearly and without the aid of false sophistication. The creativity, honesty and charm come from the students' own minds. If for no other purpose than to make them realize that good writing exists outside what they have come to rely on, and exists within themselves, we will risk appearing a little zany.

Notes

NEW TEACHERS AND STAFF GRADING SESSIONS: THREE PROBLEMS

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It may happen once a year or several times each term. It may involve many samples or just a couple. It may ask for a holistic response or require detailed comments. It may preserve anonymity or open everyone’s judgment to public view. It may be boring to some, intimidating to others, and perhaps relished by an oddball few. But regardless of its frequency, its format or its reception, in English departments large and small the staff grading sessions may be almost as inevitable as trashy novels on the best-sellers list.¹

The popularity of grading sessions probably results from their two most fundamental benefits: to allow a group of writing teachers to see how their judgments compare, and to provide practical training for the newer people on the staff. In the first case, grading sessions encourage open discussion, sharing of views, even friendly argument. In the second case, grading sessions furnish inexperienced instructors some groundwork in an important aspect of teaching writing — response to and judgment of the students’ work. The controlling assumption, of course, is that in grading sessions we can learn from each other.

But ten years of helping to train writing teachers have taught me that new faculty (TAs or otherwise — the key is lack of experience) may find staff grading sessions much less educational than the rest of us do, for three specific reasons.

First, the inevitable disagreements over grades, which we veterans may consider the meat (and the delight) of a grading session, can seriously shake the confidence of beginning teachers. Second, while those of us who have taught awhile know that the assigned mark is only one phase of responding to student writing, our less experienced colleagues may come away without such recognition, and thereby lose one of the major training benefits of the grading session. Third, however carefully detailed the assignment descriptions accompanying the sample papers, differences in interpretation among participants are almost sure to arise, and such variations frequently breed contention rather than beneficial exchange. Such assignment hasses can be especially troubling for new teachers trying to learn their craft.

Theme-grading sessions can be very worthwhile, but those of us who plan and run the meetings should be aware of potential problems for new teachers, and should make conscious efforts to minimize them, or to turn them to advantages.

Grading Disagreements

My discussion will deal with general cases, but let me start with a recent grading session I participated in. The staff considered eight student papers, four each on two separate assignments. The instructions asked us to mark the samples on a scale of A through F, and to assume that they were written near the end of the first semester course in freshman English. On the tally sheet listing grades assigned by 33 teachers, the results on five papers showed substantial grouping (e.g. Paper #2 was marked F or D by 26 people, and the highest grade was a C). But the results on the other three samples showed significant disagreement (e.g. Paper #6 was given five Fs, 13Ds, ten Cs, four Bs and one A).²

For many of us, the discussion of our wide disagreements was, I think, instructive. It was also entertaining. The tone of most of the meeting was typified by one colleague’s comment: “I would like to ask Professor Slate how he can justify assigning to this obviously poor paper a grade of B.” Professor Slate’s reply was spirited.

But, talking to some brand new teachers after the session, the mood I caught was dispirited. One fellow said, “Jesus, if people who’ve taught ten years can’t agree, how will I ever be able to decide what’s good writing and what isn’t?” Someone else chimed in, “A difference of one grade I can understand, maybe even two sometimes. But four?”³

Over the years, conversations like this after staff grading sessions have convinced me that rookies tend to see mainly the negative side of grading disagreements, because their inexperience inhibits their sense of perspective. But there are some things we can do to ease the discomfort.

First, we can point out that the statistical discrepancies revealed on the tally sheet may not be as severe as they appear. For example, when one instructor grades a paper C-plus and another awards a B, there is more consonance than dissonance; both marks, after all, acknowledge that the writing is successful to a degree. An unpracticed eye may see a larger gap than really exists.

Second, we can show new teachers that extreme divergence frequently reflects minority judgments that call attention away from a majority consensus. For instance, in the grades on Paper #6 cited earlier, 23 of 33 staff members (70%) gave marks in the C/D range.

Third, we can demonstrate that larger grading disagreements may result more from idiosyncratic evaluation than from substantive evaluative differences. For example, there is always the hard-liner who says, “I will not pass a paper if the kid can’t put in apostrophes where they belong.” And usually there is the warm-soul type who comments, “There are serious stylistic weaknesses all right, but I thought the student did a wonderful job of describing the experience honestly, and I think that’s worth a B at least.”

