THE COMPOSITION CLASS: OUTWARD BOUND

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I suppose that this paper owes its existence to an uneasiness that I have felt coming on for some time—a uneasiness that seemed to center around a need for more direction in my writing assignments. It all began with an epistemic splitting of the ways. There were two directions in which I wanted my students to move: first, toward an exploration of the phenomenological world around them, and, second, toward an exploration of their own thinking and knowing. The issue became one of how to incorporate both of these movements into my writing assignments. As so often happens, the uncovering of one problem led to others. I found myself wondering why the admonitions to “be specific” and “Use concrete details” that had adorned my writing assignments for so long suddenly ranked low. Indeed, I found that I was beset by many of the same questions of voice, tone, style, and composition in creating a writing assignment as my students were in addressing the assignment. How could I ask them to choose a voice with care when I could not resolve my own conflict over who to sound like? Was I to be their encouraging, ever-sympathetic friend or the antagonist who bullies and badgers their best out of them? Difficult questions, these.

But while struggling one day with what it was that I did want from my writing assignments, the words outward bound came to mind. Not sure of anything about the phrase except that it somehow stood for the way I wanted my assignments to be, I decided to go off in pursuit of that somehow. The results of that pursuit follow.

As near as I can determine, my first, real awareness of the term came from a conversation with a friend who was contemplating taking part in an Outward Bound wilderness experience. He was after some new direction in his life—a situation that seemed to parallel my own with my writing assignments. This initial awareness established, Outward Bound allusions began surfacing for me everywhere—in commercials, in Reader’s Digest articles, even in the popular slang expression, “Go for it!” They all seemed to be suggesting a mystical conversion experience, sure to cure all ills. I decided that my first step would be to separate the fact from the fiction of the Outward Bound movement, and so I began by examining its history.

The outward bound concept appears to have begun with Kurt Hahn, a German physician who, first in Germany and then in Scotland, established schools whose aim was the development of the individual through the development of an attitude toward life. Athletic improvement was stressed in these schools and was achieved through a system whereby steadily increasing demands were made on the body through graduated exercises. A student could start at any level and improve by the daily execution of a number of activities. In keeping with Hahn’s belief that everyone could improve, these schools were more interested in the average or poor athlete than the good one. And in keeping with Hahn’s desire to develop attitude rather than just skill, new athletic techniques that might facilitate or shorten the learning experience were frequently discouraged. As Hahn told one of his teachers who wanted to introduce a new and more successful method of high jumping, “We want to develop people through jumping, not make jumpers out of people.” And so when his students became known not for their intellectual achievement and physical prowess—although these were considerable—but for the gleam in their eyes, Hahn was delighted.

In 1941, with German submarines attacking British ships, it became clear that the younger sailors in both the Merchant and Royal Navy lacked the emotional and physical stamina of the older sailors and were not coping as well with the real and imagined dangers of the torpedoing. Hahn and a friend, Lawrence Holt, established the Aberdovey Sailing School to train and toughen young sailors. Several features were introduced at this time, including the name Outward Bound, that were to remain in subsequent Outward Bound schools. Among these were physical tests such as a ropes obstacle course; a cooperative “watch” composed of twelve boys who remained together for a month and shared responsibility and decision-making; and community service projects, in particular, rescue work.

From this beginning, Outward Bound schools have spread throughout the world, school directors being free to shape their schools according to a personal vision, the capacities of the staff, and the opportunities offered by the particular locale. It is asked, however, that new traditions be adopted carefully, only after searching investigation to see that fundamental meanings are being kept. Among these meanings are the belief in the value of creating adversity in order to overcome it, the belief that important things happen to people under stresses and challenges different from those met in everyday life, a belief that there are some things that cannot be taught although they can be learned. And, most important, there is the belief in teaching an attitude that will help people survive rather than teaching survival itself. More about this attitude later.

This, then, is what I learned about the outward bound spirit as it has manifested itself in wilderness schools all over the world. My next step seemed to be to examine more closely the connection that my subconscious had already made between this spirit and my writing assignments. To do this, I decided to reconsider the goals of my writing assignments in light of the essential goals of Outward Bound: 1. self-discovery; 2. the extending of perspectives; 3. the appreciation of choices as critical to comfort, safety, survival; 4. the extending of problem-solving abilities; 5. a concern for others. Here is what I found.

The first of these goals, self-discovery, is not new to what I shall call outward bound composition theory. There is the knowledge of self that Young, Becker, and Pike found vital in order to identify the shared features and build the bridges between writer and reader. A second approach to self-discovery comes from William Coles who says that “a writer’s responsibility to someone else” can “come only through his seeing that his first responsibility” is “to create himself for himself.” In Coles’ classroom, writing assignments invite students to become conscious of the self—the literary self—that can be construed from their language. Definitions are asked for—definitions of terms,
definitions of situations—and these definitions are examined "as a problem of self-location, as the way in which a writer through describing what he sees, describes himself as a see-er." Or perhaps as see-ers. For Coles illustrates the multiple selves that writing can reveal to us in the following assignment, taken from The Plural I, which comes toward the end of his course:

You are a student at an institute of technology. Although no major is offered by the humanities division of the institute you are required to take certain humanities courses.

Why is this, do you suppose? Is such a requirement desirable so far as you are concerned? (230)

The assignment goes on to discourage stock responses about "a balanced education" and a "well-rounded man." Coles and the class, in discussing a student's response to this assignment, arrive at the conclusion that one value of the humanities and of this writing course for the student "is to enable him to express, to create, not the 'something extra' that's him, but the someone else, the someones else, he believes himself to be (238). From such writing assignments that lead to the discovery of self and selves comes also the awareness of the self-creation that is involved each time words are put into sentences. Outward bound discoveries, certainly.

Still another approach to self discovery is that of Robert Holland whose article "Piagetian Theory and the Design of Composing Assignments" offers a model of an assignment in terms of a developmental view of learning. It suggests that an assignment can through a series of questions locate a writer's point of control and then draw the writer on from a level at which he feels capable to more complex forms of thought and statement. Such an assignment shows limits and it opens up possibilities. It suggests that cognitive growth and development require someone else to ask the questions that move you along, that there is a type of development that can only exist if someone else has designed it for you. I felt that this theory with its recognition of the role of others in providing the experiences that assist growth paralleled Hahn's views strongly—I was to return to it many times.

I decided to move on to the second Outward Bound goal—the extending of perspectives. This goal immediately brought to mind Young, Becker, and Pike's well-known heuristic in which a unit is looked at from particle, wave, and field perspectives and also is viewed as having contrast, variation, and distribution. It was not long before my writing assignments had taken a new turn. Witness the following:

Writing Assignment 4

In Writing Assignment 3, we looked at a childhood experience and/or relationship and tried to get meaning from it by examining it from the particle, wave, and field perspectives.

Now, let's use these perspectives again as we once more analyze meaning—this time in a word. Select a word from the writing that you did for Writing Assignment 3, one that you found necessary to your writing. First, examine the word at the particle level, giving denotations and connotations. Next, move to the wave level: What did this word mean to you at one time? How has the meaning changed for you as a result of your experience? And, finally, approach the word from the field level: What have been the observable effects for you of this change in the meaning of one word?

Compose the first draft of a paper that examines the word you have selected from the perspectives indicated above.

This assignment, then, was my way of assisting my students to engage in self-discovery, in varying perspectives, and in more complex forms of thought and statement. We had begun.

It now seemed time to move to the third of the Outward Bound goals—the appreciation of choices. In the wilderness, choices are easily recognized as critical to the comfort, safety, and even survival of Outward Bound participants. These participants share the decision-making responsibilities for their group or watch—e.g., they map routes, navigate rivers, decide whether or not to proceed through fog. Instructors are trained to let decisions—right or wrong—stand whenever possible; should a decision made endanger the group, they are to wait as long as they can before stepping in. In the composition class there are also choices to be made, not so obvious and dramatic, perhaps, but still critical to the literary self. Who to sound like in a paper, which "I" to present to an audience, how to see an assignment, how to make from the assignment a point significant enough to base an essay on, how best to promote the sort of reader-writer relationship that will result in cooperative activity—these are among the choices facing the composer of written meaning. Like their wilderness counterparts, writers' choices need not be right the first time. Indeed, an initial sense of inadequacy, a confrontation with one's own limits, is vital to both experiences. Revision is a natural outgrowth of an outward bound classroom, a necessary stage for writers re-examining conscious choices that they have made, in light of the possible failures that these choices have produced.

The question of how to get writers to see beyond their initial choices, how to get them to turn revision into more than just polishing the veneer of a first draft, led me to the fourth Outward Bound goal—the increasing of problem-solving ability. It also led me to Joseph Williams, who in "Cognitive Thinking, Cognitive Development and the Teaching of Writing" links the ability to solve a problem to the ability to distance oneself from it, to stand apart and develop an ironic stance toward it. "By seeing a system from a distance," he says, "we create the possibility of controlling rather than being controlled." And, I thought, by seeing ourselves from a distance we become aware of our own limits and can take steps toward extending them. Williams would have writers gain control of their writing and of their revision by freeing themselves from unquestioning deference to rules and to authority, in particular, the authority they see vested in their own writing—in a topic sentence, in a first unrealized point, in a first draft. I see replacing these authorities, the authority of the outward bound program itself, with its risks, its challenges, its rewards. It is an authority that students would have to take on willingly if the program is to work. They must agree, after all, to have a try at being their own persons. This personal commitment, also, is part of Outward Bound.

The self-determining attitude toward authority that I have been discussing is echoed in many ways by Outward Bound.
Basic to the Outward Bound experience is the belief that out of situations that progress from stress to temporary failure to success comes a special kind of self-esteem, self-reliance, self-respect. This attitude is what we are after for our students also, I think, and so we might borrow some Outward Bound methods to create it. This would mean writing assignments that fit into a planned sequence of tasks and challenges, inviting students on to ever higher levels of critical, analytic thinking. It would mean also that students would have failures along the way, inevitable and even desirable failures, for these failures would make the successes that followed special kinds of successes. There is a success that must be earned, a success for which failure—or a kind of incompetence—is a necessary condition. This is the success of Outward Bound.

