

The Perilous Life and Times of Freshman English

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To write yet another essay about the problems of Freshman English requires a certain lack of professional good manners. But perhaps the centennial year of the course's existence is an appropriate time to reflect on why Freshman English persists as a course required of all students in American colleges and universities, even though the people most closely connected with the course have seldom expressed their satisfaction with it. Freshman English has been a black hole ever since its inception, swallowing up students, teachers, and money without giving much in return (except to those who manage to write successful textbooks for use in the course). To read through Freshman English textbooks of any era is to journey through a dreary wasteland marked by the same ill-conceived pillars of wisdom, which are repackaged rather than re-thought when some new intellectual fad requires their surface conformity to its configurations.¹ When teachers of English write about the course in their professional journals it is to complain about it: its teachers' lack of training and motivation; its students' ill-preparedness and lack of motivation; its low status; its lack of intellectual integrity; the grinding workload it imposes on its teachers.² In fact, the course was conceived in the midst of an awareness of lack. When Harvard University began to administer an entrance examination to prospective students in 1874, the scandalized response of the examiners to students' poor written performance on the examinations caused the sophomore course in composition to be moved to the Freshman level in 1885, where it has remained, with minor exceptions, ever since, not only at Harvard but in most American universities.

I think that the unusual origin of Freshman English is at the heart of its problems. Most courses in college curricula—even those ordinarily thought of as "skills" courses, like skiing or ceramics—depend for their maintenance on the existence of an agreed-upon body of knowledge and an established discipline devoted to preserving and perfecting that knowledge. In academic contexts the term "discipline" carries an important meaning aside from its reference to a body of knowledge: it also denotes a state of order based upon submission to established rules and a hierarchy of authority. Now since Freshman English originated as a response to perceived deficiencies in students' literate skills, rather than as an arena in which to study a body of received knowledge, the course has never appropriated an area of study for itself that would bring order to its teaching. Despite attempts in this direction, no coherent methodology which aims at increasing students' mastery of the fundamental literate skills has ever been generated, since no one knows precisely what those skills are. Those methodologies that have been imposed on the course from time to time have either been imported from other disciplines or devised out of whole cloth, as was the case with the course's longest-lived methodological tenant, current-traditional rhetoric. Nor has Freshman English ever been able to establish a disciplinary hierarchy of the sort that usually obtains in academic disciplines: of course, it has no graduate program; professorial rank is ordinarily not granted for participation in its planning or teaching; and as a result of these conditions, until recently, very little research has been done in connection with the course.

Because of its unusual origin, then, Freshman English has been plagued throughout its history by a recurring tension between English teachers' desire to make the course teachable and respectable by grounding it in some discipline, on the one hand, and their attempts to fulfill their supposed responsibility to the culture at large by improving the level of students' literacy, on the other. The historical documents associated with the course show that if teachers adopt a disciplinary approach to Freshman English, the course becomes an uneasy compromise between some subject matter and attention to students' ability to write error-free prose, or it dissolves the problem of Freshman English by ignoring the question of student literacy altogether. And if teachers devise a course which concentrates exclusively on the inculcation of literate skills, as was the case during the first forty years or so of the century, the result has been frustration for teachers and students alike.

Before I turn to history, perhaps I'd better be clearer about what I mean by "literacy" when I use this term in connection with Freshman English. The sort of literacy that Freshman English has always been expected to inculcate in its students might fairly be called "technological" or "mechanical." For most Americans, literacy means proficiency in the consumption and reproduction of factual information. As Robert Pattison points out in *On Literacy*, in this country we expect readers and writers to be efficient rather than intelligent.³ Sophisticated linguistic or interpretive skill has never been highly valued in America; to possess such an ability is even to raise suspicion in some quarters. What Americans do seem to want from education in literacy is the ability to produce a factually coherent and conventionally correct piece of writing, or, in other words, they want the "literate page" that Freshman English has usually tried to give them.