I am not saying that we must try to explain away grading disagreements; evaluation of writing is and must remain a largely subjective process. But new teachers can be taught to use conflicting judgments — accepting some, discarding others — to firm up their own grading standards.

Grade Out of Context

While a staff grading session necessarily revolves around the As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs, deciding upon the appropriate letter is of course only one small part of a complex task. But new teachers don’t always recognize this truth.

For instance, another typical new teacher comment after a grading session is, “I gave that sixth paper a C-plus. But then I agreed with the guy who explained why he gave it a B and I agreed with the gal who told why she gave it a D. Now what?” The speaker has missed an important point by taking the grade out of its context (as students themselves tend to do). I would ask the speaker, “Why did you agree with those people? What did they say about the paper that made good sense? Wouldn’t
those points be good ones to make to the student, quite apart from the issue of what the grade should be?"

New teachers can spend 90 minutes listening to their senior colleagues talk about (or argue over) grades, and not fully recognize the larger goal of evaluation — to help the student learn to write better. Again, there are some things we can do to remedy the problem, during the grading session itself.

One obvious approach is the common one of asking session participants to include written remarks along with their ratings, and to duplicate selected comments on handouts for the meeting. A more immediate technique is to have the session leader (and/or one of the more experienced instructors) make full marginal and terminal notations on one or two of the samples and to display these via an opaque projector during the discussion of grades. A third way of generating context is to ask staff members to talk about the specific kinds of improvement they would like to see on hypothetical revisions of the sample papers.

All three procedures de-emphasize the tally sheet and help to stress the notion that putting a letter grade (or a number, or whatever) on a paper is far simpler, and in a way much less important, than learning to write good comments. Then the new teachers can see some of the whys of grades and some of the heart of writing-improvement suggestions, and can gain some sense of the vast continuum of choices writing teachers have at their command in the response process. Perhaps most important, new teachers can thus remember that grades do not exist in a vacuum, that the real job of "grading" goes far beyond the mere passing of judgment.

**Hassele Over Assignments**

I have never attended a staff grading session in which the discussion, at some point, did not disintegrate into quibbling over the assignment(s). Complaints usually start with someone justifying an unusually low grade by claiming that the paper did not meet the assignment. The problem may reach the other extreme when someone else admits to having awarded a higher-than-merited grade out of sympathy because the assignment was "impossible" (or "vague" or even "stupid").

More frequently, assignment-hassles take this form: For a certain sample paper the staff's grades show rather wide disagreement. During the discussion one instructor defends her grade by saying that she thinks the assignment calls for an argumentative essay and she condemns the sample because it does not use that mode. Another person believes that the assignment asks for expressive writing only, and he is certain that the student has performed that task very well.

Having organized or assisted with the planning for quite a number of grading sessions, I know that one seldom deliberately chooses sample papers that are off the topic, and I certainly know that one does not purposely seek out impossible, vague or stupid assignments. Furthermore, I understand that many excellent writing assignments leave some leeway for the organization and rhetorical stance of the students' responses, and that no grading session can reproduce the full classroom context out of which a paper grows. So while I have learned to endure assignment-hassles as almost inevitable, I nevertheless find this aspect of grading sessions more annoying, or boring, than instructive. And I don't think I'm alone.

Worse, if hassles over assignments bore or annoy experienced instructors, they may confuse and dishearten the new teachers on the staff. Typical post-session comments on the problem include: "Eric thought the assignment was dumb and gave the paper a B. But the kid couldn't write two coherent sentences in a row. I don't understand," and, "I thought the assignment was OK; at least it made sense to me. Now I wonder if my grade was totally out of whack," and, "I know good assignments are important, but I thought we were here to learn about paper grading."

To lessen new teachers' dismay when assignment-hassles seem to interrupt the real work of a grading session, we more experienced faculty can make every effort to de-emphasize our own idiosyncrasies, dismount from our hobby horses and remember that indeed we can never know exactly what an individual instructor would do to prepare students for a given writing assignment. We can willingly suspend our disbelief and do our best to assume that, somehow, the paper probably does meet the assignment; we can be open-minded enough to grant that an assignment which strikes us as unhappy may work well for others in their classes.

