Restrictive+ "will run"	576	72	13
Nonrestrictive+ "will run"	576	480	83

TABLE 2

Relationship Between Different Subject Noun Phrases and the Relative Clauses Which Follow Them

	Occurrences in 72 questionnaires	Incorrect occurrences	% of occurrences which are incorrect
"horse"+ restrictive	216	10	5
"horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	190	88
"any horse"+ restrictive	216	24	11
"any horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	196	91
"those horses"+ restrictive	216	22	10
"those horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	204	94
"a horse"+ restrictive	216	12	6
"a horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	188	87
"the ten large horses"+ restrictive	216	30	14
"the ten large horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	178	82
"some horses"+ restrictive	216	24	11
"some horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	174	81
"the horse"+ restrictive	216	20	9
"the horse"+ nonrestrictive	216	192	89
"all horses"+ restrictive	216	20	9
"all horses"+ nonrestrictive	216	192	89

Notes

[1]See John Ross, "Constraints on Variables in Syntax," Diss. MIT, mimeographed by Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1967; Robert Stockwell, et al., *The Major Syntactic Structures of English* (New York: Holt-Rinehart-Winston, 1973); G. Carlson, "Amount Relatives," *Language* 53 (1977); Ray Jackendoff, *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972); Carlota Smith, "Determiners and Relative Clauses in a Generative Grammar of English," in *Modern Studies in English*, eds. David Reibel and Sanford Shane (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969).

[2]Winfred Lehman, *Descriptive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 169.

[3]James McCrimmon, *Writing with a Purpose*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 423.

HOPELESS, BUT NOT SERIOUS: COMPARING RESULTS FROM WRITING CLASSES WITH THOSE OF OTHER DISCIPLINES

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Reading through our professional journals is like an excursion into self-induced schizophrenia: articles promising hopeful new methods for teaching, let us say, voice or audience, are interspersed with studies hammering home that our very best efforts have only a marginal effect on our students' skills. The professional journals are rather like cigarette ads that beguile us by design and then warn us by law. Yes, our journals assert, one does see improvement in skills, but the increase is usually no greater than that of students not taking writing courses.[1] Yes, we nod in agreement, students need to be taught to write with a specific audience in mind; yet, a study in a recent issue of *College English* concludes in fact that having a specific audience produces worse papers.[2] The Iowa study, performed in 1969, confirmed our worst fears about teaching English: that while students may improve in time, it has more to do with aging and the college environment than with writing instruction. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, we are guilty of tampering with the first blush of ignorance, and what's worse, we seem to be doing it to no good end. A complementary study, of more recent vintage[3] demonstrates that no teaching method or personal teaching style produces consistently favorable results. Given these conclusions, can anyone help but wonder if writing teachers are not wasting their efforts, the students' time, and the taxpayers' money?

Reading these studies, I can scarcely repress memories of countless student conferences in which I have remarked—gently to be sure—"look here, this word needs an apostrophe or a comma," and seen the students' shoulders sag and their eyes roll upward like St. Sebastian when the arrows penetrated his flesh. Despite all my attempts to be kindly, how difficult it is to resist mentioning to them that we had a lesson on this only last week. (Did they not remember? Yes, they did.) Once again I had beguiled myself into thinking that I had exorcised some grammatical demon forever. But here it was, hideously leering at me again. And I find myself wondering again, why couldn't I be teaching math or physics or accounting? Why is writing so different from other courses students take? How gratifying to be a chemistry teacher, able to hold up a final exam booklet and announce "this much I taught the student—more than he knew when he entered." But, in writing, as we are too painfully aware, the final exam booklets and post-tests do not buttress our claim of having taught anyone to write better.

Our efforts to validate writing improvements reminds me of a study in psychotherapy done a number of years ago. Hans Eysenck attempted to measure which of the competing methods produced the greatest rate of client progress.[4] The result: the less therapy, the greater the rate of improvement. Spontaneous remission accounted for more successes than any other approach. In this respect at least, the psychotherapist can claim kinship with the writing instructor.