Here is where the role of the instructor becomes especially critical. It is up to the instructor to foster the sort of classroom climate in which failures can become positive learning experiences. That these failures be anticipated and ungraded is as important as the attitude toward these failures that the students pick up from the instructor. If they don’t feel that they can risk much in a first or second draft of a response to an assignment, they won’t. If students don’t feel that taking risks is a good thing or that they are safe with the teacher-peer responses to their writing, they will withdraw into the “safe” English and the writing that risks nothing and ventures nothing. What we are after, then, are the planned risks and seeming chaos of an outward bound learning situation, not an uncontrolled and uncontrollable situation that presents real threats to the writer’s self-esteem. Which situation writers find themselves in will depend on how well their instructors are able to educate themselves and their students in how to respond to what someone else has attempted. Sources that I have found valuable in illustrating the type of response that furthers intellectual growth, responsibility, and freedom are Knoeblauch and Brannon’s *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* and William Coles’ books, *The Plural I* and *Teaching Composing.*

The subject of peer responses led me into the fifth and last Outward Bound wilderness objective—concern for others. Outward Bound participants may arrive at base camp separately and as strangers, but this soon changes. Placed in “watches” of approximately twelve, they are given tasks to perform that cannot be done alone, that depend upon their trusting one another and functioning well as a group. As I have just shown, the outward bound writing class also depends upon a feeling of community, caring, concern, and responsibility in its members for one another. Corresponding to the “watches” described above are the small groups in which individuals have the opportunity to discover at least one more of the “selves” that constitute their “I.” With no authority figure to rely on, no teacher to step in and rescue an aimless discussion or repair the damage done by an ill-chosen comment, the word “student” takes on new meaning. Group members have the opportunity to become subjects of the learning process not its objects, do-ers not those who are done to. If a group experience is successful, if a fellow student is helped to “see,” it will be because of their efforts, both united and individually. If a group is faltering, if an individual is not carrying his share of the load, this, also, is their responsibility—both to diagnose and to correct. Thus, small group participation offers students a new way of looking at themselves both as learners and as people. And it offers teachers the opportunity to become what Carl Rogers calls “facilitators,” those who keep students company while they discover for themselves, rather than those who tell students what they think they should know. For a discussion of the small group approach to the teaching of writing, I suggest Thom Hawkins’ article, “Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing.”

So far in this serendipitous quest for the essence of outward bound writing instruction, the emphasis has been on what there is for the student in such an endeavor. And “what there is” seems to be self-discovery, expanded perspectives, increased problem-solving ability, appreciation of choices, and concern for others. But this is only half the story, I think. For instructors of such classes must also share in these gains, as well as in the challenge, the uncertainty, the teamwork, the self-doubt that accompany them. Any teacher who has composed the type of assignment—the type of classroom—that leads to these awarenesses knows well the self-searching and self-creation that go into the process. It is impossible to go through such an experience without being changed and perhaps becoming somewhat “outward bound” also.

And so, having reached the first plateau in my own outward bound experience, I can view more clearly the uneasiness that initiated it and the questions that gave rise to that uneasiness. I have, I think, some tentative answers to those questions. The first question of how to resolve the epistemic dilemma, I would answer by inviting writers to move from an exploration of their phenomenological world to an exploration of their knowing about this world. The key seems to be to keep the two approaches both separate and present so that the writer can see them as both distinct and connected. In answer to my distaste for such directives as “Be specific” and “Use concrete details,” I see now that they have the ring of traditional, teacher-imposed mandates and rules—a last-ditch attempt to have the writer produce mechanically the meaning that the assignment should provoke on its own. The question of which voice, which role to assume in my assignments cannot be answered by either of the choices I started with. The role of ever-sympathetic friend seems to make light of the very real learnings and challenges that I intend for my students; the role of bullying antagonist adds an element of threat where I wish none to be. My voice, my role, will emerge, I imagine, from my awareness that in many ways I am taking the same outward bound journey as my students, facing many of the same uncertainties as they. And for the final question of direction for my assignments, I think that I now know in what sense the words outward bound represent that direction. The goals that seem to have supported Kurt Hahn so well in his vision of what a learning experience should do and be work equally well in my vision of what a writing experience should do and be. And that vision, my vision, can perhaps best be illustrated by the following assignment:

**Writing Assignment 5 — Another Way of Seeing**

Henri Bergson, in *Creative Evolution,* states that what we see is unquestionably influenced by what we have seen, that each instant carries with it the perceptions of previous instants. Says Bergson, “My memory is there which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state as it advances on the road of time is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing — rolling upon itself, as a snowball in the snow.” Let’s see if this has anything to do with our study of the ways in which meaning can change.

In *Writing Assignment 3,* we saw that experiences change in meaning with the passage of time. In *Writing Assignment 4,* we saw that words also can change in meaning. And we saw that these changes can be significant to the way we see and live our lives.
For Writing Assignment 5, I'd like you to examine still another change—this time in your attitude toward or way of seeing someone or something necessary to your life.

First. Begin by describing for us how you one saw or felt toward the someone or something about whom or which you have had a change of attitude.

Second. Now describe for us your present way of seeing or feeling about _________ and tell us also what brought about this change in attitude.

Third. Let's see whether there is a third way of seeing _________, not the old way, not the new way, but instead a way that consists of both the old and the new, not blended together but apart, separate. Try describing for us now this third way of seeing _________ . Show how this new way of seeing consists of both the old and the new—again, not combined but rather side by side.

Fourth. Let's suppose that an acquaintance has been looking over your shoulder as you wrote the three descriptions above. When you finished the third one, he said skeptically: "What's the good of that third way of seeing? And what's the good of knowing about it? Aren't you able to see without analyzing how you're doing it?"

Compose a response to this person's questions that will satisfy him—and you, also.

Here we have an assignment that, for me, moves toward the essence of outward bound writing instruction. It asks writers to engage in self-discovery, in problem solving, in shifting perspectives. It asks them to make important choices and to move from an exploration of their world into an exploration of their thinking and knowing. It asks them to involve others in their journey. It invites them to say to someone else, "Come along with me on my journey outward. Let me show you the way, also." Fortunate, indeed, the writers who find such an assignment placed in a writing environment that renders "safe" the risks that the assignment may involve. For these writers—and their instructors—there will be the challenges, the failures, the successes, the self-esteem, perhaps even the joy of an outward bound writing experience.

Notes


THE UN-ASSIGNMENT: WRITING GROUPS FOR ADVANCED EXPOSITORY WRITERS

Charles I. Schuster
University of Washington

What distinguishes Advanced Expository Writing from Intermediate and Freshman courses? What does the advanced writing student need to learn? According to most teachers—not much. The most commonly held attitude toward writing is that such courses advance the student by asking for more of the same. Thus Advanced Expository Writing is simply Intermediate Expository Writing write one more time. No substantial emphasis is shifted, no adjustment is made to students who ought, supposedly, to be doing something better or harder or qualitatively and quantitatively different.

Another less commonly held view is that Advanced Expository Writing represents a more specialized course, one which requires students to work within narrower rhetorical constraints. Students here might be asked to master Business Writing or Feature Writing. And although there is some good reason to offer such courses, they often preclude certain students who want a more generalized course within which they can hone their abilities without committing themselves to a particular specialization or genre.

One answer, I think, to this problem is to re-orient our notions, to shift our thinking away from the writing and toward the writer. Naturally all teachers want the writing to improve, want the course to be a step forward in the students’ progression toward compositional excellence. But this cannot be achieved by making assignments harder or more obscure, nor necessarily by demanding an increased specialization. What has to happen is for the students to internalize what it means to be a writer. The Advanced Writing students have to make a commitment to the writing that transcends the course and the college. Those students have to learn somehow to inhabit their writing, to claim it as their own. In Janet Emig’s terms, they have to make the transition from school-sponsored to self-sponsored forms of discourse.

Most writing classes do not allow students to possess their own writing; it is, instead, possessed by the teacher, the school, the institution. Given an assignment that does not work, that nets a harsh comment or poor grade, the students can disclaim responsibility: the idea was not theirs. They have been invited to a party not their own; if the food is bad and the talk dull, they can simply slide out the side door and head home.

But if the students are given no assignment—none, that is, except to produce the best writing they can—then immediately something more is at stake. If such writing tarnishes in the hand, one cannot blame some shadowy wizard standing remotely at the front of the room. In such a situation, one is one’s own alchemist, the success or failure of transforming lead into gold is purely one’s own measure. Such a course forces writers to lay claim to their writing, to assume full responsibility for what it means to be a writer. Combined with a pedagogical structure for insuring detailed, intensive response to their work along with training them to become close, critical readers of prose, what emerges is a course that can truly be identified as Advanced Expository Writing.
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My method for achieving this end is in writing groups. To them students bring their writing each week. In them they both give and receive a surprising wealth of comment, suggestion, criticism, praise. I realize that writing groups, of one sort or another, are not new, that they are used extensively by the Bay Area Writing Project, and that Peter Elbow has described them in *Writing Without Teachers*. But Elbow’s description is too vague and overly flexible to be of help to the classroom teacher. Nor has anyone explored the possibilities such a pedagogy possesses for the classroom or the reasons such groups work. My intention in the remainder of this essay is to present just such a blend of pedagogical description and theoretical surprise as to how and why these writing groups have proven so successful for class after class of my advanced expository writers.

I set up the groups during the first week of class, putting four or five students in each. Usually my enrollments accommodate such an organization; with twenty to twenty-five students, I can create four or five groups with four to five students in each. In each group I try to include: men and women, preferably two of each; younger and older students; stronger and weaker writers, bold and hesitant speakers—that is, a considerable blend of personalities and ability levels. Groups generally thrive on diversity.

To help me determine these factors, I ask each student during the first week to give a short, oral “writer’s biography” by way of introduction; I also ask to see a representative writing sample. If I guess wrong about some individuals so that a group becomes too passive or works at too low a level of response, I can still switch members between groups—if I do it by the second or third meeting. Seldom do members wish to be switched after three weeks, primarily because they develop intense group loyalty.

Starting with the second week, each student is required to bring three to four pages (five to seven handwritten) of finished prose to the group meeting each week. The students choose their own subjects. My role in this respect is purely advisory: I meet with those individuals having difficulty finding something to write about, and through half an hour’s conversation we usually uncover a number of possibilities. As to what they finally choose and how they treat it, the final determinations are made by the students themselves. They must do this—if they are to learn how to claim sovereignty for themselves as writers.

The writing that the students finally produce should be at a stage where the writer feels comfortable about reading it to the other members, but is still committed to reworking and improving it. The writing should exist as a prototype—ready to be tried out on the test field or in the wind tunnel, but not yet ready to carry passengers over the long haul. One of the writing group’s greatest virtues is its usefulness in encouraging and even compelling revision and further experimentation. The writer must therefore be open to suggestion.

The students arrive on the day of the first meeting with their writing and a pad of notepaper. They arrange themselves in a rough circle, and one student volunteers to read first. Thereafter the pattern is set: A reads; B, C, and D respond. Then B reads, and C, D, and A respond. The next week, B reads first and so on through the weeks. Students should always sit in the same order so that there is never any question—or embarrassment—as to who reads first after the first day. One of the virtues of the writing group is that once started, it runs on automatic for the remainder of the school term.

The activity within each group is as follows: The first student reads her essay aloud while the rest of the group listens. The listeners take no notes, write nothing down. Their one responsi-

bility is to listen and experience the first reading. They do not see the piece being read, for if they had it before them the process would change to one of reading rather than listening. After the first oral presentation of the essay there is a short pause (of 30 seconds or so) during which the listeners may make brief notes concerning their responses. Then the writer reads aloud a second time—the same three to four pages. This time the other members write down all their responses— to words, to tone, organization, argument, to their own interest or lack of it, to how they feel and what they think and how they react. After the second reading, the student to the left of the writer offers his response and so on successively around the group. During this time the writer says nothing but takes notes on comments and otherwise absorbs the response. When everyone has responded, the next person begins reading and so on until everyone has read and received a response from each member of the group.