Like traditional grammar, with which it has always been closely associated, the "English" taught in the Freshman course seems to be a sort of institutionalized aspiration for Americans. In our culture, to be able to write error-free prose is the mark of an educated person. As Peter Elbow puts it, "writing without errors doesn't make you anything, but writing with errors . . . makes you a hick, a boob, a bumpkin."⁴ To determine the historical reasons for the peculiarly American anxiety that underlies our fear of this sort of mechanical illiteracy is beyond my capabilities at the moment, but I will speculate that the culture's concern with success—as this is achieved through conformity to conventional behavior—has a lot to do with it. Rhetorician Richard Weaver came very close to saying as much in his 1948 essay "To Write the Truth." Weaver notes there that many composition classes deal in what he calls "etiquette," which is "the way of those who wish their speech to bear the stamp of conventional correctness," and who "are more fearful of a misplaced accent than of an ambiguity, because the former arouses suspicion that they have not been with the right people."⁵ Thus the Freshman course in "English" is as much a social as an intellectual phenomenon.

On the one hand, then, Freshman English has been a gesture in the direction of alleviating Americans' fear of not conforming to acceptable standards of literate writing. On the other, English academics have wanted to make Freshman English into a course like others with which they are familiar. I turn now to the history of this tension.

The Limits of Literacy

The teachers who were responsible for Freshman English during the late nineteenth-century attempted to devise a methodology for it that would inculcate literate skills on a mass basis.

As a result they produced the philosophy of composition now known as "current-traditional rhetoric." Current-traditional pedagogy is error-centered and formally prescriptive, apparently as a direct result of its attempt to assist teachers in instilling mastery of correct forms in the great masses of students who came to them for this very purpose.⁶ The early current-traditional rhetoricians formulated a set of generalized rules which were to be taught to students before they started writing. The advantage of such an approach was obvious; as Alexander Bain put it, "much of the necessary instruction can be condensed into principles, and may be impressed by carefully chosen examples. The teacher is here a trainer, and can impart in a short compass, what, without him, would be acquired slowly, if at all."⁷ The rules were enshrined in compendious textbooks which instructed students in how to avoid the designated errors. In this way current-traditional pedagogy offered teachers the advantage of efficiency, in that many students could be given instruction in a short period of time. One of its disadvantages, of course, is that the pattern of error varies from student to student and from assignment to assignment, so that the list of anticipated errors, or rather, the rules governing the production of correct discourse, must continually be expanded to cover all possibilities. This necessity accounts for the enormous size of most current-traditional textbooks, not to mention their doctrinaire tone and formulaic approach to the writing process.

Current-traditional pedagogy seems to have dominated Freshman English instruction from the course's inception until about 1960, and perhaps beyond. That current-traditional rhetoric was well entrenched in Freshman English during at least the first forty years of the twentieth century is borne out by the testimony of its teachers. Herbert L. Creek, in a 1955 article which bears the distressing title "Forty Years of Composition Teaching," notes that when he "began teaching composition at the University of Illinois in 1910, a pattern of instruction in writing was already established, and, in spite of frantic experimentation, there has been no revolution since."⁸ Creek traces this pattern to the pedagogical innovations inspired by Barrett Wendell—who introduced the practice of the "daily theme" at Harvard in 1884—and to the ubiquity of Adams Sherman Hill's textbook, *The Principles of Rhetoric* (1878). Hill taught Creek that there were four, and only four, respectable forms of discourse and that he should avoid "fine writing." Wendell, on the other hand, "told how to begin with a topic sentence, how to repeat the idea of a topic sentence at the end of the paragraph or larger unit, how to summarize the leading ideas" (5).

Creek's account is supplemented by an article written by Henry F. Thoma for a 1957 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Thoma testifies that when he began teaching in 1931 "students wrote a theme a week. They were drilled not to make comma splices, begin sentences with due to, split their infinitives, put periods after the titles of their themes, or write paragraphs without topic sentences."⁹ According to Thoma, students used a handbook which "handed on English grammar more or less untouched" as well as a collection of essays. "In the second semester, they read a novel, some poems, plays and stories—on which they wrote critical papers. And there was the Research Paper, about a month of it." The remarkable feature of both these teachers' accounts is their laconic notice of the presence in Freshman English of a few pieces of discursive and pedagogical dogma, none of which seem to be organized according to any perceptible fashion, unless it is the order dictated by tradition.

