Focusing Twice Removed

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"Before I read this I need to tell you that when I was seven I was raped." These words of warning were my freshman student's apprehensive introduction to her shocking account of being attacked by the neighbor's gardener's son. Taken completely by surprise, the class and I listened as she read the description she had been given ten minutes to write. Though its details were not particularly graphic, we were riveted. Her classmates were impressed and appalled by her open sharing. I was taken back by the unexpected intimacy of her subject. She had chosen to write about her rape knowing that she would be reading it to the rest of the class and that I would follow-up with questions. Bravado was not her intent; her hands shook, her voice quavered, and her eyes welled up as she recalled the experience. Later I asked her how she had been able to write about such a painfully personal experience. "You told us that the one experience we didn't want to face, the one we felt in the gut was the one that could potentially yield the best writing," she said. "I wanted to start with something that could really be good."

As startling as it seemed to me then and as shockingly insensitive as it may sound now, this was exactly the kind of experience that I had wanted her to write about when I asked her to volunteer. The late Robert Kirsch, writer and literary critic, had advised his students to "write from the gut" when selecting their topics. I had found this advice invaluable and passed it on to my students. This quarter, as usual, I had fortuitously asked the right student to share her "gut-level" prose. I chose Linda because she was the first student to show up for class that day and because she was a self-possessed participant in class discussions. This was only the third week of classes, so I had had nine sessions with my students — not enough to find out who would be best suited for this type of public soul-baring. For indeed, that was really what I had asked for and hoped would happen. The exercise's success depended mainly upon the sensitivity and openness of the student guinea pig.

This barbaric sounding exercise was one that I used each quarter with my freshman literature students. It seemed to me that my students took for granted the insight and skill of published writers like E.B. White, George Orwell, and Joan Didion (the essayists with whom they were beginning the quarter). With typical freshman critical aplomb they berated the themes, the style, and the tone of these professionals. For them, criticising a piece of literature meant saying why they didn't like certain things, which meant identifying those elements which didn't fit their world view, their experience, or their personal expectations for style and form.

I like to think that one of the reasons I am teaching literature, though certainly not the main reason, is to sophisticate my students' critical perceptions of literature. I spent quite some time pondering which word to use before I settled on "sophisticate," and even then I looked it up to make sure Webster thought it meant what I had intended. He said it means, among other things, to deprive of simplicity, to disillusion, to make worldly wise. That's what I was after. I wanted my students to see, appreciate, and absorb some of the wisdom they encountered in literature so the rather simple view they have of themselves and of the world would expand — much like the f-stop on a camera opens to allow more incoming light. What I wanted was a perceptual and intellectual transformation from an f-stopless Kodak instamatic mentality to a Canon with its changeable f-stop aperture and compatible film speeds. As the Canon is more sensitive to the light, producing more perceptive photographs, changing snapshots into art, I wanted my student readers more sensitive and sensible. For this to occur, they needed to willingly open themselves up, which, as Webster points out, requires an initial disillusionment with their present view of the world. They had to be willing to endure self-questioning, uncertainty, and confusion to be receptive to the complexities of the human condition and the artistry with which it is portrayed in literature. They had to open themselves to the *affect* and the *effect* literature has on them: its power to lay hold of them, to impress them, and then to change them so they can truly see what literature has to say and the way in which it is said.

Dilation began the first day of class because my students arrived having read few engrossing essays and having written even fewer. Using the text *Eight Modern Essayists* (Wm. Smart; St. Martins Press; 1980) we read and discussed a half dozen essays of three very different professional essayists which had come directly from the author's personal experiences, for example, E.B. White's "Walden," "Once more to the Lake," and "Death of a Pig"; George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," "How the Poor Die," and "Marrakech"; and Joan Didion's "On Morality," "On Going Home," and "Goodbye to All That." Far from being intimidated or even impressed by the professionals, the students were blasé. They had no idea of what was involved in writing an engrossing essay in the manner worthy of such critical attention. Pursuing my goal to sophisticate them, we read what the writers said about their own work, including the interesting comparison between Orwell and Didion's respective renderings of "Why I Write." They listened to my lauditory analyses and strove to adopt the language and logic of the literary critic, but they were simply trying on the accoutrements of literary appreciation; they were not yet engaged closely in the text, not yet seeing it for themselves. While they were beginning to understand what they should be looking for and how they should be looking, they still had not read carefully and closely enough. Few of them could comprehend beyond a surface reading of the text that elicited the author's general meaning and intent. Of even more importance to the exercise I am presenting in this article was my observation that hardly any students had ever written an essay of the kind they were reading. They had not been asked to write about a critical personal experience that made the demands on their thinking and writing the professionals had made upon themselves. Another means of developing their appreciation had not been used. They couldn't understand what the essayists had accomplished by reading their texts, and, furthermore, they had not tried writing personal analyses themselves to find out what the professionals were up against to produce essays with power to engage, depict, and persuade.