To help my students perform well as writers and respondents, I give them three pages of suggestions. I include them here as an appendix. They represent a hortatory blueprint, a rough set of shared procedures and principles. But the guidelines alone do not suffice. The success of a writing group class inevitably depends upon the interaction of the teacher as respondent and role model, especially since most students do not know how to comment honestly and constructively on the writing of their peers. For the teacher, as well, writing group responses differ from the usual evaluatory comments written in the margins of student essays. The purpose of a group response is neither to justify a grade nor to focus a grim editorial bombight on awkwardness and error. Instead, its intent is to describe the ways in which a piece of writing works and fails to work so that the writer can, if she chooses, go back and revise.

To comment in this way takes experience, but even instructors without previous group work will find their responses rich and fruitful because of the reading, writing, and critiquing they have logged in over the years. My technique is to give both “macro” and “micro” responses—that is, to focus on certain overall elements (development, tone, argument, syntactical patterns) as well as specifics (word choice, phrasing, rhythm, images). I always try to balance positive and negative statements, using this same shorthand of pluses and minuses after my comments as reference points. During the first reading, I function as a blather, absorbing every word as it is spoken off the page. During the second reading, I write continuously, noting words and phrases so that I can refer the writer to particular points in his essay. Surprisingly, I find I need those references myself. The short-term memory is often shorter than one suspects.

My oral response to the writer usually consists of a few overall impressions followed by a serial reading of my manically scribbled notes. I try to be encouraging, but not falsely so, telling the writer both what I think and what I feel—directly, honestly, personally. During the first three to four weeks, I respond last, not to have the final word, but to give the students more room to respond since my comments tend to be extensive. Otherwise, the students often tailor their reactions to suit mine. One lesson they need to learn is to trust their own intuitive and critical judgments. After four or so weeks of group work, it no longer matters in what order I respond; the students have ceased to define me as the fount of compositional wisdom, even though they still naturally pay heed to my comments.

Before leaving the group, I offer a quick general critique of the group members. My most frequent task is to urge them to be more specific, honest, direct, and intuitive. I urge them over and over to locate their responses specifically so that the writer knows
exactly where something is happening. Perhaps the best advice I
give them is that if they find nothing to criticize they are in
essence telling the writer to mail the article to The New Yorker.
Likewise, if they find nothing to praise, they are telling the
writer to become a house-painter. Somewhere between the two
extremes is the balance I am looking for.

During the first half of the course, this participation in each
group is essential. My comments and critiques set ambitious
expectations. My presence underscores a strong commitment to
the process. My participation as respondent and sometimes—if
time and my own subject matter allow—as writer contribute to
the collaborative relationship that develops between the students
and me throughout the quarter. Later on, I can come just to
observe or, as my conferencing time with individual students
increases, skip a group altogether, though I hate to do this for
the signal it may send to the students.

I describe the process in such detail because it is difficult to
start writing groups from scratch. Once begun, however, they
are almost self-perpetuating. I have enough veterans now that I
can invite previous students to model a writing group for my
new class on the second or third day. The experienced students
love to show off their skill at responding and afterwards to speak
about the benefits of this way of writing. Their expertise and
excitement begin the class in rousing fashion.

Writing group classes need special planning by the teacher.
For one writer to read twice and hear everyone’s response takes 20
to 30 minutes; writing group classes therefore require two-hour
blocks of time. Given the intensity of the activity, each group
usually requires its own room so that they do not distract one
another. Once a week the students also need to come together as
class. Such meetings allow us to feel our collective pulse—to
hear general discussion on the group process, to discuss topics of
common interest, and, as soon as possible, to edit student essays
that have emerged out of the groups. Oral readings alone do not
suffice; important as they are, essays are intended finally to be
read.

Grading such a class has never proven to be a problem. I tell
my students early that their final grade will be based on the best
10-12 pages they produce during the term. Among those pages I
would like at least one completed essay of five pages or more. In
addition, I place considerable value on attendance and contribu-
tions to the group. Midway through the course, I offer stu-
dents a graded evaluation. At the end of the term, I ask the
students to describe the experience of the groups in an essay for
me—evaluating their own performance and the contributions of
the other members in their groups. These responses help me to
understand what has happened in the groups during my absence.

So much for the pedagogical underpinnings of writing
groups. If we grant that they work, and this can be borne out by
classroom practice, then a significant question emerges: what
accounts for their success? Why are they worth the time and
trouble? There are, I think, a number of answers, some of which
have implications about the teaching of writing beyond this par-
ticular classroom strategy.

First of all, and perhaps most important, writing groups con-
solidate into one process the four essential components of rhetor-
cial study: writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Andrea
Lunsford, during her keynote address at the 1983 Wyoming
Conference, advocated just such a reintegration of Speech and
English. Her argument was that writing specialists must create
a discipline informed by the eighteenth-century model so that
rhetoric can reclaim its interdisciplinary base. Writing groups
operate from just such a premise. They are holistic in the best

sense of the word. Writing, reading, speaking, listening—the
four activities are brought together in a focused and purposeful
way that almost guarantees an improvement in a student’s verbal
and compositional well-being.

Within the context of the writing groups, each of these activi-
ties takes on a special significance. The activity of writing, first
of all, differs from that in most traditional classes for two rea-
sons. First, it is self-sponsored; that is, it belongs to the student,
who must accept both responsibility for its faults and gratifica-
tion for its virtues. As stated earlier, that kind of sovereignty is a
crucial factor in process courses like composition. The students
come to claim their writing in a way that makes them particu-
larly earnest about what they do and how they do it. Just as
importantly, the writing is read to peers, who are also producing
writing of their own. Peer pressure creates a spinal effect; week
after week the students inevitably push their expectations
upward, while simultaneously helping each other to achieve
them. They also expand their expository horizons by hearing
the varied essays and interests composed by their classmates.
Almost always, they come to appreciate styles and subjects that
were initially unappealing, enlarging their own repertoire of
possibilities. Such an expansion of mind is one of those essential
tenets of a liberal education, and it lies at the heart of the revi-
zalized enterprise of Rhetoric that Lunsford described.

The reading—in this case, the reading aloud—is also cru-
cial. Reading aloud, in and of its own sake, is a positive experi-
ence for writers, one which improves their sense of sound and
rhythm. Once they overcome their initial embarrassment, stu-
dents come to enjoy these readings, even to take pride in the
sound of their own language. More significantly, as a former
member of my own writing group recently told me, “Reading
aloud is a form of editing. You hear things that you skip over in
the silent reading. And you have to be concerned with the
responses of your audience; you hear the piece through them,
you observe their physical responses, hear their laughter, see the
glazed expression, feel the approval or disapproval.” Reading
one’s writing aloud is one of those lost practices that needs to be
reintroduced into the composition classroom. In my recent
research with published writers of non-fiction, I found that they
all affirmed the importance of this practice. John McPhee, for
example, was adamant about its value. When I asked him if he
read his work aloud, he replied, “Every word.” Asked if read to
himself, he elaborated:

I have to have an audience. My poor audience is my wife
who is a very good listener . . . she’s a reader . . . she reads
widely and she — thank the Lord — is willing to sit and
listen to me when I come home once or twice a week or
whenever it is with a little segment that I have completed.
I’ll read it before we have dinner, and in that way I release
myself from it. And I hear it, and I make changes as a
result of the reading. But absolutely all of this is aural
— “a-u” aural. I wouldn’t publish ten words that hadn’t been
read aloud. Absolutely everything that I have written has
been read aloud to someone at least once. And of course
the person who is listening most closely is I. But it is meant to
be read aloud. Whether it actually is or not, it is meant to
be both oral and aural . . . It is meant to be heard in the ear.

Richard Selzer and Maxine Hong Kingston likewise read all
their work aloud before publishing it. All of these successful
writers need to hear the language in the ear, to hear the poetry of
it (or the lack of it) before committing themselves in print. The reading aloud is, therefore, an essential aspect of writing groups.

So is the listening. Each time I institute writing groups, at least one or two students during the first week insist that the essays should be read silently by each group member. "After all," they say quite logically, "these essays will not be read aloud by real readers in the real world." True, but the writing group does not imitate the world; it creates a focused and structured environment within which essential verbal abilities can be improved. Listening to someone read a three to four page selection from an essay on silicon chip technology strains the mind in healthful ways. It improves the short-term memory, thereby enlarging our verbal attention span. It forces us to listen to (and for) voice, tone, rhythm, repetition. It reawakens in us a renewed awareness that language is oral and aural—that even in print it achieves effects through an implied "soundfulness." And—if the piece is well-crafted—it is a pleasure to hear someone else weave thought and language together. I often think that it is the listening—the close attention to hearing language spoken—that allows writing groups to achieve their most important and lasting effects.

Finally there is speaking. Most formally trained speech teachers might well scoff at the low level of oral activity that occurs in the groups. Clearly it is not intended to replace formal training in Oral Delivery. But they would agree, I think, that such activity pays useful dividends. Speaking about the writing forces students to verbalize complicated and impalpable notions about rhythm, connotation, tone. (What, in this very sentence, is the effect of that initial prepositional phrase?) As Janet Emig has so persuasively stated, verbalizing concepts helps us to know and remember them. What we can put into words gains value as something we can apply conceptually. Additionally, speaking makes all the students into more active participants. No one in the groups can sit back and passively listen or tune out altogether. Each must become an active and contributing member, a role underscored and encouraged by their activity as speakers.

At the heart of this process I am describing is something so essentially rhetorical that it constitutes the heart of the communications triangle—namely, the interactive nature of language. Writing groups merge the writer with an audience, the subject of an essay with its response. They force an interaction between and among writer, reader, subject, and language, creating an environment in which various sympathetic and opposing forces (the writer's intention, the reader's response, the inflection of the word) produce that verbal synthesis we call a text, with all its complications, possibilities, and richness of meaning. To apply the term adopted by the Russian linguist and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, the interaction in such an environment is "dialogic."5 What the students gain from all this is an enriched understanding of the rhetorical forces at work in language, the contingencies that always operate upon any act of speaking or writing. And they learn this through a collaborative process that reinforces the bonds between speakers and listeners, writers and readers.

As an inevitable part of this active exchange, the students also learn the value of revising. One of the most complex skills that instructors must teach is how to revise, how to educate students to be their own best readers. In a conventional composition class, only finished essays are usually examined by class and teacher, making revision something that gets tagged on dearly, if ever, at the end of the writing process. But writing groups encourage students to bring in parts of essays, second and third drafts, tentative possibilities. As the participants learn to respond closely and critically to other group members' writing each week, they are in essence giving a wealth of suggestion for revising. Week after week, each member performs this function until they all become sensitive, critical readers of each other's work. Ultimately this ability turns inward, toward their own compositions so that they become their own first readers. They learn to anticipate response, to bear the reactions of their writing group members even before they occur. Even the most practiced writer still needs other readers, of course, but writing groups do help students learn to read with an eye toward revision.

Finally, there is a very practical reason writing groups work: they are portable. Most composition classes create teacher-dependent students who have difficulty functioning independently once the instructor has departed. Writing group students, on the other hand, initiate subjects, write, read, and revise—all largely on their own within the structure of the writing groups. And, unlike the student who cannot carry the teacher away, writing group students can form subsequent groups and sustain them for as long as writing is important to them. A number of my most committed students have done just that.