Throughout this period teachers complained by implication, as Creek and Thoma do, about the limitations imposed on them

by the low level of expectation that permeated instruction in the Freshman course. George G. Gates, writing in 1959, eloquently conveys the frustration that many of his colleagues must have felt:

For almost thirty years I have been a teacher of composition. Yet in retrospect I cannot think of a single student to whom I have given real assistance in his writing. I have changed some spelling habits. . . . I have in a few instances eliminated the "comma splice" and the "fragment," secured a firmer use of the comma before "and" and "but" in the compound sentence, urged the use of keywords and concrete details in developing the paragraph. At various times I have suggested the THESIS SENTENCE as a means of writing to the point in the long paper. These so-called elements of composition are typical of the things taught me as a student. Yet I can not think these things teach a person to write above the literate level.¹⁰

Here Gates succinctly puts a complaint frequently voiced by teachers of Freshman English during the early part of the twentieth century: paradoxically, to teach students how to produce a "literate page" is not to teach them how to write.

This inherent paradox has plagued Freshman English for many, many years. In an important 1969 essay entitled "Freshman Composition: the Circle of Unbelief," William Coles describes the peculiar circumscriptive relationships between text, course and kind of writing which have always informed instruction in Freshman English. Coles writes that "the kind of writing taught and learned implies the text which implies the course which implies the activity which implies the kind of writing taught and learned."¹¹ The circularity stems from "the desire for a universally realizable standard of writing. . . . The language of standards . . . has the effect of turning the activity of writing and everything associated with it into a kind of computerized skill." Coles compiles a "portmanteau" preface from a number of contemporary composition textbooks and uses it to charge that what textbooks ask their students to produce is "that kind of non-writing popularly known as Themewriting." Themewriting, "invented originally by English teachers for use in English classrooms only . . . is as closed a language as the Dewey Decimal System, as calculatedly dissociated from the concerns its user and the world he lives in as it has been possible to make it." In other words, the writing done for "English" class—mechanically flawless, structurally obvious, conventionally literate—is generated, read, and forgotten all within the confines of the course, since it is always focussed upon the acquisition of the polite literate skills, rather than upon its potential effect or use.

Freshman English, then, when it is conceived as a course whose aim is the inculcation of mechanical literacy, has always been doomed to suffer from a closed and vicious circle. Since Americans tend to cling to the unexamined notion that the possession of mechanical literacy is a sign of the educated person, Freshman English is required of almost every student who attends an American college or university. A standardized approach to the teaching of the course is thus necessary in order to accommodate all the students who require it. Standardization is relatively easy to bring about with regard to the more formal aspects of writing, especially if only a few forms are prescribed for study. The prescribed forms soon assume the character of "correctness," which they apparently borrow from the more conventional aspects of discourse that are also studied in the course,

such as usage, punctuation, and grammar. And yet it is this very approach which stultifies and stunts students' growth as writers.

Nevertheless, as Gates and other writers' accounts make clear, English teachers have usually taken their role in meeting their responsibility for student literacy quite seriously, even though they find the task frustrating and debilitating. But English teachers are not alone in assuming that it is they who must shoulder this responsibility: spokespersons outside of English departments also expect the course in Freshman English to insure that students can produce a mechanically literate page. When this notion is expressed by members of other academic disciplines, it usually brings with it the notion that the course bears the responsibility of preparing students for college work.

In 1958 Dudley Bailey, chair of the department at Nebraska, noted that the "present aims of Freshman English are hopelessly confused with the aims of a college education," a situation which he credited to the "service-course" doctrine that surrounded composition instruction.¹² While our colleagues in other disciplines teach some subject matter or other, like botany or economics, in Freshman English, Bailey asserts, "we teach 'skills,' ranging from general college orientation to getting around in the library and preparing term papers for our subject-matter colleagues." As a result, Freshman English programs have "become a sort of service organization. Like the janitors, we perform a 'valuable service' for our various colleges. But we are not really a part of any of them" (231-32). It seems that inside academia, just as outside it, nobody knows what literacy is. Our colleagues, however, do have quite specific functional expectations for Freshman English; its purpose is to prepare students to handle the writing assignments that will accompany their courses.