We can also provide, once again, some perspective for new teachers. For example, we can point out that in fact there is something to be gained by discussing assignments as we talk about grades — after all, students themselves may interpret assignments differently, and new teachers may profit by observing such variations, if we eschew quibbling and address the real issues.

**Conclusion**

Staff grading sessions are designed to help us hone our skills as writing teachers, and we would do well to remember that new instructors have not yet developed much of a blade to sharpen. We need not attempt to shield new people from every minor rough spot in the training process, but some awareness and anticipation of likely problems with grading disagreements, with putting grades in context, and with hassles over assignments may prevent them from enduring needless perplexity or discouragement before we even have a chance to step up to the grading wheel.

**Notes**

1It may seem superficial to outline a practice for which I claim such widespread use and which can take so many specific forms. But for the sake of later discussion let me assume that most staff grading sessions will share most of the following characteristics: Usually a packet of papers is distributed a few days in advance of the meeting and the composition staff is asked to assign grades without consulting among themselves. Descriptions of the writing assignment(s) which generated the papers are included. Sometimes specific comments are solicited, or the staff members may simply be directed to make notes and come to the meeting prepared to discuss and defend the marks they assign. Often grades or comments must be turned in before the session and a tally sheet will be prepared, showing the results for each sample, usually in the form of a chart.

2For the sake of simplicity I have included plus and minus grades under the principal letter — but remember that, say, a B-minus and a C-plus technically show closer agreement than do a B-minus and a B-plus.

3An assignment is always surrounded by the overall structure and progression of the particular writing course itself, and by the instructor's specific pedagogical goals at a given point in that course. Furthermore, performances on assignments can be shaped by commonly used techniques such as chalkboard brainstorming, focussed free-writings, in-situ questions raised by students in class, and small-group reading and exchanges of rough drafts. But even an explicit admonition on the grading session instructions, such as, "try to avoid getting hung up on the assignment(s)," seldom heads off the difficulty.
THE REVIEW
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Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing
C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon
Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1984
171 pages Introduction by James Britton

Composition is a field suspended between two apparently contradictory views of itself — one immediate and utilitarian, the other loftier, more philosophical. The articles and responses to articles in popular composition journals are a running record of the tension between these two perspectives: how often is a broad, theoretical discussion of writing greeted with "Fine, but how? Where are the assignments that will bake this pie in the sky?"
And yet, increasingly, it is the broad philosophical issues which have begun to define composition as an intellectual discipline; consider the work of Walker Gibson, James Britton, and James Berlin, to name just a few. Any current bibliography of composition theory is likely to be laced with works from cognitive psychology, semiotics, theoretical linguistics and epistemological philosophy. These days, names like Cassirer, Chomsky, Saussure and Bruner are more likely to be cited in discussions of writing than those of Whately, Blair, Brooks and Warren.

But it's all very heady stuff — theories of signs and signification, theories of meaning and mind, theories about the nature of reality itself — and writing teachers may well ask how, with all the more immediate demands we face, we're supposed to find time to become philosophers, too. In our more reflective moments, though, we recognize the decision we face is not if we will become philosophers; language itself implicates us in profound and difficult philosophical dilemmas, just as it implicates us in social and political ones. We know too, in those moments, that, as Ken Macrorie puts it, when we "fail to see our composition classes in any larger world," our teaching must fail, even if our students do not.

All of which leads me to Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing, a sometimes dazzling, sometimes disturbing book which, much to its credit, helps us look at the teaching of writing in as broad a philosophical context as one can imagine without neglecting more practical pedagogical questions. About half of the book's seven chapters are given to detailed explication of specific teaching choices, while the rest present a sweeping intellectual argument for what the authors call "the modern tradition" and against the epistemological assumptions of "ancient rhetoric." Knoblauch and Brannon don't just tell us that they prefer one approach, one strategy or assignment over another; they want us to understand why they do what they do and why they reject what they reject. Every discussion of practice is surrounded by a discussion of principle. The practical pedagogical discussions are useful and entertaining, but it's the philosophical rationale for the modern tradition that makes the book as lively and as provocative as it is.