Psychotherapy aside, one wonders: is the acquisition of writing skills really so different from other learning activities? From my own experience, there is at least one other endeavor where

the rate of progress seems infintesimal: and that is learning to play the violin. My violin teacher, half my age, gives me insights into how I must appear to my writing students: "No, no!" she will insist, "That's a dotted eight note, the dot indicating a separation. Don't you see it?" Of course I do, when she points to it. (I am one who is often abashed by the obvious.) Why hadn't I seen that marking earlier, having practiced the piece for two weeks? To anyone learning the violin, the answer is simple enough. I was concentrating on other matters: maintaining bow pressure and bowing in a straight line, establishing proper intonation, elevating the instrument, coordinating my bowing with my body movement, launching the proper attack—I could go on *ad infinitum*. In short, I was a man with too much on his mind to think about music.

In this respect, I was not significantly different from my writing students.

In my mind, undertaking any of the activities listed above—violin playing, psychotherapy and learning to write—are linked. The pleasures and frustrations are similar, the rate of progress often so slow as to be imperceptible. As anyone who has experienced them can testify.

But is the acquisition of writing skills so different from those of academic disciplines like math or history or foreign languages? I went to the academic journals of various disciplines to find out. And, after reading several issues, my conclusion is that they are not. The major difference is that teachers in these courses have more flexibility in minimizing the number of variables that a student has to contend with. They can, if they wish (and they often do), give multiple choice tests and fill-ins rather than test students on either their problem solving or expository writing skills.

In math, for example, the solution to a problem may be learned in a formulaic manner, with one set of numbers merely substituted for another without much need of comprehension on the student's part. The closer the resemblance between the structure of the test questions and those given in class, the better the student's performance. When the questions are asked in a different format, however, students grow puzzled. Consider: one mathematics educator reported in *The Mathematics Teacher* that a national math test revealed that 82% of American 17 year olds could not find the area of a right triangle given all three sides. The author stresses that this poor showing "was not the result of computational failures but was the result of the inability to conceptualize the abstraction of area."[5] For every student who was able to provide the area as requested, two mistakenly offered the perimeter. As teachers of writing, how often we have seen a similar phenomenon: the student learns to punctuate the possessive case when she is tested for it but still has to be reminded to do it on her papers. No doubt, too, this same math student remembers passing a test on finding the area of a figure; in a certain context she can solve this problem—when the test was restricted to a few kinds of problems, a few kinds of formulas. She wasn't being confronted as she is now with a multiplicity of problems. In this new context, she is likely to be baffled but will ultimately learn to recognize how to deal with problems of area in all their Vishnu-like disguises. The same is true of the writing student who is plagued by a similar inability to transfer knowledge from one format to another. For a long while—too long it may seem to us—he may need to be reminded of the proper form for the possessive case.

Regard, too, the comments of a writer in *The Journal of Chemical Education*. Experience has made her skeptical of the validity of a remark she has heard expressed by chemists that "if one learns fundamental principles and theories, one will be able to make applications as needed."[6] In writing classes, that would be the equivalent of lecturing students rather than having them write. The author shrinks from this approach. Rather she concludes, "There is evidence that until a person has 'soaked' in the content of a field, partly by being exposed to a wide range of problems and situations, he or she can solve only the most superficial of problems. As a rule it takes about 10 years for people to accumulate enough experience to show real facility in dealing with a great many problems."[7] Biology teachers discover the problems associated with transferability as well. One instructor remarks: "The typical biology student, accustomed to being told step-by-step what to do in the laboratory in order to achieve some pre-arranged result, is likely to be overwhelmed by the task of designing an investigation unless the assignment is preceded by a set of experiences which define a general biological topic and suggest some methods and choice."[8] The learning of biology becomes messy when the student is confronted by the number of variables that a beginning violinist or writer is subject to.

The nursing profession recognizes a similar problem. In an article appearing in *Nurse Educator*, the authors comment that "Analysis of tests reveal . . . that teachers tend to ask questions at the lower cognitive levels, even though they indicate that their primary objective is to foster students' abilities to think critically and analytically."[9] The writers appeal to their colleagues to "write test questions at higher cognitive levels." Their concern: "If students are to transfer knowledge into clinical practice, testing must foster a student's ability to think quickly and analytically, rather than merely to recall facts." Evidently, as in other disciplines, teachers are tempted to create tests that will evidence learning success rather than to deal with the uncomfortable recognition that student skills improve slowly.