Although my enthusiasm may suggest otherwise, I am aware that writing groups are no panacea. They demand considerable nurturing on the part of the instructor who must also be willing, in part, to give over his or her role as authoritative expert to the students. They depend upon the commitment of the students, many of whom have never had to assume this kind of responsibility for their own work. They emphasize the aura of language and necessarily de-emphasize the finished written product, at least in the workings of the groups. But with all that said, I still believe writing groups to be the best method I have discovered for teaching advanced expository writers. Nearly all my students have agreed, a fact I know by reading their anonymous written evaluations. I would like to end by quoting just one such evaluation by a student who described his recent experience in Advanced Expository Writing:

For once, the opportunity of writing was put in a positive light. No more generic three page papers, typed, double-spaced, dealing with a professor's bland topics. I liked the limitless guidelines we were given with non-fictional themes. I came away from our class meeting time with a desire to sit down and write. At first, I was ambivalent about the writing groups—how good are these other writers? how will mine compare? Through the quarter, though, I developed a need to expose my writing to others for an outsider's constructive criticism, someone who knew nothing about the piece, but could generate useful feedback that would make for easily understood revisions. The opinions that the others gave became a useful set of guidelines to improve my own pieces and I value these opinions with high regard. The writing group has become very valuable to me.

They have, of course, also become very valuable to me. I hope that more of my colleagues who teach such courses will try writing groups for themselves.

Notes

1 Emig was one of the first to distinguish between self-sponsored and school-sponsored forms of discourse among writing students. See The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Illinois: NCBE, 1971). Emig compares the two kinds of writing and asserts that "(1) No student in the same has expe-
rienced a curriculum or a set of school-sponsored experiences in composition in which peer interactions play any formal part as, say, in reciprocal reading and evaluating of themes by pairs or groups. (2) Peers play a very significant role in self-sponsored writing of the twelfth graders in this sample" (p. 78). The pedagogy I describe fuses these two kinds of writing into one mode.

3See Peter Elbow, Writing without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), Chs. 4 and 5, esp. pp. 78-79, 84-106. My greater debt, in this respect, however is to Professor Roger Whitlock, Director of Freshman Composition, University of Hawaii, who first introduced me to writing groups by inviting me to be in his. The experience changed the way I write and the way I teach. I am still a member of that original writing group which has been meeting now for more than four and a half years.

3I am thinking here of “sovereignty” in Walker Percy’s terms, as a claiming of thought and experience for oneself. Percy asserts that “If we look into the ways in which the student can recover the dogfish (or the sonnet) [that is, any educational experience], we will see that they have in common the stratagem of avoiding the educator’s direct presentation of the object as a lesson to be learned and restoring access to sonnet and dogfish as beings to be known, reasserting the sovereignty of knower over known,” in The Message in the Bottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954, 1979), p. 59. Writing groups compel students to claim the writing experience on their own terms, and thus they can help them discover their own power as students and writers.

4Professor Lunsford delivered her remarks at the Opening Sessions of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English in Laramie, Wyoming on 27 June 1982. Her paper will, I am sure, soon find its way into print.

4Taped interview, 22 June 1983. I am extremely indebted to the University of Washington for its award of a Graduate School Research Fund stipend which allowed me to pursue my research.

4As Bakhtin states “The word, breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in this environment and striking a dissonance with others, is able, in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone,” See Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 277.

5Very little, either pro or con, has been written about using writing groups in the classroom. See Richard Gebhardt, “Teamwork and Feedback: Broadening the Base of Collaborative Writing,” College English, 42, 1 (September 1980), 69-74; and Martha A. Fisher and Joan Hocking, “The Writing Workshop: Boon or Bane of the Composition Classroom?” Freshman English News, 10, 2 (Fall, 1981), 17-20. Both essays are helpful, but neither focuses on the virtues of using writing groups in advanced expository writing classes. A long-time advocate for collaborative learning, including writing groups, is Kenneth Bruffee. In particular see ‘The Way Out,” College English, 33, 4 (January, 1972), 457-70; “Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models,” College English, 34, 5 (February, 1973), 634-43; and his text A Short Course in Writing, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980). I think it is fair to say, however, that the theory and practice of the writing groups I advocate is considerably different from Bruffee’s model.

Appendix

I. Introduction to Advanced Expository Writing

Here is how the course will work. Each week, you must have 3-4 1/2 pages of written work which is ready to be read and responded to. You cannot have less than three or more than four and a half (or you will not be able to get a true response from your group members).

The class will form itself into groups with 4 or 5 members each. The groups will meet beginning next Tuesday afternoon from 1:30-3:30, and every Tuesday thereafter until the end of the quarter. The most intense work of the course will be done in the 2-hour group sessions. They are essential. To miss them is to miss the course. The grade at the end of the course will reflect attendance and participation in these sessions. Each session missed will drop you half a grade or more. If you miss three of these sessions, I will ask you either to drop the course or accept a failing grade for the quarter.

You must also attend class every Thursday 1:30-3:30 in our room in Parrington Hall. In these sessions we will conduct the administrative business of the class and edit various written work by the writers in English 421. Attendance at these classes is mandatory; they represent the only time we will all be together to talk about writing. They will also help us make the adjustments to the groups and allow us to read some of the work being produced in the groups. The editing sessions on Thursdays have, in the past, proven of enormous benefit to the writers in this class.

All this is hard-line talk, mostly because the course depends on a strong commitment. If you think you will have trouble attending or writing the required amount, then you should not stay in the course. Students from my previous 400 level writing course will attest to the difficulty involved.

On October 22nd, I will ask everyone to submit 4-6 finished pages to me. On November 12th, I will ask for an additional 4-6 pages. At the end of the quarter, I will ask that you submit 10-14 finished pages total on which you want to base the writing-performance part of your grade. What you give me does not have to be complete — that is, it might be the first 9 pages of a 30 page feature on "Diseases of the Rhododendron Bulb." Or it might be a 6 page essay and the first pages of 4 as yet unfinished pieces. But the writing itself must be finished, or as finished as you can get it with your group's help. THERE WILL BE NO INCOMPLETES.

I will comment as extensively as I can on your writing both when I hear it read in the group and when you give it to me for a specific response. But the most valuable comments should always be coming from your group. If the group does not operate as it should, if there is some problem or other, then someone (or everyone) in the group should let me know. If someone is not bringing writing each week or is not responding properly or is violating the format, then the group should tell me so that we can get the procedure back on track. If the instructions are followed, the writing groups will be valuable, enjoyable, productive. They do depend on good will and true grit.

No weekly writing will be graded. At mid-quarter, I will give you a rough approximation of your grade based on the writing I have seen and heard, your contributions to your group as respondent, and your participation and attendance in the Thursday sessions. At the end of the quarter, in addition to the writing you hand in, you will be encouraged to describe your group — how it worked, who helped you most, how you feel that you contributed, what you accomplished during the quarter. This state-
ment will help me to establish how the course has worked for you.

One last note: During the quarter, you must read at least two revisions of work already heard by your group. Students in past classes have specifically requested this so that they can see how their comments are affecting the writer (and the writing).

When you are ready to have something of yours edited at a Thursday session, please give it to me for editing. Do not be hesitant; the Thursday sessions will really help your writing. I need to start receiving copy by the 3rd week.

Good luck.

II. Some Guidelines for Setting Up a Writing Group

1. You need four or five committed writers.

2. Participants should want to increase the amount and improve the quality of their own writing. They must be willing to make a firm commitment to meet every week for at least two hours in their group. They must also agree to bring a new or revised piece of writing each week. The group cannot work unless each member participates as both writer and respondent every week.

3. Kinds of writing. Since this is an Expository Writing Class, we must limit ourselves to non-fictional prose. In the past, we have seen analytical essays, critical articles, argumentation, book and movie reviews, personal letters, autobiographies, descriptions of people, processes, objects—almost anything as long as it belongs essentially to that category known as non-fictional prose.

4. It usually takes about 20-30 minutes for a writer to read twice and then hear the other participants respond. Groups may want to set up a time-keeper who will enforce limits so that every individual gets to both read and respond. No one should ever be skipped.

5. The group works best if each member sits in the same place each week. The person who reads first one week should be the last person to read the next week. Response should start to the left of the writer.

6. At some point during the quarter, each member of the group is required to read at least two revisions of pieces that the group has responded to. Previous writing group classes have found that they like to hear the ways in which their responses have made a difference in their group members' writing.

7. At the end of the quarter, you will be required to turn in your best 10-12 pages. Among these pages should be at least one completed essay of 4-5 pages in length. Your pages may be one long essay, or the first 10 pages of a book, or one essay plus seven first pages of essays as yet uncompleted. The writing grade of the course will be based upon what you turn in. WARNING: Although 10 pages does not look like much, do not be lulled into a false confidence. Most writing group students have difficulty producing 10 excellent pages at the end of the quarter.

III. Advice to the Writer

1. Read a piece that is somewhere between three and four-and-a-half typewritten pages.

2. Do not spend time introducing the piece you are going to read. Do not explain anything about its composition. Do not apologize for it. Do not say what kinds of responses you are looking for. The temptation, especially at first, will be very strong to do any or all of these things. You will want to say, "I did not have very much time to write this week, and so . . ."

Don't say it. If you do, you will color your listeners' responses to your words. Say only what is necessary to help your group understand the piece, that is, "This is the second section of the essay I started reading last week" or "This is a revision of the 'carpet' essay you heard two weeks ago."

3. Read the writing slowly enough so that your listeners can take it in. And read it loudly enough so that they can hear it clearly. Wait 30 seconds or so between the first and second readings to allow your listeners time to write down a few impressions.

4. When the members of the group give you their responses, just listen. You will probably be tempted to defend something you have said or to explain it or to justify it. Resist the temptation. Say nothing. It is your responsibility to listen. It may help if you write down responses for use later when you revise. Even when questioned directly about a work, a citation, whatever—say nothing. Any response on your part can—and probably will—color the responses you receive from your listeners, thereby making them less valuable.

5. Elbow tells the writer: "Don't try to understand what people tell you . . . But do try to understand how they tell it to you." Some respondents say more in tone and gesture than they do in words. Take in their whole response. See what you can make of it in your mind and in your writing.

IV. Advice to Listeners

1. Take no notes the first time a piece is read. Do not even put a pen or pencil in your hand. Concentrate on listening to the piece. Try to make yourself aware of what is going on in your head as you hear the writer's prose. What do those words do to you? How do they strike you? When are you with the writer? At what point does your mind wander? What do you remember after the piece is finished?

2. In the time between the first and second readings, you might write down any first impressions you had. What words and phrases registered with you? What did you think and feel about what you heard? What do you want particularly to listen for during the second reading?

3. During the second reading, write continuously, noting down the thoughts, analyses, and impressions that are triggered in your mind by the piece. Try to comment on certain general elements such as organization, tone, voice, persuasiveness. Then move to particular words, phrases, images. Tell the writer your response to his or her words. Stick to your experience. What went on in your head as you heard the words read? What did you perceive?