For Knoblauch and Brannon, composition teaching is in the midst of a battle between two distinct, powerful forces, the ancient and the modern traditions, and the goal of this book is not to make peace between them. "Doubtless compromise is an effective solution to many problems," they concede. But not this time. The blur on the back jacket cover explains why: "The authors argue that the two traditions are fundamentally incompatibe in their assumptions and concepts, so that writing teachers must make choices between them if their teaching is to be purposeful and consistent." This is nothing less than a struggle for the hearts and minds of composition teachers, teachers who have not, the authors explain, set out to teach in antiquated, ineffective ways, but who simply have not been able or willing to think enough about the larger implications of what they do (or don't do) in a writing class. Many, perhaps most writing teachers teach by the seat of their philosophical pants, taking what the authors call "the smorgasbord approach," a little of this, a little of that, depending on what comes along that looks interesting or workable. "The trouble is," Knoblauch and Brannon tell us, "the variety that unreflective eclecticism appears to afford in classroom activities comes at a price of contradiction at a deeper level of intellectual perspective." Time has come for teachers to wake up, and to catch up with modern ideas about language and learning which should be informing their teaching, but is not.

If all this sounds a little evangelical, well, I think it's supposed to — Chapter Two, "Ancient Rhetoric in Modern Classrooms," is subtitled "That Old Time Religion." The answer the authors put forth is "more reflective instruction"; in fact, on the first page of the book they "encourage teachers of writing to become philosophers." But really, they do more than encourage, they insist:

We believe it is important for teachers to become more conscious of the philosophical dimensions of their work because nothing short of that consciousness will make instruction sensible and deliberate, the result of knowledge, not folklore, and of design, not just custom or accident.

The concern over the influence of "folklore" and "custom" is a crucial one for Knoblauch and Brannon, since, as they see it, the problem has been that many teachers of writing have been teaching, for the most part unknowingly, under the malevolent spell of classical assumptions about language, knowledge and world, a spell which casts a shadow over everything they do, be it creating assignments, organizing classroom activities, or responding to student writing. These teachers have, in effect, absorbed (or have been absorbed by) this tradition without knowing that they have; they serve its limited ends, and they teach with its largely discredited methods: the authoritarian teacher at the center of things, the stifled class discussions, repetitive drilling and workbook exercises, the almost exclusive focus on form and on issues of "prose decorum," response to student writing that is directive and superficial, "seeking only to bully the student writers toward some 'Ideal Text.'" Standing opposed to this ancient tradition is "modern rhetoric," what the authors call the "writing workshop," the features of which they define, explain and defend most clearly in Chapter Five, "Modern Rhetoric in the Classroom: Making Meaning Work." Here's an abridged list of the essential features:

1) It is student centered.
2) It assumes that composing is a competence which develops through use.
3) It is facilitative, not directive, and collaborative, not authoritarian.
4) It reverses the ancient priorities of correctness and clarity first, fluency second.

It is these four characteristics that make the modern tradition "attitudinally distinct" and therefore "irreconcilable with a traditional approach."

The theoretical battleground on which all of this gets hashed out is nothing less than the history of Western speculative
thought—as I said, this book is not shy about taking a sweeping
look at teaching writing—with the crucial turning point for the
modern tradition being "the epistemological crisis" of the sev-
eventeenth century, that time when "ancient faith in the probity
and completeness of traditional lore about the world gave way
before a newly skeptical habit of mind"; Descartes, then Locke,
then Kant and "the organic coalescence of mind and nature
through symbols." The decline of traditional concepts of knowl-
edge and language is found, then, in the rise of philosophy in the
"New Key," in the recognition of human beings as "animal sym-
bolicum" rather than "animal ratiocinum," as Ernst Cassirer was to
put it. I won't spend time here with the philosophical argument
itself, except to say that in two slim, quick-moving chapters,
"Discourse as Knowledge/Knowledge as Discourse," and
"Understanding Modern Rhetoric," they offer what appears to be
a sound (if sometimes overly glib and facile) account of the
movement of epistemological philosophy over the past 250 years
or so. What interests me more than the history, though, is where
all of this philosophy leads them, how they connect the abstract
concepts to current concerns in composition teaching.