In the May, 1962 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, William Templeman reports the results of a survey he conducted among his colleagues at the University of Southern California, a survey which asked other departments what they expected freshmen to learn in the required composition course.¹³ Three themes run through the responses. First, the English department is responsible for inculcating in students such mechanical fluencies as spelling, punctuation, correct usage, grammar, and syntax (the Biology department also wants "legible handwriting" free from "undue smudging"). Second, and somewhat less insistently, the respondents write that Freshman English ought to give students reasonable facility in expressing ideas clearly on written examinations. Third, the course ought to equip students with the "ability to write a term paper" including footnotes and bibliography (39).

The respondents demonstrate no awareness that they may be asking English departments to do some of their work for them, as when Anthropology complains that freshmen don't know how to marshal evidence for anthropological claims, or when the professor of Geography mentions that he sometimes has to define "the basic words of my discipline" for his students (37). Nor do they question that the acquisition of writing skill is an elementary matter; as the Bacteriologists note, "any student completing one year of Freshman English should not require additional instruction in written communication during his remaining three years at this University." They cannot understand how a student "passing an adequate Freshman course could retrogress so greatly that at the junior year he would have pronounced deficiencies in his written communications" (36).

Now Templeman's survey probably represents a classic case of getting what one asks for. I cannot imagine biologists or philosophers asking members of other departments what they should teach in their courses; but if they should do so, the responses

would no doubt be somewhat less assured, or at least less uniform. Nor does Templeman's survey pretend to represent the attitudes of faculty in other colleges and universities which require the Freshman English course. Nevertheless, it clearly makes the point that the faculty of one respected American university believed that the English department's primary work is the inculcation in its students of what might charitably be called mechanical literacy. Further, the respondents claim some jurisdiction over the other work of English departments; more than once it is mentioned that English teachers' concern with poetry and fiction and creative writing may be taking time away from what faculty outside English departments consider to be their more important work.

Crisis at Midcentury

The many problems faced by Freshman English were early apparent; it was not until the forties, however, that influential members of the profession began to call for its abolition. In 1939 Oscar Campbell, who had studied with Barrett Wendell at Harvard, argued that Freshman English "has done much more harm than good," since it operates under the assumption that learning to write is a skill—like learning to play the piano—which can be mastered within finite time limits.¹⁴ According to Campbell, the pretensions of composition teachers to impart writing mastery in one or two semesters are a dangerous symptom of "the American belief in educational short cuts in showy, rather than sound values" (179). The real loser in this game is the student, who soon decides that "writing his mother-tongue is a sort of stunt which has no discoverable relationship to any of his real intellectual concerns" and that "good writing exists only in the fantastic world" inhabited by his English teachers. This fantastical "good writing" is the subject matter of English for the students, just as economics is the subject matter of Economics Departments; Campbell thinks this is why students feel no obligation to write "English" in their other classes.

Following this indictment, however, Campbell tips his hand as to his real reason for wanting to abolish Freshman English: "it obscures for everyone concerned the extremely important service that English literature, as one of the still living humanities, must render to college students and through them to this disordered world of ours" (182). Campbell leaves his readers with the impression that Freshman English has caused English teachers to be thought of as "grammarians" and "futilitarians," and that this reputation keeps students from studying literature, which cultivates and sharpens sensitivity. The underlying tension in Campbell's essay reflects in microcosm the fundamental problem that Freshman English has always faced: to confine the course to instilling mechanical literacy is demeaning to its students and teachers alike; moreover, it is impossible to accomplish even this limited objective in one or two semesters without the internal direction that would be provided by some disciplinary affiliation. But Campbell's suggestion that the course be abandoned is no solution to the problem; it is merely an evasion.

Twenty years later Warner G. Rice, chair of the English Department at Michigan, called for the abolition of Freshman English on somewhat different grounds. Echoing a tradition of complaint that had been in the air since at least 1920, Rice is of the opinion that the skills taught in Freshman English are properly the province of the high schools.¹⁵ As a departmental chair, Rice was not unaware of the considerable loss of power that would accompany the abolition of Freshman English, nor did he underestimate the hue and cry that would arise from faculty in other departments who were no more interested in assuming the responsibility for students' mechanical literacy than were

English teachers. Nevertheless, he was willing to pay these prices, since, according to him, the proper business of English departments is not literacy, but language and literature.