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I do not mean to suggest that their high school English teachers were remiss, though more often than not I find myself working with students who have written less than five essay length papers throughout their four years of high school. While I advocate the use of this exercise in high school, the level of analytical sophistication it could produce would probably be less than what I expect from my college freshmen. Nevertheless, in principle the affect should be the same: becoming more aware of the difficulties involved in personal analysis and more sensitive to the accomplishments of those who master it intelligently and artistically with written language.

I had other reasons for choosing this kind of writing assignment in place of the traditional literary analysis essay. I thought it would make my students more mature writers as well as more sophisticated readers. Indeed, my freshman writers preferred the view that they were in the process of maturing rather than suffering from inadequacies. With exercises like this, I intentionally shifted my teaching to promote their maturity, whereas my former approach was to inform them of what they had somehow missed learning and needed to acquire to catch up. Seeing them as the pupa still at work in the chrysalis and not the fully formed, but crippled, butterfly gave both of us more leverage to experiment and explore possibilities that would not have presented themselves before.

Reading and writing, the prospective and the introspective, aligned in a more meaningful and useful way for the students when they did the focusing exercise. First they read the mature thinkers and writers who used their significant personal experiences as the gist from which they dramatized, narrated, analyzed, and theorized about life. Their probing reflection spun persuasive essays with the dramatic immediacy of fiction and the convincing urgency of real life actions and issues. E.B. White's pig's death took on farcical and tragic proportions as he recaptured the events of the pig's passing. We tittered as he recounted his much interrupted telephone conversation with the vet, sniggered as he described his pet dog licking the suds from the pig's enema bag, and fussed along with White about the intimate bonds that are broken by death. Speculations about the implications of loss and unmet expectations continued to reverberate within us long after we had put the essay aside.

Next, I wanted my students to ponder the causes of these reverberations and attempt to duplicate them in a writing assignment. After pointing out the levels of abstraction which manifest in various discourse modes within each essay (e.g. recording, reporting, explaining, classifying, advising, speculating), I explained James Moffett's manner of depicting the relationship between a writer and his/her subject (*Universe of Discourse* p. 35). Having synthesized several of Moffett's writer-subject progressions into a single chart for my students, we practiced finding evidence in the texts of the various relationships the writers had with their subject matter.

Recording what is happening	Dramatization	Sensory on-going perceptual selection
Reporting what happened	Narration	Chronologic memory selection
Generalizing what happens	Exposition	Analogic of class inclusion and exclusion
Inferring what will, may, or could happen (or be true)	Logical Argumentation	Tautologic of transformation and combination

When they arrived, some of my students wrote almost entirely in the narrative mode; others were clinically analytical. None of them incorporated all modes in a single text. The dramatic impact and persuasive engagement of the professional essayists eluded them as long as they continued to write in a mode that restricted how they approached their subjects. I wanted them to write a three page essay incorporating a variety of abstraction levels so they might expand and play with the many relationships they could have with their subject matter.

To generate their first drafts, I led them through an exercise I adapted from one that Cherryl Armstrong, a member of the South Coast Writing Project, had published in one of their newsletters. She had observed Keith Caldwell's Bay Area Writing Project presentation of "Focusing" at the South Coast Writing Project's Summer Institute and written her slightly modified version. You could say that my exercise is "Focusing" twice removed, and probably bears little resemblance and relates only slightly to the exercise Caldwell developed. I was after more than focusing from my students' writing, although that was an essential starting place. I wanted them to work their thinking and writing from description that put the writer in the critical moment of a significant personal experience through the modes of narration and exposition to persuasion, stopping short of blatant argumentation. After several trials, I had honed the steps of the exercise and my methods of delivery to the point where, in hind sight, students remarked about how satisfying and engaging their writing had been. They were also more appreciative of what the authors they were reading had accomplished.