4. Do not tell the writer what to do. Do not say, "Take out the first sentence." Say instead, "Your first sentence did not lead me into your essay" or "That first sentence bothered me because it made fun of houseboats; I'd like the piece better without it." Offer suggestions and support them with specific reasons as to why they work better. Offer your views, even if you do not always know why you are reacting that way (though you should keep trying to figure out the reason). You might say: "Your words made me angry. I hated it when you said . . ." You might say: "I loved that whole part where you . . ." You might say: "I disliked the voice in this essay. It struck me as condescending in that section on . . ." You might say: "I was really moved by the description of . . ." You might say: "I dislike the word 'utilize' and so every time I heard it I wanted to hit it with a hammer." Whatever you say, always be honest and specific as to what you think and where, in the essay, that response occurred.
FROM JAMES BRITON: THE RHETORIC OF SPECTATING

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In the last two decades, composition experts have devoted their best imagery to describing traditional freshman English assignments: Ross Winterowd referred to the rhetorical modes as "empty egg crates" which students are instructed to fill with random ideas. For Winston Weather, this organization suggested "the well-made box": "I have been taught to put 'what I have to say' into a container that is always remarkably the same ... a solid bottom, four upright sides, a fine fitting lid." Janet Emig described the five paragraph structure as the glorified Fifty-Star theme for which we should hear Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" in the background. The resulting style Ken Macrorie labeled "English" and Jacques Barzun "the Black Rox." In a recent article, James Kineasv aptly summed up these widespread objections:

The freshman English theme as it is usually taught is most frequently written without an explicit aim, takes no particular view of its subject matter, is oriented to no particular medium, and is preferably done with no serious thought preparation. In other words, it is aimless, meaningless, mediumless, and unprepared. No serious professional writer would dream of producing a text under any of these conditions.

At national meetings, such judgments are reinforced, but many freshman programs do not change. Perhaps this discrepancy is in part caused by the alternative offered: individualized programs allowing students to work their freewriting into a variety of genres while meeting in conferences and workshops. At large universities where graduate students teach these classes while taking their own and at junior colleges where teachers suffer under five course loads, such alternatives have not seemed feasible. Thus, in this world of regular meeting times, large sections, and required texts, the same readers and modes and teacher-centered classrooms still reign.

Recognizing these constraints, many new texts have suggested assignments such as rhetorical situations, case studies, or issue debates that will involve students and perhaps generate a more authentic style. But to affect aimless and unprepared writing, we also need to change the class structure: to a teacher-and-student centered classroom with emphasis on writing as process. A practical, workable scheme for such change, one applicable regardless of departmental realities, can be found in the work of James Britton.

To explain the proper role of this course called "English," Britton uses his continuum of discourse from participant to spectator and from the transactional to the poetic. The participant is involved in the transactional sphere of action and decision-making; the spectator, when removed from the action and able to reflect, considers past or possible events to understand behavior and form values. Between these poles lies the expressive, both an informal written form and extemporaneous speech by which we give immediate reactions, combining the self with identification to a listener and with the subject at hand.

For Britton, this spectator end of the continuum, by which we reflect and judge, should be the English class' realm, to help students extend their linguistic powers and thus their intellectual and social development. This spectating begins in expressive talk and ends at literature; its middle ground includes literary and nonliterary activities by which people experience new situations and adjust their attitudes. From the expressive, we move to visual spectating, a learning experience: "A major aspect of a spectator's response to the events he witnesses will be a concern for the people involved and an interest in the way they react, but there is likely to be present also an interest in and evaluation of the pattern events take, with a sense that what is happening here might one day happen to him." The next step is recounting experience with others, used to test our modes of evaluation, hear new opinions, and invite corroboration.

And finally the poetic continuum ends in literature of the child and adult, which Britton explains as central to human values. Thus Emily Dickinson's "Ample make this bed" reconciling love of life with death is similar to a child's witch story concerning the contradictions of growing up: both reconcile logic and emotion and thus increase our understanding of confusing new situations. Such literature of both the child and professional author shapes, for writer and reader, the values we live by, the difference between the two lying in the extent of their applicability:

The poem in which the poet comes to terms with his own experience becomes, when we read it, a means by which we may come to terms with ours. What the poet writes and what the child writes are of the same kind: each becomes spectator of his own affairs in order to discover some pattern that relates the new experience to all that has gone before. But the more mature and sensitive the writer, the more will his adjustment work for other people. The poet's poem, that is to say, is more influential than the child's.

Britton's spectator continuum, combining visual spectating, gossip, and literature can apply not only to reading or writing poetry, but also to expository writing. Within our regular class structure, spectating can help students create, refine, and evaluate their ideas — going from "English" and an aimless text to vivid writing for an audience. For this purpose, the steps of spectating should be seen not as separate functions but as a unified series that can overlap or be reordered. As such, they should be integrated into each writing assignment.

Expressive Writing

Whether students are writing about literature, reporting on an event, or shaping a comparison, their refining of ideas and values should start in the expressive voice. This discourse, as speech and writing, contains the speaker's emotions; it is "a way of being with" which includes signals about both speaker and topic. And because we "shape at the point of utterance," it can also generate thought instead of just reporting it.

As speech and writing, the expressive should begin the writing assignment. If students are going to write about Billy Budd, their roommate, or local drinking laws, they might first freewrite to record their attitude and authentic detail as well as surprising new discoveries. As informal idea-sharing and as written work, perhaps in a journal, this expressive step initiates the writer's connection to the subject and out of herself to an audience — the first movement toward generating and refining values.

At the beginning of a narration assignment, this looking in the heart to write brought out a journal piece on housebuilding
in Massachusetts. This student's next two freewriting sessions led to a first draft on the stages of building a family vacation home as reflecting stages of her parents' marriage and divorce and of her own growing distance from them.

Another student, asked to write a personal argument paper, used the expressive outlet for first voicing anger over a teacher's snap judgment of her. Here is the beginning of her first freewriting attempt:

I won't use your name because I don't feel that you're the type to want your identity known. But you remember me. I'm sure. I'm that crazy broad that stormed out of class in tears of anger (I assure you it was not humiliating as you probably thought). It's a rotten habit to cry when you're angry. I would much rather have delivered a scathingly logical rebuttal to your insult and then departed with majestic grace.

After freewriting these feelings out two more times and drafting a letter to the teacher, the student was able to write the controlled and logical response she aimed for. Here is its beginning:

I've always felt that school is a place for new experiences and your remarks last week were a new experience for me. It's the first time that I've been so completely pre-judged by a total stranger.

These expressive steps toward a draft, especially journal or freewriting, should be regular required work in the syllabus. It can be written in class, but preferably at home, perhaps in answer to specific questions. Then it can be discussed in groups and later turned in with the final draft, to serve not as a "free" activity but as a valued part of the assignment.

Spectating Events

As students begin to bring out their own connections to ideas, they should be led to spectating in the transactional world, and then perhaps to combining these first two steps. One reason for Kinneavy's judgment of empty purposeless freshman writing is that the students often employ no such evidence—no connection with the transactional. In watching behavior, Britton argues, we gain new values and possibilities. Thus our students need to move beyond their own expressive formulations into the social arena; this spectating should be a specific component of assignments.

After writing down feelings about the roommate, the student should observe her and take notes; for a memory piece, such as the housebuilding paper, she should record impressions and then try to re-create the past events, as Emily in Our Town returns to her twelfth birthday in Grover's Corners. To describe a campus scene, compare two restaurants, analyze a local fire, or review an art exhibit, students should be required to spectate and record, just as for assignments on literature they should look carefully at a piece's dialogue, scenes, and context. When students draw such materials from Shakespeare, the law court, sorority meeting, or sheriff's office, they are confirming and modifying their values by specific transactional occurrences and preparing for effective written communication.

On the first assignment, students should be given practice with "becoming a camera" and should be shown, as D. W. Harding has written, that value-forming begins as they record, that there is little true contemplation. They should also try more active forms of spectating, such as conducting interviews or surveying opinions.

After my students twice went out in pairs to describe the same place and compare results and then reported on one local event, a woman introduced her next paper, on the downfall of a big time drug dealer, with this character-revealing description:

I was greeted at the door of the motel efficiency by a four-year-old boy wearing only discolored underwear. The child pushed past me and ran out into the cold January night. As I entered, his father, John Nevels, was propped on the bed drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette. The bed was the central fixture in this one-room efficiency, with boxes containing clothing, kitchen utensils, and old Christmas decorations scattered on all sides. In the far corner was a small kitchen table, displaying empty beer bottles and the dried remnants of an earlier meal. John was clad in his work pants and a dirty T-shirt, which made visible several unprofessional tattoos on his right arm. He was oblivious to the activities of his son. I took a seat in a chair by the window, where I could both conduct the interview and observe the child on the balcony.

By combining two prime techniques of spectating—observation and the interview—this student wrote a prepared and purposeful paper on the drug world; she did not stop at the vague formulations Kinneavy criticizes. And she achieved this vividness through a second required step—gathering real world evidence.

This requirement is especially applicable to longer research projects—a mainstay of composition programs. In many syllabi, the assignment especially suffers from a style that is either English or plagiarized and from the lack of a specific aim since students often search for any library subject that will yield the required number of footnotes. Students instead need to see that "doing research" should stem from a desire to know more about an idea they have already considered and that research can mean first-hand study, not just reading research. One student started by writing expressively on her fears concerning television's effect on her children and designed a project to test her feelings. After their "worst report cards ever," she insisted on "No TV for the next six weeks! None! Not Any!" Then she began to observe strange behavior from her passive homelbound addicts.

— They played outside. Basketball and baseball became almost daily activities.
— They read books for pleasure. My son, a first grader, read seventy books the first month and won the classroom reading contest.
— They played together and invited friends over to play games that they invented. . .

At the library, she learned about traits that her children shared with young drug addicts and about television addiction; she turned to such work to enrich what for her was purposeful first-hand research, based on spectating in her transactional environment.

At the beginning of writing projects, expressive writing and visual spectating may overlap. After studying her roommate, for example, the student might again freewrite on their relationship; to analyze literature or an art exhibit, she might write expressively after careful observation. But while the two steps may be interchanged, they should both be encouraged and perhaps brought to class on subsequent days to help the student develop detailed material and a personal perspective.

Gossip

Regardless of the sequence of their exploration, students will need group discussions to reflect on their material with others. This theory of "gossip" produces a specific role for the peer group in a writing class: the emphasis is not on students' critiquing for-
mulated ideas — in an almost finished draft — but on discussing ideas as they are formulated, on reviewing evidence and attitudes as they work toward first drafts. Together students can form thoughtful judgments of motives for television viewing, the actions of a sexist teacher, or the meaning of a play's ending, as they move out from their private thinking and gain an immediate sense of audience. Such groups might also be used for revising and proofreading.

Small groups of students — meeting during class time — can first give a writer the much needed sense of importance. Their work on mountain churches, a local election, or a remembered funeral will spark immediate positive reactions which seem so much more real than a teacher's written comments. And this interaction helps students see their focus and the significant detail — that a piece on the Moonies really concerns the student's fear over her attraction to this group; that spectating on a downtown cafeteria really revolves around the social rituals of older people. Thus a thesis and organization can form here, especially if the ideas and not a specific structure control the conversation. While such "gossip," supplemented by informal conferences with the teacher, often causes students to do more freewriting or spectating, it also helps them focus a piece and aim toward a specific audience.