Albert Kitzhaber, the premiere historian and defender of Freshman English, replied to Rice's argument by pinpointing the failure of English departments to come to grips with the fact that "the teaching of language and writing is one of their inescapable responsibilities."¹⁶ This failure "to take sufficient account of language and rhetoric as legitimate subject matter," Kitzhaber charges, "will explain the widespread notion that all we need aim at in teaching students to write is a minimum level of competence." What Kitzhaber fails to take into account here is that it is the presumed demand for mechanical literacy made by the culture at large which had limited the scope of Freshman English. Before Kitzhaber began his work, few teachers had considered it as a course which might teach students the principles of either rhetoric or linguistics. The term "composition" has a very different meaning for Kitzhaber than it does for Campbell and Rice. While they obviously refer to what I have been calling "mechanical literacy," Kitzhaber uses "composition" in its classical sense to mean a branch of rhetoric which deals with the art of inventing and presenting public discourse. Kitzhaber's persistently repeated proposal that the composition course should aim at "disciplining the student's thought processes and his powers of expression," was a far cry from the more usual conduct of the course that was being condemned by his colleagues (1962, 481).

By the late 'fifties the intellectual poverty of Freshman English had become achingly apparent to its partisans as well as to its foes. Increasingly, articles about Freshman English appeared with words like "failure" or "shame" in their titles. Even Kitzhaber admitted that the chief problem of Freshman English had been its historical domination by a concern for "habits of correct usage — mere linguistic etiquette." By this time writers who complained about the course usually took Kitzhaber's tack, directing their comments toward the course's lack of disciplinary affiliation. For example, in 1961 Thomas Kane laid the blame for the "problem of composition" at the door of confusion over the course's purpose. Kane asserts that "too many teachers of composition are not teaching composition; too many do not even understand what composition is."¹⁷ He elaborates:

to some the course seems a sort of clinic for the development of personality through self-expression; to others an intellectual gym where everybody works out on great ideas; to still others a period for close order drill in grammar; and to some an adjunct to literature into which short stories can be smuggled as 'models.' (Models, one wonders, for whom?) If the meaning of composition is as elastic as this, plainly it has no meaning at all.

Kane is confident that "composition can be better taught if we take care to train those who will teach it;" but before we can do this we must "come to some general agreement about what we take composition to be. A fundamental part of our difficulty at the moment is that we do not seem quite certain what we are supposed to be doing, an uncertainty that surely makes us unique among pedagogues." In 1969, George Stade was able to point to the lack of subject matter as the source of the amorphousness of Freshman English:

The course does not develop or progress, but like Eliot's silent vertebrate in brown, it contracts and concentrates, withdraws. There is not the sense from class to class of new accomplishments, intellectual or practical that confirm the validity of the old ones, impart morale to student and

teacher, establish rapport between them. It boils down to this: the course we think of as having form for its content has no content at all. Freshman English as we teach it is not a subject.¹⁸

Only occasionally do critics of Freshman English writing during this period identify its preoccupation with mechanical correctness as the villain who had rendered the course both unteachable and disreputable. Writing in 1963, Donald Tighe argued that those "innovators" who eschew grammar and mechanical instruction in order to teach composition soon find themselves in hot water with administrators and colleagues.¹⁹ According to Tighe, the teacher's usual way out of this bind is to "modify his course and his standards — be 'realistic.' To do this he tries to combine methods and ends with a variety package." Apparently, teachers who were frustrated with the limitations imposed on the course by a preoccupation with mechanical literacy or who eschewed the "variety" approach to the course had only one other option available to them (granting their immunity to the complaints of colleagues and administrators): they borrowed a subject matter for the course from some related discipline.

Between 1940 and the mid-nineteen-sixties several contenders threatened to step into the disciplinary gap that was thought to loom over Freshman English. Chief among these was literature, of course, but General Semantics, Communications Skills, linguistics, logic, rhetoric, media, film, creative writing, and various of the social sciences all took their turns at providing "content" for the course.²⁰ About all that was necessary for a subject to be considered as a candidate for discussion in Freshman English was that some influential members of the profession were interested in it or that some relation to composition could be posited for it. The scope and variety of disciplines which were advocated as potential rescuers of Freshman English attest not only to the presence of widespread professional dismay concerning the course, but to a fundamental confusion over what it ought to entail.

