

RAZZLE-DAZZLE IN THE CLASSROOM OR WHERE DO WE GO WHILE THE BAND PLAYS ON

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I don't know how different your situation is than mine, but I'm always amazed by how many things I'm supposed to be doing with my students.

I suppose, for instance, that I have to do something with the notion of "process" again this year. In fact, this semester, I probably need to do something really dramatic like maybe move my class into my living room and invite my students over to the house for study breaks about 11:30 at night while they're right in the middle of their processing. I suppose I could even do better if I could live in the dorms next year so I can really get close to my students and really get into the whole real idea of their real "process" and get it really right, but my wife's not happy about that. (She doesn't know what to do with the dogs.) But even if I can't really *live* with my students, if I work things out right, at least I can *meet them at breakfast* or ride home once in a while with them on the bus.

"Process," of course, also means I have to do a lot of writing and REwriting and "re-visioning." Re-writing and re-visioning are *obviously* good. If students want to write, then they have to write. Then re-write. And re-write again. And again. And again. And again. (How many times is that? I knew a teacher who once told me you have to get in the habit of re-writing something at least six or seven times to get things right. A couple of years ago, this fellow was having his students rewrite and rewrite and rewrite . . . But after the first two or three rewrites, he started to get bored and he began yawning and falling asleep right in the middle of class and his students started turning in exactly what they did before one more time and they started putting grasshoppers in his mouth while he was asleep and after a while he quit eating supper and his hair started to turn orange and fall out and he started to lose his memory and his wife left him for some football player she found in Ken Hui's Modern Chinese Restaurant and when they finally buried him, he was still mumbling something about "one more time . . .")

Teaching "Pre-writing," of course, is good too. Before our students begin to write and re-write and re-write, we got to get them to begin *thinking* with questions and analogies and little tricks to jog their brains and we get them to write answers to the five W's and we get them to ask about how things change or stay the same or we get them to "nutshell" their ideas and draw spider lines connecting their psychic "maps" and pretty soon, we've given them the means to look into their hearts and souls and discover creativity or knowledge lurking there like some shy calf afraid of the sunlight—and with our help, our students can drag that calf out into the sunlight and feed her oats and beans and barley and parade her around the arena of knowledge to the loud applause of fellow students and teachers and scholars.

(Without a heuristic, of course, the calf becomes veal.)

To keep them from getting "blocked" or stuck or embedded or insincere or embalmed, we need to do lots of *free writing* with our students, too, maybe ten minutes each day—to get them in the habit of lubricating their engines in the evening after they've said their prayers or—just before they begin serious thinking.

And audience. We need to get students to practice "audience-ing"—so they can know who they are writing for and understand that they are really writing for someone else and not for *us* even though we somehow evaluate what they write and most of the time give them grades. We need to help them to analyze their audience without stereotyping and predict what their audience will think even though we may never actually know what most audiences will think, and plan how to push their audience's buttons even though nobody actually knows how many buttons to push or whether it always matters or, if it does matter, when it actually matters. And at least we need to help them to deal with hostile audiences and friendly audiences and ignorant audiences and stupid audiences and ideal audiences and unspecified audiences and academic audiences and younger audiences and older audiences and female audiences and male audiences and ideologically truculent audiences.

And we ought to make time for students to write with their buddies (nowadays, they "collaborate") because writing with one's buddies engages students in "conversation" about their writing and conversation is good and cheap and somehow self-rewarding and heuristic and salutary.

And we need to schedule time for discussions of evidence and the elements of "persuasion" and the comparison/contrast essay (both aaaaa bbbbbb and abababab formats) and the stipulative definition and the enthymeme and the crot and we need to apply Bakhtin and Foucault and Stanley Fish and films. We need films. And computers. We need computers. (I understand computer-assisted invention is still a hot number this year. Turn those freshmen loose with "invisible writing" and computer-assisted free writing and computer-generated graphics and just wait for the good stuff to print out.)