Literature

Following Britton's model, literature would be the final product of the student's spectating. Either produced by students or read from anthologies, literature is a fundamental way we form values about the world, creating an evolving pattern of culture. Thus final products should not just be graded and filed, but should be read: through in-class sharing, oral readings, and local or national publication. And students should feel that improvement will not only produce a better grade but will help them influence other people, that they are writing powerful literature.

With adjustments made for particular assignments, every paper can emerge from this continuum: of considering attitudes through expressive writing, interacting with past or present transactional data, reflecting and forming judgments as a group, and moving toward a literary product. Whether the text or syllabus mandates description, comparison, argument, personal writing, writing about literature, or longer research papers, each step should be required, reviewed and perhaps even graded. For some assignments, certain steps might be given more attention: expressive for personal writing, visual spectating for description or research, group "gossip" for argumentation. With such variation, students could continuously employ the entire set of steps to produce work which might spring out from Weather's box, quiet Kate Smith, and produce the explicit aim and viewpoint Kinneavy seeks.

Notes


The participant/ spectator continuum is explained in Britton's "Spectator Role and the Beginnings of Writing" and "Writing to Learn and Learning to Write" in his new collection, *Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays of James Britton* (Montclair, N. J.: Boynton Cook, 1982).

2James Britton, "Spectator Role and the Beginnings of Writing," in *Prospect and Retrospect*, p. 50.


**LOCKEAN EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE FRESHMAN RESEARCH PAPER**

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Few English teachers would deny that the freshman English research paper is in trouble. In a recent article in *College English*, Richard Larson argues convincingly that English teachers should not even pretend to teach sophisticated research methodologies; this should be the job of professors in the content areas. This is a powerful argument. How can English teachers prepare a student to write a sophisticated research paper in anthropology? Unless they know the conventions and issues of that field, they can't.

At least part of the problem is that the research paper is an artificial construct that has, I would like to argue, its basis in a philosophical system that many English teachers no longer understand or accept: empiricism. Empirical philosophy, as presented by 17th and 18th century philosophers such as Locke and Hume, argued that all knowledge developed from the comparison, or association, of ideas. Truth, for Locke, resided in the proposition, which consisted of a subject and a predicate, each of which was the sign of an idea. Each idea entered the mind through the senses. Learning and judgment are advanced by determining the agreement or disagreement of these ideas, and knowledge develops when these relationships between ideas is immediately and certainly perceptible. In fact, Locke's entire system of epistemology presented in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* is based on this intuitive grasp of the fundamental relationship between ideas.

This connection, however, can be either intuitive or demonstrated. If intuitive, the agreement or disagreement between ideas is immediately apparent. This kind of knowledge grows from the mind's immediate apprehension of truth and is rare because few truths are simple and obvious enough to be so grasped by the human mind, which is, according to Locke, obtuse and limited.

The mind can, however, discover truth by demonstration, which is the association of ideas in long chains. Hence, Locke argues, if the mind can move from idea to idea intuitively, it can establish the truth of "distant" ideas by connecting them indirectly to known and accepted ones. These connections, if they are all linked together through intuitively valid associations, can lead the thinker to truth, even though the connection between
the intuitively valid idea and the initially questionable one may be based on a complicated chain of associations.

The freshman research paper seems to me to rest on basically empirical assumptions. Many textbooks that teach this paper focus on the importance of mechanical associations: gathering ideas and data, taking notes on cards, connecting these ideas to each other and to a thesis, which is often viewed as a complex of ideas that the student constructs either from his or her reading or past experience.

Like so many parts of our school rhetorics, this view of research papers is reductionist — it has, over the years, lost its philosophical roots, its epistemological underpinnings. We have accepted as valid part of Lockeian epistemology — the mechanistic part — and rejected the part of the system that addresses the most significant issues associated with the search for meaning. This is the part of Locke's philosophy known as probabilistic reasoning.

Probabilistic reasoning is the term Locke applies to the kind of understanding or knowledge that is inexact and probable rather than exact and intuitive. Much of human judgment, Locke argues, must by necessity be based on inexact knowledge. This partly because the human mind is too gross in its perceptions to be able to understand much of the data that impinges on it. But it is also due to the fact that humans must often make decisions based on incomplete information and partially understood facts. This is particularly true in the political arena, in which politicians must make decisions without having all the information pertinent to a given issue. But it is also true in scientific research, in which the scientist trying to make a new discovery must attempt to test or to create a theory using inexact and partial data.

Because of this basic human condition, Locke developed a fairly coherent system of probabilistic reasoning. He has been criticized for not developing this loose collection of insights into a system of inductive logic, such as the one that Mill fashioned in the 19th century. But Locke apparently felt that such a scheme of logic would not give the human mind access to truth similar in exactness to that allowed by intuitive or demonstrative understanding, so he did not press probabilistic reasoning beyond its rudimentary outline. This reasoning does, however, provide the English teacher with a useful system for teaching the research paper that raises fundamental questions not usually addressed by writing textbooks.

For Locke, probabilistic reasoning consists of four major strategies for probing a subject. These methods all serve heuristic as well as communicative functions because they provide ways for discovering information about a given issue, and they also provide strategies for presenting those issues to an audience. In two fascinating essays, Hoyt Trowbridge has shown how probabilistic reasoning served both functions in the work of many 18th century writers, including Dr. Johnson and Gilbert White, the biologist.

The four major probabilistic strategies for exploring cloudy issues are 1) the use of maxims or principles, 2) the framing of hypothesis, 3) the use of analogy, and 4) the reliance on authority. All of these are, by definition, inexact; but they all would, to one degree or another, serve the freshman writer well when trying to discover significance within a topic area.

The first two methods, the use of principles or maxims and the use of hypothesis, are similar. Both require the thinker to begin reasoning deductively. Instead of working from sensory data and innate ideas developing from immediate experience, the thinker begins with an unproven abstraction. A maxim is a commonly-accepted truth while a hypothesis is a convenient abstract idea whose validity can be tested by direct observation or other kinds of proof. Both are tentative, carefully presented, and both are used to test and uncover more valid knowledge. Too often students fail to recognize the distinction between an abstraction that an author presents and a more fundamental assertion based on evidence. Both to them appear to share the same degree of certainty, the same degree of value. Therefore, students cannot establish what Locke terms "degrees of assent," the degree of certainty — or the lack of it — that a proposition holds. Hence, a flimsy paperback arguing that the Bermuda Triangle is associated with Atlantis and hostile extra-terrestrials enjoys in their eyes the same degree of assent as a scientific study of tides and storm patterns in the Triangle area.

Looking at it from another point of view, the hypothesis allows the student to construct a general statement that he or she can test by research and reflection. This is not, however, a thesis statement but a working generalization that can be modified or rejected as the research progresses.

Analogy is a third method of probabilistic reasoning. This strategy postulates that if events in one situation lead to a given conclusion, then the same conclusion can be reached in similar events. Eighteenth century philosophers, scientists, and logicians considered this the weakest method of reasoning, largely because it often led to foolish conclusions. In The Natural History of Selborne, for instance, Gilbert White, usually the paragon of empirical reasoning, reached the most outlandish conclusions by analogy. Confronted with the fact that some birds disappeared during the winter, he concluded that they must hibernate, like some mammals that also disappear. He even toyed with the ancient idea that some birds wintered under water. He never did completely accept the undeniable fact that many species of bird migrated.

It is the fourth and final method of probabilistic reasoning, that based on authority, that provides the underpinning of the freshman research paper. This Locke viewed as second hand evidence, a necessary evil given that humans could not possibly, due to the limitations of time and space, experience all things directly. Because of this, the mind has to accept information from secondary and, by definition, questionable sources. It is this skepticism that student researchers lack almost entirely, and it is this view that theorists of the research paper have neglected to transfer from empirical philosophy.

Because of the untrustworthiness of second-hand evidence, Locke outlines six specific criteria for weighing testimonies. These, I suggest, might still prove useful to composition teachers. The first is the number of witnesses that report on a given incident. If many people report that an event occurred, or if many reach the same conclusion on an issue, this increases the probable validity of the assertion. On the other hand, the maverick who asserts that the Bermuda Triangle is the work of extra-terrestrial creatures with enormous powers, when the majority of writers point to powerful storms as the cause of destruction, should be viewed skeptically.

The second criterion is the integrity of the witnesses. The testimony of an upstanding individual should be viewed less skeptically than the testimony of a scoundrel. Generally speaking, then, a respected scientist should be viewed more positively than a charlatan. This is, of course, a value judgment; but our students, as educated individuals, should be taught to recognize that Einstein is a more believable figure than is a TV faith healer.

The third criterion is the author's design, which is a bit more subtle than the previous criteria. What is the writer's intention,
purpose, or goal in writing the piece and presenting the evidence? Is it to sell books to the ignorant by means of sensational assertions? Is it to proselytize and convert? Is it to inform using reason and careful logic analysis? Students often do not make such distinctions, assuming that anything appearing in print has objective validity.

Fourth, what are the circumstances that gave rise to the discourse? This question requires students to examine the historical and political context of the source to determine what motivated the author to produce the piece. For instance, knowing that Nixon was about to be dropped from the Republican ticket when he gave the “Checker’s Speech” helps the student evaluate the validity and intention of the speech.

The fifth criterion requires students to examine the internal consistency of the document. Obviously, if the discourse is riddled with factual inconsistencies or confused purposes, it loses validity and believability.

Sixth, are there any contrary testimonies on the subject? To apply this principle, students must be sensitive to the various arguments and view points clustered about a given issue and be willing to weigh and consider all of them rather than simply selecting the one or ones they consider personally acceptable.

Although the primary purpose of this paper has been to analyze the Lockean, empirical assumptions of the freshman research paper, I would like to end by making two practical suggestions to composition teachers. First, we as teachers have inherited a distinction between direct and indirect knowledge, between concrete and abstract understanding, with a definite prejudice in favor of the former. Our students, as participants in Western culture, should be taught this distinction, especially when writing research papers. The core of any paper should be, then, based on direct experience and direct involvement with a topic. It should not be based on a naive, generalized curiosity about, say, the pyramids of Egypt and why they were built. A student interested in raising goldfish and with some experience and interest in this area should write on raising goldfish.

Second, the research paper need not—indeed should not—be viewed as the presentation of unequivocal truth. It is not a stone tablet handed down from on high. Instead, it should be an exploration of a subject, perhaps using the strategies of Lockean probabilistic reasoning, which is in final analysis a general, skeptical view of the human mind and its ability to know. The research paper can be exploratory in the sense that it probes a topic rather than makes an authoritative statement about it. Students should learn to analyze and evaluate sources rather than use them as support in the simple sense of this term.

Notes

"YOU WRITE WITH A PURPOSE," "YOU BREATHE" AND OTHER NEEDLESS ASSERTIONS

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“Writing with a purpose” is one of the healthier cliches of the discipline. James McPherson has made a bundle on it and Joseph Trimmer and Nancy Sommers will probably do quite well as they continue the tradition of purposeful writing with their revision of McPherson’s work. Yet the more I think about “purpose” and read what teachers tell students about “purpose” the more convinced I become that “writing with a purpose” is part of a large group of phrases such as “everyone breathes” or “dogs have hair” — phrases that everyone would agree with but no one knows what to do with after they agree.