By the nineteen-seventies it had become apparent to most concerned observers that the importation of some discipline external to Freshman English's traditional preoccupation with mechanical literacy would not save the course from itself. By this time teachers who wrote about the course consistently rejected literary study and other peripheral matters in order to suggest that the process of writing itself was the appropriate subject for the course. Carl Klaus put this proposal eloquently, if somewhat hesitantly, in a 1976 article entitled "Public Opinion and Professional Belief." Klaus reviewed the current media furor over Johnny's inability to write, and contrasted this with the English profession's persistent refusal to train teachers who could approach the Freshman English course knowing "as much about writing as we can."²¹ He concluded by proposing, somewhat timorously, "that we regard writing as a basic academic discipline" (339). Klaus' voice was not raised in isolation, however; from about 1970 onward writing itself surfaced as an appropriate area of study in which to ground the course.

Prognostications

If the aim of Freshman English is to help students achieve what I've been calling mechanical literacy, it seems reasonable to assume that the course ought to be grounded in some theory of literacy. I think that the profession's current interest in the writing process is a move in just this direction. And yet potential theories of literacy are only now being generated in scholarly circles, some one hundred years too late for the thousands of stu-

dents and teachers who have labored in the ordinarily unproductive vineyards of Freshman English.

I think that our historical blindness to the potential of literacy as a theoretical study is bound up with the cultural habit of conceiving reading and writing in very narrow terms, as arts to be acquired by children or young people as a mark of their socialization. I have maintained throughout this essay that Freshman English has always been intended by the culture which supports it to be a course in the acquisition of mechanical literacy. The English profession, which has been saddled with this responsibility for a hundred years or so, has spent most of that time trying at once to fulfill and to avoid its (unwanted) task. On the one hand, we establish a professional organization devoted to study of the course; on the other, we relegate Freshman English to the furthest corners of our professional consciousness in order to concentrate on more respectable areas of study such as literature or linguistics and lately, rhetoric. I think that our love-hate relationship with the "English" commonly taught in the Freshman course can be understood by analogy to our similar relationship to what is now called "traditional grammar." Indeed, they may be the same entity. Certainly, they are analogous in their refusal to go away, even though serious research has been calling the validity and usefulness of both into question for many years.

According to some recent research reported by Patrick Hartwell, knowledge of the rules of traditional grammar seems to have "no value whatsoever" for writers and speakers of a language.²² This is not to say, however, that knowledge of the rules is totally useless. Formal knowledge of the rules permits users of the language to have access to their tacit grammatical knowledge in ways that would not be otherwise available. The problem for teaching is that this formal knowledge makes sense only to people who possess it, or, as the technical writers put it, such knowledge is "clear only if known."

This situation apparently leads teachers, most of whom possess a hyper-literate awareness of grammatical rules, to assume from their own experience that a knowledge of grammar will help their students to become equally proficient in literate matters. The Catch-22 is that the possession of literacy is prerequisite to the acquisition of hyperliteracy, or metaliteracy, if you like. As Hartwell puts it, "it is the mastery of written language that increases one's awareness of language as language" (123). In other words, one can't be hyperliterate before one becomes literate. In the case of grammar instruction, it would seem, English teachers' own hyperliteracy has led them to assume that the cart could be put before the horse, that instruction in the rules could help students to master them.

In the case of Freshman English, teachers have hoped that instruction in the rules governing the production of "correct" discourse would instill mastery of the writing process. Teachers of the course are for the most part "hyperliterate" in the sense that they are conscious not only of the language they use but of their relative degree of skill in it. Their students are not hyperliterate, nor, for the most part, do they wish to be, since American culture does not give its most ostensible rewards to those who possess hyperliteracy.