For example, in the second chapter, as they describe the
troublesome influence of ancient assumptions on modern compo-
sition, they enter into the fray over the usefulness of "aims" and
"modes" of discourse, suggesting a kinship between the overly
restrictive "ideal intentions" of Aristotle and Cicero and "con-
temporary taxonomies of intent." In particular, they question the
models of discourse suggested by James Kinneavy and James
Britton. "Which of Britton's ideal aims best describes John Dry-
den's Essay on Dramatic Poetry?" they wonder. Or, to put the
question another way, "Is the Declaration of Independence persuasive or
argumentative?" Their real target here, it seems to me, is a lim-
iting and limited overvaluation of form as an end in itself, a ten-
dency they see as having ancient sources. While one can
appreciate their concern about the possible "damaging miscon-
ceptions" about writing which can result from thinking about
discourse in highly schematized ways, as in other places in the
book, the authors overstate their case and risk obscuring their
point. As with any such schema, what Kinneavy and Britton attempt
is to clarify by making distinctions, by fudging a bit about actual
boundaries between "kinds" of discourse. That people
overread the schema doesn't make them "wrong" or useless, it
simply means that we must be careful about taking our models for
the actual world. Most serious discussions of "types" of dis-
course, including Kinneavy's and Britton's, begin by acknowl-
edgeing what Kinneavy calls "overlap." As he explains, "We have
to separate the aims in order to study them... But it is pain-
fully clear to anyone who takes a look at actual discourse that very
few pure aims of discourse exist" (60). In his brief introduction to
this book, Britton makes the same point as he responds to the
authors' "Which aim?" argument: "Much of the difficulty dis-
appears when it is recognized, following Jacobson's lead, that
many or all functions may operate together in any piece of
writing."

Later in this same chapter, however, Knoblauch and Brannon
make what seems to me to be a more compelling attack on
"phony genres," like the five-paragraph theme, the "Term Paper," and the "compare/contrast" or "definition" paper. When
a teacher assigns something like the definition paper, they say
that the point of some writing is to define for its own sake,
that such writing is generic. In fact, however, defining is
nothing more than one of many strategies available to writers for
accomplishing their purposes.

On a more practical level, Chapter Five, "Modern Rhetoric in
the Classroom," describes and explains some of the alternatives
which make up the writing workshop, all the while continuing
their sizzling attack on traditional practices and the source of
those practices in ancient rhetoric. As they compare the two tra-
ditions, they stress that simply knowing or using "new" and
"modern" assignments is not enough—"closest classicists know
about peer groups, personal writing, and revision, like everyone
else. But they think like Cicero just the same." Even such appar-
ently "non-traditional" assignments like "personal" or "expressive"
writing can become "just another school genre," a ritual
exercise "nearly always resulting in formulaic writing." What
matters is not method but attitudes about learning, language
and the process of writing. The aim of the writing workshop is
to involve students in tasks that will stimulate learning and
writing, which means asking genuine questions and letting
students play a meaningful part in defining the nature of the ac-

tivity. To this end, the workshop rejects the assigned topic, "the
most artificial of possible stimuli," as well as letting students
choose" their own topics, which gives the "appearance of free-
dom" but which traps writers into equally artificial topics like
"My Summer Vacation."

The actual writing sequence they use to illustrate the work-
shop sounds interesting enough, if a little complicated. It begins
with the teacher asking a question; this time it's "Who knows
you best?" Students write briefly in class about some personal
experience which will lead to a reflection like "No one knows me
better than I know myself," or "That person really understands me.
"The teacher joins in the writing, intentionally choosing an
incident which will "contradict an anticipated 'typical'
response" (a strategy which seems to me to undercut somewhat
the "realness" of the teacher's role), and then everyone meets in
groups of four or five to discuss what they have written. Event-
ually, students form a "position statement," make a trip to the
library for "further information," and finally end up writing an
essay and taking part in a debate in class. It is not entirely clear
from their description how writing about "Who knows you
best?" might comfortably lead to library research, or how sides
for the debate would form up, but, as much of what they
present, most readers will recognize and admire the basic ele-
ments of the sequence: student initiative in shaping the activity,
peer response, and lots of writing.