One reason that everyone agrees that people write with a purpose is that “purpose” is such a broad concept. For most practical purposes, people can muddle any distinctions between “purpose,” “motive,” “intention,” “goal,” “aspiration,” “desire,” “aim,” and “resolve.” There are, of course, small differences. I might intend to sell encyclopedias. My “purpose” might be to buy a Datsun. My goal might be to have a big enough car to carry five people plus three bags of groceries. My aspiration might be to some day buy a large Detroit gas hog and flaunt my affluence in front of my neighbors. Yet in use, “purpose” becomes a blanket term to include “anything that you want to accomplish some time in the future”: “My purpose is to sell encyclopedias to earn enough money to buy a Datsun and someday buy a gas hog.”

And accepting this all-purpose, muddled-together notion of “purpose,” I have no doubt that I write with a number of purposes. I have therapeutic purposes for writing: I want to put on paper some of my complaints, fears, and pronouncements. I want to feel good, get things off my chest, receive the encouragement of my friends. And these sometimes conflict with my professional purposes for writing: to get promotions, to keep up with the ideas in my field, to learn more about writing. And my therapeutic and professional purposes often get mixed up with my personal purposes: to keep from mowing the lawn, to keep from getting a summer job, to keep from knocking out the concrete in my driveway with my eight-pound sledge hammer. And I suspect that anyone who isn’t dead can make a similar list for just about any task that they have to do or want to do or don’t want to do.

Yet this awareness that I write with several “purposes” doesn’t necessarily make me a better writer. In fact, if I were to sit down and investigate my purposes, I’d probably get so bogged down with my introspection that I probably wouldn’t do much writing. (Right now, I’m wondering whether or not my fear of going home to crack concrete isn’t the guiding force behind my composing—shaping, inhibiting, and informing my priorities . . . and I’m getting depressed wondering whether such purposes are significant enough for a person thirty-nine years old who should be asking or coping with existential questions, understanding who he is, finding the satisfactions that only come from asking the eternal questions about being, unbeing, life, and Truth, and I think I might go home and go to bed this afternoon.)

As C. H. Knoblauch has pointed out, “Certainly, it would be naive to insist triumphantly on what everyone already takes for granted, that a writer may be responding to many purposes,
some broad and open to analysis, others deeply personal and unpredictable" (155). Yet it is equally naive to assume that students have any idea what "writing with a purpose" involves and that teachers can simply exhort them to "write with a purpose" or suggest that simply knowing that they must "write with a purpose" will make a difference.

Knoblauch suggests that in classroom situations, students commonly have a number of purposes among which are solving problems, anticipating instructors' expectations, following directions, "impressing (or refusing to impress)" instructors, getting good grades, "revealing or concealing real attitudes, opinions, and beliefs," and gaining peer acceptance (158). And we each could probably add to the list. My own additions include: learning about writing, learning about scholarship, feeling good about themselves, impressing parents and/or community, getting jobs, practicing, cheating, and courting.

And if, in fact, we tell students that purpose is important, and if we help them to understand just what sorts of purposes we're talking about, we still do not know how to help them to become "realistic," or set reasonable "goals" based on their purposes. What, in fact, are the priorities for students who want to write something important to themselves, gain acceptance from their teachers, demonstrate that they can be creative and imaginative, and at the same time conceal who they "really are"? How do we help students who want to write honestly and sincerely (because their teacher requires them to) but also want to learn to cheat, beat the system, make money, and become overnight successes? And how do we help students to take risks and be creative while they practice how to write like scientists for a freshman composition class requiring peer evaluation and a proficiency test at the end of the semester? (Even recognizing conflicting purposes might take me a month.)

Typically, instead of helping students decide on their own purposes, cope with a number of conflicting purposes, evaluate and weigh purposes, and use their purposes to plan, research, or otherwise keep control of their writing, teachers ignore students' own purposes and, instead, use "purpose" as a rhetorical ploy to persuade students to change or adopt what teachers themselves consider to be more responsible purposes. Frederick Crews tells students:

In your own writing, you will always want to adjust your rhetoric to the specific audience and purpose you have in mind.

Two sentences later, he suggests the kinds of purposes he himself prefers:

Rhetoric need never call for deceptive prose; it calls, rather, for making a strong case by satisfying your audience's legitimate expectations (7).

Although we can appreciate Crews' moral stand, his encouragement of student honesty has nothing to do with helping students to adjust their rhetoric to their purposes or even to recognize or understand their purposes.

H. Ramsey Fowler tells students, "All your essay writing serves a basic purpose: you aim to communicate something about a topic to a particular audience of readers." He then continues to tell students what their purpose ought to be:

You choose a subject that you care about and believe readers will care about. As you develop and arrange information about the topic, you balance your view, the demands of the subject, and the needs, interests, and expectations of the audience. If you have done your part, readers will be drawn into your world and will experience the subject as you do (2).

But "caring," "balancing," and "drawing readers in" are Fowler's purposes, and serve only to remind students of their obligations, not to create any awareness of the value of having "a purpose."

Indeed, we can find other cases where teachers apparently use the advice "consider your purpose" to tell students what their purposes ought to be, rather than to help them to recognize how their purposes shape and direct inquiry and inform their decisions. Thomas Kane tells students that purpose involves subject and reader and then proceeds to explain what subjects are best—those that stretch experience and skill, those that include "revelation of personality" (8-9); Kane tells students, "Most fundamentally, you do not want to repel your readers" (9). Explaining his "dynamic model of rhetoric" centered on "choice in a context for a purpose," Patrick Hartwell emphasizes that "we must recognize false goals as well as true goals"—and choose "harmony" over "flattery," "truth" over "insult" (47-48).

Another way of dealing with "purpose" without dealing with "purpose" is to try to define "purpose" to make "purpose" more useful. Trimmer and Sommers tell students that the "central idea" of their revision of McCrimmon is "that writers write most effectively when they are 'writing with a purpose'" (22). Then they proceed to explain that "purpose" is different from "motives." Motives include: "to complete the assignment, to earn a good grade, to publish . . . writing." Purpose, on the other hand, has a "specific meaning":

purpose is the overall design that governs what writers do in their writing. When writers have determined their purpose, they know what kind of information they need, how they want to organize and develop that information, and why they think it is important. In effect, purpose directs and controls all the decisions writers make throughout the writing process (23).

I can understand why they would want to separate students' purposes from other sorts of rhetorical purposes. (Who wants to mess with the personal, the eccentric, the uncontrollable stuff inside students' heads?) But their distinction between "motives" and "purpose" is artificial and not clear. If purpose "directs and controls all the decisions writers make," then motives must be a part of "purpose"—for they, too, direct and control important decisions that writers make.

All of this gets even more confusing when Trimmer and Sommers try to tie "purpose" to "process":

finding a purpose to guide you through the writing process is the purpose of the writing process. Writing is both a procedure for demonstrating what you know and a procedure for discovering what you know. For that reason, you must maintain a kind of double vision of your purpose. First, you must think of it as a preliminary objective that helps illuminate the decisions you have to make. You must actually discover your purpose. Second, you must think of it as a final assertion that helps implement what you intend to do in your writing (23).

I'm trying to picture members of a freshman composition class who learn that their purposes for turning in papers for good grades and for learning how to write academic writing are actually "motives" and discovering that their "purposes" are actually "designs" and "preliminary objectives" and "assertions" that help them to implement what they "intend." (What, in fact, is an "intention," then, and how is it related to "purpose"?

Certainly "intentions" also direct and control some of the decisions writers make in the writing process. And what does it mean to "discover" your purpose? Do writers always discover their purposes? How is that different from discovering ideas? And how is discovering a purpose different from discovering your intentions and motives? And someplace along the line, we've got to ask does any of this make any difference? (Personally, I suspect that Trimmer and Sommers got stuck with a dead goat called "writing with a purpose" and they've tried to bury it in a whole new conceptual context by sleight-of-hand: now it's goat; now it's process!)

Other writers, while less ambitious, are equally ineffective in their attempts to change "purpose" to something else. Some suggest that the "purpose" of writing is "persuasion" (see Neman) yet the notion that writing is "persuasion" is old-fashioned and narrow-minded and went out of communication theory in the 1960's. Others have tried to emphasize that writing is "the projection of an intention or purpose through forms or structures to an audience in a scene" (Winterowd 174). Yet writing is not simply a projection of intention—and except for extrasensory perception, there may be no practical way to recover an author's original "intention" by only reading the text itself.

And still others link "purpose" with some sort of fuzzy "goals": "We can clarify the goals of the writer by turning to a traditional image—the open hand of harmony and the closed fist of truth," writes Hartwell (45), yet I'm not sure whether "getting a job" or "being creative" requires open hands or closed fists. And still others suggest that "purpose" is related to kinds of writing—writing to inform, persuade, entertain (or express, persuade, refer, or be literary)—an approach to purpose that probably doesn't help students to write as much as inform them what they are writing. (See also Knoblauch 154.)

It's possible to make too much fuss over "Writing with a purpose." Yet by looking at what writing teachers have done to make "writing with a purpose" mean something, we can perhaps begin to understand why so much of what goes on in the teaching of composition becomes essentially elaboration of the meaningless: bland ideas carried beyond their essential uselessness. And we can speculate about other statements that might be the result of the same kind of elaboration:

"Writing is to be read."

There's truth in this one. I haven't read anything lately that wasn't to be read. To get more mileage out of the statement, teachers extend the truth to inform students that they ought to write for somebody or try to be "interesting" or "stimulating." Sometimes they turn the statement into a ploy to insert a little "real literature" in an anemic composition course or to rationalize their use of peer readers.

"Writing is a thinking process."

This one's pretty good and is related to "writing is a process"—another useless statement which I don't want to talk about anymore. As far as thinking goes, I can't imagine when writing wouldn't be a thinking process. But I also can't imagine much that I do as not being a "thinking process"—I can, for instance, make a case for "eyeing my shoes is a thinking process" or "ordering doughnuts is a thinking process" or "breaking concrete is a thinking process." Most often, I suspect teachers use this statement to 1) upgrade their profession, 2) to make students feel bad for dumb ideas, 3) to get history and anthropology teachers to allow their students to free write or keep journals.

"Writing is discovery."

This one's related to the previous one but probably has more applications. Advocates of "process" often use the statement to establish the obvious: that writers discover organization, directions, and sometimes even their main theses while they write. Anti-intellectual composition teachers also use it to convince students that they can write anything so long as they write about themselves, become enlightened, concerned, and keep an open heart willing to swing with surprise, reality or Truth (whichever comes first). And it is used by those writing teachers who like to spend the first half of their courses "teaching" students how to "discover" something to say using heuristic devices. In fact, what's nice about "discovery" is that all composition teachers no matter what their theoretical persuasion can use it or bend it enough to exhort their students to do whatever they think ought to be done.

"You write for an audience."