The frustrating side of this paradox is simply that to teach literacy according to a set of prescriptive rules is a waste of time for all concerned. The sinister side, of course, is that the profession's persistent attempts to instill literacy in this backward fashion have at least postponed its attempts to teach writing, in the sense in which that word is used by most members of the English profession. To possess this higher level of literacy, according to Pattison, is "to be conscious of oneself as a user of language;"

more, it is "to begin to take the measure of creation" (12). This sense of literacy is much closer to what we mean when we talk about revered writers, or even about our own work, than what we mean when we talk about student themes. The confusion accounts for our lack of awareness about what we're doing in the Freshman English course. While we tell ourselves that we ought to be teaching writing, the culture is making a very different demand on us. The uneasy compromise that exists between the English profession and the culture at large has kept Freshman English alive, but unloved, for a century.

While writing itself is now accepted as the proper subject of the course by those persons who publish in professional journals, this awareness is apparently not current among many of the people who regularly teach Freshman English or who direct writing programs. Moreover, it is far from clear that scholarly interest in the cognitive and social aspects of writing acquisition will tell us much about how to teach a mechanical literacy that will help our students to get by in the world at large. And of course we haven't even broached the ethical questions: is "getting by" what we want to teach our students? Or do we want to teach them to write, instead?

The obstacles that confront Freshman English seem to me to be formidable. The questions I've framed above will have to be addressed before rhetoricians and composition theorists can begin to design writing courses based on what they know about the acquisition of writing ability. In the event that such a miracle comes about, we need to realize further that any approach to Freshman English which departs from its historical role will not be met with cheers and grace by our colleagues in literature. Some literary scholars have already assumed a defensive posture toward the current critical opinion that literature is just one among the many interesting forms that written discourse takes; they will not be pleased by the further subsumption of the study of poetry and fiction under the broader head of something like theoretical literacy. Even if we are able to convince all members of the English profession that writing instruction involves a great deal more than mechanical literacy, we still must convince our colleagues in other disciplines to buy into this program. And none of this is to mention the reaction that will occur in quarters inhabited by the likes of Edwin Newman and John Simon. Thus, I suspect that resistance to change will endure for a long time in Freshman English, the course whose history has a great deal more to tell us about the aspirations of American culture for its educational system than it does about writing instruction.

Notes

¹Histories of traditional composition textbooks are now available. The most compact contemporary source is James A. Berlin, *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-century Colleges* (Urbana: NCTE, 1984); but Albert Kitzhaber's dissertation, *Rhetoric in American Colleges and Universities 1850-1900* (Washington, 1953) is still an invaluable resource for anyone who would understand the continuity of the tradition.

²Leonard Greenbaum's "The Tradition of Complaint," *College English*, XXXI, 2 (November, 1969), 174-87, recounts the institutional and academic problems associated with Freshman English.

³Robert Pattison, *Of Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 174-5.

⁴Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 168.

⁵Richard M. Weaver, "To Write the Truth," *College English*, X, 1 (October, 1948), 26. The flap that followed the appearance of Weaver's article provides a convenient index to the wrangles that were being conducted over Freshman English at midcentury. See especially the responses by James McCrimmon and Porter Perrin in *College English*, X, 4 (January, 1949), 222-23.

⁶In the early history of the course, Freshman English teachers in some schools were expected to read and grade weekly themes from as many as two hundred or more students. See Robert J. Connors, "Mechanical Correctness as a Focus in Composition Instruction," *College Composition and Communication*, XXXVI, 1 (February, 1985), 72, n15.

⁷Alexander Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric: A Manual*, 4th Am. Ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1877), v.

⁸Herbert L. Creek, "Forty Years of Composition Teaching," *College Composition and Communication*, VI, 1 (February, 1955), 4.

⁹Henry F. Thoma, "Freshman Texts, 1931-1956," *College Composition and Communication*, VIII, 1 (February, 1957), 36.

¹⁰George C. Gates, "We Who are Afraid to Teach," *College Composition and Communication*, XII, 1 (February, 1959), 18.

¹¹William E. Coles, Jr., "Freshman Composition: The Circle of Unbelief," *College English* XXXI, 2 (November, 1969), 136.

¹²Dudley Bailey, "The Obvious Content of Freshman English," *College Composition and Communication*, IX, 4 (December, 1958), 231.

¹³William Templeman, "Thirty-Seven Departments on Freshman English," *College Composition and Communication*, XIII, 2 (May, 1962), 35-40.