Chapter Six, "Responding to Texts: Facilitating Revision in
the Writing Workshop," is another place the authors make direct
contrasts between "failed ideas" of the past and what should hap-
pen in the modern classroom. They discuss in considerable detail
how teachers can encourage or, without meaning to, discourage
substantative revision in student writing. They offer both prac-
tical advice (and, as in most places in the book, friendly warn-
ings) as well as hefty theoretical background. Unlike many
recent treatments of this topic, which suggest only general tax-
onomies of kinds of revision, or which vaguely complain about
how little we know, this carefully written chapter uses sample
student writing and teacher responses to spell out what they see
as the difference between "facilitative response" and "directive
commentary." Basically, the facilitative approach takes the form
of a dialogue between writer and reader, either the teacher or fel-
low students. This dialogue focuses on what a writer has actually
said and why she has said it, rather than on mechanics or stylistic
issues. They point out that the important difference between the
two approaches is not simply that one is "content" response and
the other "form" response—comments on content can be just as
directive and coercive as those made about style or mechanics.
Rather, the significant difference is one of authority and attitude;
what matters, they rightly insist, is who retains control over the
writing, the student or the teacher. When a teacher imposes her
own agenda on the writing and limits the student's role to "copy
editor," no serious revision is likely to take place.
But even as we smile with recognition at familiar principles and
activities, the book leaves us with the disconcerting task of
deciding exactly which side we are on all of this. And, trouble
is, there are only two sides to choose from, if we are to believe
the tone and much of the substance of this book. Are you a
"closet classicist"? Am I? What does it mean to be "allied with
Cicero," secretly or otherwise? Does the "old mahogany desk,"
that symbol for all the sins of traditional teaching methods,
"abide in the hearts and minds" of every proponent of classical
rhetoric in the modern classroom? Knoblauch and Brannon's tar-
get might be the failures of traditional pedagogy — nervous,
directive response, the hobbyhorse of prose decorum, phoniness
of various kinds — but at times it seems their enemy is the past
itself; their language gives them away: "the dogmas of antiq-
uit y," "the failed ideas of the past," "encrusted belief." What is
ancient, that is, pre-Cartesian, is suspect. And while their pre-
sentation of the movement in epistemological philosophy may
be sound, I'm less sure about the argument they finally construct
from it. In places it seems too pat. Too neat. There's our modern
world, "founded on a perpetual search for truth," and then there's
the ancient one, with its "privileged ministers of truth" and its
"passive veneration of conventional wisdom."
Britton remarks in his introduction that "this is a book that
makes no compromises," and while the authors are certainly
right that too often compromise leads to contradiction and
inconsistency, it seems equally risky to approach ideas of this
complexity in such dramatic, either/or language. Knoblauch and
Brannon are, I think, quite right to claim that there is some-
thing "modern" about modern rhetoric, and to reject the old
chestnut about all modern ideas in composition being ancient
notions cast in modern jargon. Classical rhetoric was based upon
what we have come to see as "false" or at least incomplete
assumptions about the relation between language and substance.
But, question is, does that render all subsequent observations
and generalizations false? Do pre-Cartesian rhetoric and philos-
ophy have so little to say to the modern teacher of language?
Britton also says this book will stir things up in our field
because of the "courage displayed in the authors' statement of
faith," and while it certainly is a courageous book — it seldom
ducks a fight — I'm wondering if it isn't more likely to stir
things up because, in places, it speaks loudly, often with intem-
perance. It preaches and scolds when it needs to relax and share
the good deal of learning it has to share. Too often, Knoblauch
and Brannon fall into what Richard Lloyd-Jones once called "the
messianic incantations which accompany the one true way" (17).
My concern is not that the book offends some brittle standard of
scholarly precision — it is a well documented, carefully crafted
book — but that the breathless urgency of their voices might
cause some already skeptical readers to dismiss what is said with-
out having listened. That would be a shame because most of
what is said needs saying, needs to be heard and debated by
teachers at every level, from every discipline. I can't recall a dis-
cussion of writing or the teaching of writing that has as many
useful and invigorating things to say; and yet, in the end, the
tone of the argument becomes a distraction, an irritant, a weight
under which the important business of the book begins to sink.

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