This one's a little more interesting. There may, in fact, be something to this one—if students are social cripples or under ten years old or don't know how to provide their readers with signals, clues, details, their teachers can exhort them to "write for your audience." (Teachers don't know how to do much more than simply exhort their students or point out that good writers "write for an audience." Sometimes, teachers try to make more out of "audience" by stretching their exhortations into meaningless exercises in "audience analysis" or vague, theoretical discussions of imaginary people.

"Writing should be done on both sides of the brain."

I thought this one was dead, but I still see it moaning by the side of the road. What's nice about it is that it makes composition teachers look like brain experts. But beyond saying that language is controlled on side x (I forget which side that is) and logic on side y, composition teachers don't have much more to say about hemispheres. And in fact, those who still talk about brain sides tend to use brain sides metaphorically—to analyze texts ("Ah! Look! A creative x-hemispher ed insight!") or deplore the lack of creativity or discovery in composition ("Lo! we exercise only the x side of the brain!")

"Writing is communication."

I really like this one. When teachers use this statement, they generally have nothing to say about the complexities of communication or the problems involved in understanding what "communication" really implies. Instead, they resort to this statement when they need a better-sounding replacement for "Your writing smells like old laundry" or "You expect me to read that?" Sometimes, they use it as an excuse to review "communication triangles" or to write "sender—message—receiver" on the blackboard—models that are about a quarter of a century old.

"Writing is hard work."

This statement is most often used in self-defense. It often occurs at the beginning of textbooks and says only what students suspect or have already experienced or will experience soon. When textbook writers say "writing is hard work" they generally mean, "A lot of this stuff is boring and may be useless, but if you poor bastards don't like it, it's because you aren't willing to work hard enough." In the classroom, it becomes the introduction to Peptalk #54: How to Motivate the Lazy Bums on Friday Afternoons or When They Have to Write Something Besides Personal Narratives or When They're Threatening to Go to the Dean and Complain about Your Grading Policy.
"You write best from experience."

I'm not exactly sure how someone might not write from experience. Normally, I think the term is bent to defend the value of personal narratives, personal voice, and to lend some support to the notion that writers write best when they participate in some sort of conversion experience or epiphany. I don't think I have ever seen it used to defend the value of research.

"Writing is Art."

Depending on how you want to define "art," I suppose all writing is art — some of is pretty bad art. But "Writing is Art" generally gets used in more limited context: those occasions when students get particularly boring or windy or when they show signs of writing about subjects teachers know nothing about in forms teachers don't particularly like or understand.

And there are many more of these kinds of statements that need even less comment. Here are a few:

— "Good writing is written by real people."  
   [How about that?]

— "Writing takes commitment."  
   [Even the worst writer in the world is committed.]  

— "Writing has deep psychological roots."  
   [Here's the source of "you are what you write."]

— "Good writing works."  
   [Here's an all-purpose statement that can mean whatever a teacher wants.]  

— "Good writing is creative."  
   [Generally used to combat anything teachers don't like.]

I am amazed by the strength of such simple-minded statements. Teachers cling to them, explore them, and keep trying to make something bigger and better out of them. And some of them do sound really good and maybe ought to be more than they really are. (Deep in my heart, I really want "writing with a purpose" to mean more than it does. There's something about the sense of "purpose" that maybe all Americans are supposed to have, a sense of destiny, a sense of moving forward, of progressing, of knowing where you're going, of succeeding.) Yet until we can give some of them up or admit that we are addicted to fluffing up the simple-minded, we will probably continue to float a few feet off the ground, calling down to our students, and asking them to see what may not be there, accept what may not be stated, feed their brains on air.

Notes

1See, for instance, Preston.
2For a more complete discussion, see "Writing Laboratory Image" or How Not To Write To Your Dean."
3For a slightly longer argument, see the "Bait/Rebait" feature I did for English Journal.
4For a typical early description of "communication," see Barnlund.

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The editor welcomes responses to this article.

ARGUMENT AND WORD PLAY: THE USES OF SIMILE

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Children play with words as they would with any toy, but somewhere in the process of growing up they lose or are taught to lose their sense of word play. Language freezes up either at a developmental stage or in the schools, and by the time we see students in college it has become a full blown threat. Thus, Ann E. Berthoff has written that "Our students can learn to write only if we give them back their language, and that means playing with it, working with it, using it instrumentally, making many starts" (The Making of Meaning, p. 70). Wordplay can be used in the classroom not only to warm students up to the possibilities of language but also to make them better rhetoricians. One technique that has proven effective in my course on argument is the simile game.

I like to play the game after discussing T. B. Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (Norton Anthology of American Literature, I:1467-78), the classic American tall tale depicting backwoodsman Jim Doggett as he honeswoggles a group of riverboat gentlemen into believing an outrageous bear hunting story. Jim is an expert liar and rhetorician. We believe his lies because we are taken in by his infectious personality and unusual flair for words. We delight in Jim even as he dupes us. For Jim, language is a confidence game, and throughout the tale we can see him shifting strategies as his language progresses from ineffectual boasting to poetry. One impossible bear that he tracks explodes like the boiler of a steam engine; and yet another more believable bear, the big bear of the title, "looms up like a black mist" and
"groans like a thousand sinners." It does not matter that Jim's similes are lies; they are believable and offer a unique, even attractive, point of view. In short, they win an audience.

We think of the simile as a rudimentary, often humorous, figure of speech, one that rusticizes (like Jim) and tough talking Chandlersque detectives employ. It is a local beauty. But in persuasive writing the simile can be a powerful vehicle for conveying or expanding upon a message. In one stroke, it can clarify a relationship or advance a position. It is a form of argumentation. Jim's similes, for instance, do more than add color; they harbor arguments: as machines, bears can be known; as mist, they cannot. On the one hand, nature is controllable; on the other, it is a threatening mystery. Exploring the implications of these "hidden" arguments in class is relatively easy, but demonstrating to students that they, too, can project a persuasive personality, make a point, and expand that argument through similes requires more effort. The simile game encourages students to experiment with similes and to incorporate them effectively into their own arguments.

The rules are simple. Before class I prepare two sets of noun cards. Set A consists of types of people (college student, professor, rock star, disco dancer, etc.). Set B consists of lesser states of being (cheese, dog, cat, cactus, etc.). At random, each student picks one card from each set and fashions a simile out of the two nouns selected. (Students may convene in smaller groups to barter cards.) To get the ball rolling, I provide two models for a simile:

1. The _______ is as _______ as a _______.
   (A) (adjective) (B)
2. The _______ _______ like a _______.
   (A) (verb) (B)

After five minutes or so, I ask students to scrawl their similes on the board. The results are varied depending upon how immediately obvious the connection between A and B is. In general, the first products are either incomplete in some way or cliché:

1A. The rock star was as tough as a loaf of bread.
2A. College students in their attempt to find individuality end up appearing as different as a beat-to-death bowl of mashed potatoes.
3A. After the marathon, the athlete lay on the ground like a pile of mashed potatoes.
4A. The beer drinker had the manners of a pig.
5A. The politician was as gray and long-faced as a mule.

These similes fail because the writers assume connections that are not readily apparent to the reader. The comparisons raise too many questions. When is a loaf of bread at its toughest? How is a bowl beat-to-death? What is so different about mashed potatoes? The problem is not so much a lack of detail as it is a failure to expose hidden assumptions concerning the similarity of two things. Mashed potatoes may lie firmly with little peaks or in a runny puddle. Pigs to a pig rancher may be well-mannered. Making a simile work requires an understanding of definition, argumentation, and audience.

To make each simile more communicative, students proceed to a second round of writing in which they must clarify the point of similarity by expanding upon either the A or B "side" of their sentence. Generally, they sharpen their arguments as well as their similes:

1B. The rock star was as tough on the outside but as soft on the inside as a freshly baked loaf of bread.
2B. College students in their maddening attempt to find individuality end up appearing as different from one another as the flakes of instant mashed potatoes in a plain white bowl.
3B. After the marathon, the athlete lay on the ground like a pile of mashed potatoes in a rainstorm.
4B. The beer drinker had the manners of a pig at feeding time, pushing others out of his way to get to the trough.
5B. The politician, on viewing his hostile audience, was as gray and long-faced as a mule contemplating an unplaced field.

In each example, we find a sharpening of detail, a clarification of the intersection between two randomly chosen items, an intensification of point of view, and an exploration of an argument's implications. The merely implausible politician of 5A reads himself in 5B to plow his antagonists. The desperate individualists in 2A achieve a complex uniqueness in 2B: individual potato flakes, like snowflakes, appear unique but are tasteless, artificial and anonymous against a colorless background. Whether these implications are intended or not, students can see that with some re-writing and a bit of word play they can add texture to flat expressions. They learn to make meanings.

The game is not fail-safe: students are bound to come up with clichés. But the player who drew "beer drinker" and "chicken" quickly discarded his first simile ("He carried on like a chicken with his head cut off") for a more graphic version: "The beer drinker was as appealing as a disemowered chicken that had been lying in the sun for several days." Here, the expansion brings a certain ripeness if not specificity to the prose. Perhaps more of a hazard than clichés is the certain eventuality that two randomly selected terms will in fact have virtually no apparent point of connection. This became clear to the student who drew "hairdresser" and "star." However, even in such cases I have found that there is a will there is a simile. The student began with "The hairdresser had the personality of a poity star." This shot in the dark led to something more understandable: "The wit of the hairdresser was as sharp as a star" and "The hairdresser's ego was as approachable as a star" and finally "It was easier to touch a star than to criticize the hairdresser's work." Given the challenge to connect the unconnectable, this student progressed from the notion of star to shape to the ironic expression of something distant, haughty, and untouchable.

The simile game exercises skills in word association, idea expansion, and even irony; it encourages word play and demystifies figurative language. But the ultimate problem of all classroom games is whether play can be transferred to reality. Can we also encourage students to apply the critical skills learned in play to the writing of an essay? Round three of the game does just this.

I usually play the simile game before returning a set of graded essays. While reading each essay, I mark a point usually in the introduction where the writer might effectively place a simile. I then ask students to re-submit their opening paragraphs with an appropriate simile added to the text. With this step, writers are encouraged to discover not only fresh but deeper expressions of their arguments.

The student, for example, who wrote of his dread for family gatherings was content in his first draft to argue that "This reunion would be no different than any others." On rewriting he added the following simile: "All of the relatives will be there like flower pots at the head of a gravestone, never to be moved again." Another student warning against excessive trust of friends first wrote: "I was impressed by her calm confidence; I was enthusias-
tic, and I could not wait to get started." Encouraged to write a simile, she added a more precise expression of her ill-advised dependence: "I was as trusting and enthusiastic as a wide-eyed puppy following his master onto smooth ice for the first time."

To be sure, not all students added similes of such complexity, but I found that most submitted rewrites that clarified rather than confused. Moreover, clichés were as scarce as hen's teeth. Do students transfer the skills of this exercise into their writing without professorial pressure? In subsequent assignments in which no explicit requirement for a simile was made, I found that about 12% of my students did use similes. Repeated innings of the game throughout a term reinforces the connection between simile and argument.

With the simile game, students loosen their imaginations; they reclaim their language through word play. Moreover, they learn to recognize ideas concealed within figurative language, draw fruitful comparisons, and clarify those comparisons. It is an exercise in the creation and expansion of an argument.