¹⁴Oscar Campbell, "The Failure of Freshman English," *The English Journal*, XXVIII, 3 (March, 1939), 178. Campbell remembers that Wendell "used to exclaim that he had exerted a more baleful influence upon college education in America than any other man in his profession" (177). Campbell's article engendered a series of responses that were printed in *EJ* throughout 1939 and 1940.

¹⁵Warner G. Rice, "A Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English, as It Is Now Commonly Taught, from the English Curriculum," *College English*, XXI, 7 (April, 1960), 361-73.

¹⁶Albert Kitzhaber, "Death — or Transfiguration?" *College English*, XXI, 7 (April, 1960), 372. Kitzhaber continually complained in print and at professional meetings about the effects on Freshman English brought about by the "service" concept that the course has always had to bear. He wrote in 1962 that the "course has been deprived, from the first, of satisfactory status; it has been regarded as, and indeed usually made into, a narrowly practical how-to-do-it course, not a course that could be regarded as humane, liberal." Because of its "service" status, Kitzhaber continues, "the best minds in the profession have rarely concerned themselves" with it, and "few first-rate men have taken to trouble to write textbooks" for the course. And, because of its low status, nobody outside of colleges of education had done any research on it. These remarks are from Kitzhaber's "Freshman English: A Prognosis," *College English*, XXIII, 6 (March, 1962), 481.

¹⁷Thomas S. Kane, "Rhetoric and the 'Problem' of Composition," *College English*, XXII, 7 (April, 1961), 504.

¹⁸George Stade, "Hydrants into Elephants: The Theory and Practice of College Composition," *College English*, XXXI, 2 (November, 1969), 145.

¹⁹Donald J. Tighe, "The Shame of Freshman English," *College Composition and Communication*, XIV, 1 (February, 1963), 34.

²⁰Brief histories of the importation of "subject matters" into Freshman English are available. See, for example, Kitzhaber's *Themes, Theory, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963); Edward P. J. Corbett, "Rhetoric and Teachers of English," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, LI 4 (December, 1965); and A. M. Tibbetts, "A Short History of Dogma and Nonsense in the Composition Course," *College Composition and Communication*, XVI, 2 (May, 1965).

²¹Carl Klaus, "Public Opinion and Professional Belief," *College Composition and Communication*, XVII, 4 (December, 1976), 377.

²²Patrick Hartwell, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar," *College English*, XLVII, 2 (February, 1985), 105-27.

The New Orthodoxy: Rethinking the Process Approach

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Some years ago I attended a meeting of Suzuki Method parents and teachers, a meeting at which (being new to this particular method of music instruction) I felt like the only Presbyterian at a convention of Southern Baptists. Every speaker affirmed Suzuki's "mother tongue" approach to the teaching of music as the only possible pedagogy. Before Dr. Suzuki and his wonderful method, no one had ever learned how to play the violin or the piano properly. I tried to stay with the emotional drift of the group out of politeness, but I kept thinking that it was a shame about Paganini and Liszt.

This same irreverent notion surfaced at the last Conference on College Composition and Communication, even though at this particular meeting I was myself one of the true believers. At session after session I heard praise for the process approach to teaching writing and nodded my head with the rest in agreement. I was in absolute harmony with all who said this is a much more sensible pedagogy for writing teachers than the old product-oriented approach I used to take. And yet, I was uncomfortable in the midst of all the yea-saying; were there no dissenters? Was the process approach going to solve all the problems of the writing classroom? Or was it possible that all of us were caught up in the fervor of the newly converted, embracing a new orthodoxy for its virtues without considering that it might have weaknesses as well?

These heretical ideas were intensified when I read George Hillocks's "What Works in Teaching Composition: A Meta-Analysis of Experimental Treatment Studies." In this provocative article Hillocks analyzes 60 experimental research studies in the teaching of writing from 1963-1982. Among these studies he identifies three modes of instruction, which he terms presentational, natural process, and environmental. His conclusions are interesting enough to quote almost in full:

In the most common and widespread mode (presentational) the instructor dominates all activity with students acting as the passive recipients of rules, advice, and examples of good writing. This is the least effective mode examined.

...

In the natural process mode, the instructor encourages students to write for other students, to receive comments from them, and to revise their drafts in light of comments