In an appeal that is strikingly similar to that of nursing, sociologist William V. D'Antonio urges his colleagues to resist the temptation to encourage passive learning. He remarks that "Students who are lectured to and then tested by multiple-choice examinations do not learn much sociology." And he continues: ". . . we can be easily misled by [students'] ability to handle multiple-choice tests into believing that they are absorbing a sociological approach."[10] In the same issue another writer concludes that the "ultimate test of a sociologist's effectiveness as teacher is the *empirically demonstrated extent* to which students can do, after a course ends, what they could not do at its beginning. (Can do, that is to say, things that sociologists deem important—report critical facts about this society, past in contrast to present and here compared to there; report certain linkage between these facts; explain, however tentatively, why such linkages might obtain; and apply this knowledge to the troubles that vex our lives today.)"[11] Alas, the author then admits that no such empirical test of efficacy exists. Unfortunately, as writing teachers, we can only envy sociology teachers their ignorance.

Historians face a similar dilemma. How tempting it is, as one historian indicates, to impart information and interpretation rather than skills—"analysis, conceptualization, organization, chronology, empathy, and the ability to communicate—practiced by historians."[12] The regularity of articles in *The History Teacher* advocating that historians aid students in becoming more than passive memorizers of facts but explorers in the historical method testifies to that discipline's efforts to undertake the difficult task of teaching skills . . . and their resistance to it.

Indeed, one can leaf through the teaching journals in other disciplines and discover similar sorts of frustrations to those we

experience as writing teachers when these disciplines require students to display a skill — to think like a sociologist or an historian, a mathematician or a nurse — rather than simply to memorize facts and findings. And given the frustrations that attend appraising student skills, it is no wonder that many teachers would prefer giving a multiple choice test rather than sort through an essay answer that combines insights with absurdities, much of it rendered in unintelligible prose. How much more appealing for teachers to devise tests that reward rote memorization. At least they can for a time sustain the illusion of having taught *something*.

It should be consoling to us as writing teachers to know that the journals in other disciplines express anxieties akin to our own. Admittedly, this is a curious form of consolation, rather like soothing a child who has been deprived of dessert by taking away another child's treat. On the other hand, knowing we are not facing these problems alone may make it a bit easier to go through that exhortation on the value of specific detail once again.

Notes

[1]Jewell, *Effectiveness of College Level Instruction in Freshman Composition*, HEW: Office of Education Bureau of Research, 1969.

[2]Gordon Brossell, Rhetorical Specification in Essay Examination Topics," *College English*, 45, no. 2, Feb. 1983, pp. 165-73, There are many such gut-wrenching articles. Indeed, almost any statistical study indicates that promising, commonsense approaches do not produce the expected results. The number that foundered on the shoals of empirical studies is too long and dismal to recount here.

[3]Tim McCracken and W. Allen Ashby, "The Sacred Mirror: Testing English 101, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 8, no.2, Winter, 1982, pp. 95-108.

[4]Hans Eysenck, "The Effects of Psychotherapy," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 1952, 16, p.319.

[5]James J. Hirstein, *The Mathematics Teacher*, December, 1981, p. 704.

[6]See H.A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 2nd edition, The MIT Press: Cambridge, Ma., 1981, pp. 72-98.

[7]Mary Budd Rowe, "Getting Chemistry Off the Killer Course List," *Journal of Chemical Education*, November, 1983, pp. 954.

[8]Verne M. Mills, "The Investigative Laboratory in Introductory Biology Courses: A Practical Approach," *The American Biology Teacher*, October, 1981, pp. 364-5.

[9]Diana A. Mayer Demetrulias and Lena E. McCubbin, "Constructing Test Questions for Higher Level Thinking," *Nurse Educator*, Autumn, 1982, p. 13.

[10]"Nibbling at the Core", *Teaching Sociology*, Jan., 1983, pp. 172, 179.

[11]Everett K. Wilson, "Standards for Judging the Adequacy of Sociology I," *Teaching Sociology*, Jan., 1983, p. 211.

[12]Alan B. Briceland, "The Group-Task Approach: Developing Analytical Skills in the United States History Survey," *The History Teacher*, February, 1981, p. 191.