Nevertheless, at its start each exercise was another shot in the dark, and as such could miss entirely. Before class I asked one student, Linda, if she would mind volunteering to read a piece of personal writing to the rest of the class. I identified the topic, explaining that it would be a descriptive piece every one would write according to my instructions which I would then question her about while the class looked on. The other class members, after seeing our model, would group in dyads and question each other. Our purpose was to model the questioning procedure for the rest of the class.

Linda agreed and, along with the class, began following my instructions to generate the first draft. First, make a list of personal experiences that somehow changed you or your life so that you were not the same after they happened. They do not have to be major events. They could be something that the rest of us might consider insignificant (e.g. E.B. White's pig's death). However, they should be events that caused a shift in your perception of yourself, of life, or of "reality." You were not quite the same after these events happened. Those vivid memories that frequently crop up, especially those that flashed in your mind as I was giving these instructions, are the ones you want to write down. After generating a list of four or five, select one that you would be willing to write about. The best choice is usually the one that gives you a gut reaction when you recall it, the one that you definitely do not want to write about. Those are the incidents from which previous students have produced their best writing. Hearing these instructions, Linda changed her topic to her rape.

Second, after getting a vivid mental picture of the incident, jot down the colors and sounds that seem to stand out. Prehaps there was a particular smell or feeling that you had at the time; what was it? List the people who were involved and their distinguishing characteristics. Be brief. Next, listen to the dialogue that occurred if there was one. Write down key snatches of dialogue that would unlock the whole conversation.

Third, writers have to decide where to begin and end the episode they will write about. They have to arbitrarily cut a manageable chunk out of the whole story which may have its beginnings in early childhood and still be reverberating in their lives. However, they only want the most interesting piece, the part which is the context for the actual experience. Do this now: choose an appropriate manageable beginning and end for your experience. Remember that you are only writing a three page paper and not a novel. (When students find it difficult to arbitrarily choose a starting point, I suggest they proceed by saying, "Once I was ________ when ________" which forces them into a story telling mode.)

Fourth, draw a linear time line on your paper. Place the first action of your story's plot at the left end and the last action at the right. As you mentally recall the actions in between, fill them in on the time line. Again, don't try to include every action, only the ones significant to the plot. Survey the actions you've plotted and pick the critical moment, the exact moment at which students have said they "shifted," "cracked," "realized," "knew," "changed" or "decided." Put an X on the time line at that spot. I usually interrupt the instructions at this point to provide an example out of my own experience. I tell them the story, hastily plot the event for them on the board, and mark a big X at the strategic moment. I then wax dramatic and describe the crucial seconds in vivid detail, including my own physical and emotional conditions along with the action and color of the moment.

Shifting their attention back to their own critical moments, while trying to maintain the sense of significance and intensity that has developed in the room, I give the next direction. Fifth, as you keep that critical moment clear in your mind's eye, begin writing it down, describing it so completely that it provides a language photograph of that moment for the reader. It puts the reader in the moment and allows him/her to recreate your experience. Write for about ten minutes.

By this time all the students were writing vigorously in the emotional fervour of the moment. Unfortunately, limited by time, I had to drag most of them away from their papers after ten minutes, turning their attention to Linda. Drenched by the emotional recall of their own triggering moment, they were primed for Linda's recounting of the moment of her rape.

> He threw me down on the floor, forcing me with his body to lie down. He pushed up against me. I was only seven years old, but I had guessed what he was going to do to me. I knew I had to try to get away. He hit me in the face, punched me in the stomach so I couldn't move. He started touching me in ways that I ________. He ripped off clothing and starting fondling me. At this moment I felt a horrible feeling of disgust. I could not believe he was doing this to me. I started screaming louder and louder. He told me to shut up or he would kill me. So I did. Then he raped me, a seven-year-old child, shivering, terrified under his weight.