I'm getting depressed. Life is so short and my forehead is wet with sweat, and I don't know if I could possibly do all this in thirteen weeks and I've even got MORE things to fit in . . .

Like spelling. We have to teach spelling.

And punctuation. (I don't know if this is the place to admit it, but I don't know how to teach the notion of "restrictive and non-restrictive" at all.)

And the "Simple Sentence" and "Compound Sentence" and the "Compound/Complex Sentence" and the "Clause" and the "Adjective Clause" and the "Misplaced Modifier" and the "emphatic" and the "loose" sentence and the "ramifying paragraph" and the kind of paragraph that looks something like a big "X."

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And sentence combining. We have to do lots of sentence combining.

And *ad ignorantiam* and *non causa pro causa* and straw men and red herrings and *non sequiturs* and false dichotomies and note cards.

And the differences between the "summary," the "paraphrase," and the "precis."

And we need to teach students to be able to write like biologists and chemists and social scientists and technicians and lawyers and Joan Didion and E.B. White and John McPhee without denying them their own voices and a right to their own language and a place in the social/sexual/cultural/counter-cultural/religious/ethnic/minority revolution.

And we need to teach students to *read* with care and scholarship. And we need to get them to read hard texts with intelligence and common sense and *enjoyment*. As J. Hillis Miller tells us, we need to help them to recognize "interpretation as joyful wisdom, the greatest joy in the midst of the greatest suffering, an inhabitation of that gaiety of language which is our seigneur."¹ And we need to spend time to teach them to be funny, mature, enjoyable, especially ironic yet respectable *human beings* who can go to any sushi bar in town with *anybody*—even Stephen Toulmin or M. A. K. Halliday or Aristotle—and use their chopsticks with one hand and understand the deep relationship between wasabi and shoyu.

According to Cecil Rhodes, scholars can be characterized by their "truthfulness, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness, and fellowship; exhibition of moral force of character and of instincts to lead and to take an interest in one's contemporaries; physical vigor, as shown by fondness for and success in sports." And even if we can't make Rhodes Scholars out of our students, we should *at least* encourage them to be good *scouts*—trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

Some of this is, of course, just plain foolishness and I realize that some of it isn't even fair, but if you stand back and look at *all this advice*, *all these ideas*, *all these different ingredients* for misery and suffering and depth-defying boredom in the classroom—most of which comes to us unquestioned, impractical, or just plain vague—you've got to be either confused or amazed or, like me, a little depressed.

I keep on asking myself, How many of us learned to love writing by reading some cosmic textbook on writing that begins by telling us what writing is good for and why we should take writing seriously? How many of us learned to love writing because some process-oriented social-activist insisted on putting us into small groups so we could converse in the community of knowledge of our peers while helping Joe Blow, the dumbest kid in class, get a passing grade?

How many of us learned the value of re-writing by re-writing and re-writing and re-writing some dumb essay on the value of football or "My Roommate" or "Life in the Fast Lane" or "Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*"—essays that we just wanted to forget and never knew we'd have to live with for three or four weeks at a time just to make contact with something called "process"?

How many of us actually learned to write for different "audiences" through the exhortations of our professors to "know who you're writing for" and writing essays to imaginary members of school boards and fake members of city councils? And how many of *us* actually learned to write by studying *ad ignorantiam* and Stephen Toulmin or Kenneth Burke or Robert de Beaugrande

or even "A Modest Proposal" or "Politics and the English Language"?

How many of us now write with some kind of conscious attention to issue trees, speech act theory, Aristotle, enthymemes, Derrida, brain trust highlighting, formal outlining, "tension," "tone," "mood," "inventorying," pickled hermeneutics, and the differences between "simile" and "metaphor," superordination and subordination, parataxis, hypotaxis, and synpraxis, the left and right sides of the brain, telic modes of meaning, familial, informal, formal, ceremonial, and technical registers, polyptoton, chiasmus, and catachrésis, polysyndeton and asyndeton, connotation and denotation, difference and difference, deracination, desedimentation, and chiasitic invagination?²

Not many.