On other occasions students have recounted witnessing deaths of loved ones and complete strangers, divorce announcements, all types of accidents, and incidents involving animals. They, like Linda, had often completely forgotten about the incident until recently and had not discussed the moment with a mental health professional. Often, a recent event had brought the earlier incident to their attention. After Linda finished reading I asked her one of several versions of the question I eventually repeated ten times: "So what?" I softened the stark effrontery of it by saying instead after a respectful pause, "So Linda, what do you want to say to us about your rape?" Struggling to a more objective view of the experience so she could go on with the exercise, she said in a whisper, "That it is terrible to be raped when you are seven years old." She had leapt immediately to the point she wanted to make. Now I had to lead her back to fill in the explanation she knew but had not put into words. My next question was obvious. "What is so terrible?" She replied, "The pain, the fear, and the disgust." Wanting to provide a narrative context for the description she had given us and the analysis and explanation that was to come I asked her, "What happened that created the pain, the fear, and the disgust?" She began a narrative recounting of the events surrounding the critical moment she had described. By saying, "Then what?" I urged her narrative on to give us a chronological context of what had happened. When she had given us enough narration I moved her on by asking, "So what?" She responded by shifting into prose that was analytical and advisory. As though she were talking about another seven year old, she analyzed her feelings and actions. For a long time she had been afraid of men, including her father. She went on to explain her present difficulties with intimate relationships. She did not like to be touched. Moving from emotional saturation to mental engagement, the class was beginning to see the enormity and complexity of what Linda had meant by "it's terrible."

Even though I had ended the exercise by thanking Linda for being such a powerful model and releasing the rest of the class to perform the same "so what" exercise with their partners, Linda did not want to stop. She wanted to explain more about the incident and ask the same question that the rest of the class asked after I dragged them away from their partners: How do we write this up? What do we do next? My instructions sent them off to find writing havens as the next class entered: Write about your significant personal experience in such a way that you include description that puts us in the moment, narration that gives us a context, explanation that reflects insightful analysis, and a touch of persuasiveness that is speculative but not argumentative. The power of your recreated moment and your accompanying explanation should move the reader to adopt your point of view, or at least accept its validity. This essay is not meant to be objectively and logically argumentative. By this I mean that we are not trying to construct a logical argument for or against an issue (in Linda's case, rape) which could stand alone if the writer's personal experience were removed. We are not working to remove the writer's subjective authority from the issue. Rather we are working to draw the reader into the writer's subjective frame of reference. We want to use the writer's emotional expression to entangle the reader's sensibilities, and in so doing persuade the reader to adopt the writer's point of view, putting the reader in the writer's position where she/he experiences the crisis through the writer's eyes.

As one would expect, Linda's first draft, while gripping in its reporting of a shocking moment, is not a well-written depiction. I directed Linda away from concerns about graceful writing on this first draft. A series of refining and polishing drafts would follow, but for now the exercise had another objective—to affect the class so that its members would relate to each other and their writing in a different manner. I wasn't disappointed. Linda's exercise did more than rivet the class' attention; it changed the working atmosphere, the kinds of writing the students would do, and their attitudes toward their work. From now on they could write what James Britton calls "dummy runs." The stakes were much higher than simply completing the assignment. Linda had put her heart into the ring, and the others knew they had to follow her lead to produce writing the rest of us thought worth reading. They now expected more from themselves. They

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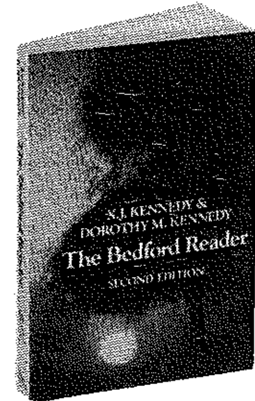

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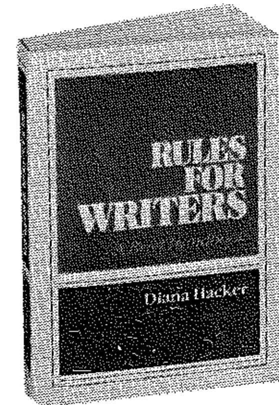

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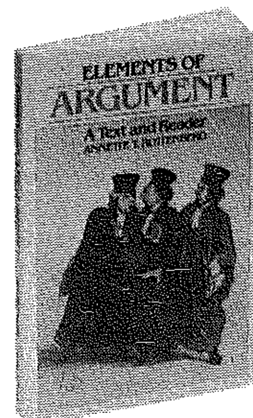

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were challenged to find something truly meaningful to write about. Several students moaned that unfortunately nothing dramatic had ever happened to them, so they had nothing of equal value to write about. Interestingly enough, these students, who thought they had lived uneventful lives, often wrote better essays for this assignment. Without the shocking impact of a significant crisis to rely upon, they had to wring more subtle and often sensitive significances out of their mini-traumas. Deeply reflective and perceptive essays were written about a decision to forgive a family member, the first shot on a hunting trip, and a father-daughter conversation.

Class members also expected more from each other — more openness, more personal commitment, more honesty, or else they felt disappointed. They were also more curious about each other. Effervescent and gregarious, Linda did not seem like a childhood rape victim. We carry stereotypes of how such people should look: withdrawn, anxious and tentative. If Linda had such a secret, what about the others? Was their jocularity a cover for equivalent psychic traumas?

At the end of the assignment, reading the polished drafts, class members were engrossed and often moved by the detailed authenticity and depth of their classmates' writing. They felt the power of such personally committed writing. This experience, and the individual redrafting and writing group work that led up to it, allowed them to realize that no secret formula (known only to teachers and professional writers) exists for writing effectively; student writers could see that they carried the essay "in them" and hard work was required to get it out and onto the paper. Furthermore, as more accomplished writers, they could now begin to understand the process by which professionals write about their experiences, and to have more respect for the results.

But you may be more concerned about Linda, about all the Lindas who came before her and who made themselves vulnerable in such a potentially damaging way. As teachers are we not responsible for the repercussions? To that question I unerringly answer "yes." We have to hold ourselves responsible. Exercises such as this which deal with our students' most intimate and intense memories require us to use care and skill in administering them. Linda's willingness to share her terrible moment was a tacit statement of trust and a plea for it to be returned in kind. She had taken my request seriously and asked me to do the same. While challenging her to enrich and analyze her depiction, I had to keep in mind that this had other implications beyond a writing exercise. The temptation to capitalize upon the high drama of this pedagogical moment has to be tempered by constant vigilance. By remaining sensitive to what Linda was going through as she relived her memory, I could be more certain she would benefit as much as the class from the exercise. In this way, as with all classroom lessons that are basically personal and confrontive in nature, we can ensure that our students will not only be willing to continue with them, but will find them valuable. If we don't manage such exercises well it seems to me that we will be forever doomed with "dummy runs" and essays in which no one is at home. And we will be missing an opportunity for students to come to appreciate literature in a wholly personal way.

Revitalizing Style: Toward a New Theory and Pedagogy

Elizabeth D. Rankin
University of Alabama

In the past several years, we have seen various attempts to define and explain the dramatic changes occurring in the field of composition studies. In particular, Richard Young, James Berlin and Robert Inkster, and Maxine Hairston have spoken of a "paradigm shift," a change in the basic assumptions and attitudes that underlie all our theory and pedagogy.[1] One result of this paradigm shift has been a noticeable decline in the status of style as a pedagogical concept. By this I mean that the teaching of style no longer enjoys a prominent place in our discipline.

Some see this as a change for the good. For too long, they argue, style dominated our pedagogy — almost to the exclusion of other concerns. And of course they are right. But what I fear may be happening now is an over-correction of sorts. Style hasn't just stepped back to take a less dominant role in our teaching — style is out of style.

Before I go any further, it is probably wise to stop and explain what I mean by style in this context. To do so is no easy task, for style has had a protean identity over the years. "Historically," says Linda Woodson, "style has been interpreted both narrowly, as referring only to those figures that ornament discourse, and broadly, as representing a manifestation of the person speaking."[2] Most often, however, those who write about style in texts and in journals define style, implicitly or explicitly, in terms such as these:

> The style of a piece of writing is the pattern of choices the writer makes in developing his or her purpose. If the choices are consistent, they create a harmony of tone and language that constitutes the style of the work. A description of the style of any piece of writing is therefore an explanation of the means by which the writer achieved his or her purpose.[3]

In practice, discussions of style nearly all deal with particular linguistic choices: with diction, syntax, and tone. So I'll start out my own discussion with this definition in mind, though the definition itself, if regarded narrowly, may well be a factor in style's decline.

What, then, are the reasons for that decline? I think there are two. One has to do with the claims of competing concerns. As modern composition studies rediscovered its roots in classical rhetoric, it discovered whole areas of study that had been neglected for years. One of these areas, invention, has attracted much attention of late, and as rhetoricians rush in to fill the gap in research, interest in style has declined. The same could be said for other new areas of interest, such as the composing process. Although there is really no need to see these new fields as competing with the old, the politics of our profession and the rhetoric that it gives rise to have created such an effect.

Of course this is not to say that no one is interested in style these days. Style does have a place in the New Rhetoric — or rather, it has a place in both branches of the New Rhetoric that Richard Young has identified.[4] And this is the second reason for style's decline. For so far, neither branch of the New Rhetoric has offered us a sound, complete, and adequate theory of style. Until such a theory is formulated — or at least until such a formulation