Most of us probably never even learned very much about writing by taking freshman English, anyway. In fact, I bet that *most of us don't even know how we learned to write* (or spell or think "critically") and probably don't even know how to picture a writing class we'd like to take ourselves. What we did was we took classes on the 19th Century novel or Faulkner and Joyce and the American Short Story and we bumbled along on our own and fudged a lot and guessed and stayed up all night and swore to ourselves and thanked the Lord (Oh! Thank you Lord!) that we knew our grammar and could spell and read enough to get a feel for what we were supposed to do.

And lo! when we went out to get our jobs, someone said, "Well we can give you a job if you can teach writing." And we said "Oh! Thank you Lord! We can teach writing"—and then we went out to find out how to do that. And since we didn't know how we did that or even how we ourselves learned to write in the first place, we talked to our department head (who, like everyone else, was probably writing a freshman English textbook that would simplify things so that any brain-dead graduate student right out of Keats and Shelley could get the little buggers to survive at the Big U) or we talked to our book rep and she said, "Well here's the best book on the market. Just lookit all the study aids and it comes with a diagnostic test and covers all the Modes and Process, too, and it's guaranteed to simplify things so that any brain-dead graduate student right out of Keats and Shelley can get the little buggers to write a complete sentence—even football players."

Ever since then, we've been buying into more systems, and the systems change every year as new and exciting sales reps come by to push new and exciting approaches by famous people and promises for even better "process" or better "thinking" or better "purpose" or better "communication" or better "interdisciplinarity" or better "imagination" or better "community." And we buy into *more* systems and we sweat and we kick the dog and we complain about English and black rot and dry toast and keep asking ourselves and our friends how come our students are sooooo baaaad! and how come this year's crop is even worse than the last?

And . . .

. . . And you're probably looking at this right now and asking me, "Well what the hell's so special about your own hype? Are you gonna tell me what to do that's any better? Where's all the good news that'll make my life easier, that'll do my teaching for me, that'll guarantee me a day in the sun, a new contract, a tree with leaves in the spring and a cool breeze over freshly mown grass, and time to write my book on Edwin Arlington Robinson . . .?"

Well I don't know.

In fact, I don't know if it's *ever* possible to quit looking for that day in the sun, and I'm not so sure I know much about cool breezes or freshly mown grass. You should see my own lawn. And I know nothing about Edwin Arlington Robinson. (Deep inside, I suspect everything we do as teachers is somehow inadequate or incomplete or overly simplistic and overly ambitious. In fact, I suspect we sometimes underestimate how much our students can learn without us and our great ideas and new textbooks.)

And while I can't give some formula or offer a new brand of thinking to replace whatever was out there last, I *do* think I can exhort us all to pare down on the nonsense, remain skeptical—perhaps even a little cynical—and keep asking ourselves simple, basic questions about our hype, our exhortations, and our faith in tradition and our methods:

- ▶ Do we actually know what we're talking about? (or have we made it up?)
- ▶ Is it good simply because we know what it is?
- ▶ How long will it take to talk about in class and is it worth the effort?
- ▶ Are we simply borrowing other people's hype? and is that hype simply *traditional*?
- ▶ Does it appear so neatly only in handbooks and workbooks?
- ▶ Is it just one more glamorized exhortation to be good and nice and polite and read books and learn a word a day and be intelligent and thoughtful and responsible?
- ▶ Do we like it because we're English professors dying to teach literature in the first place?
- ▶ Will our students be able to use this advice without our help next year after they've sold their book back to the bookstore?
- ▶ Does it sound so good simply because it's French or German or because it comes from the Latin and we know its etymology?

Who knows where all this will lead? Stripped of all the baloney, all the hype, all the promises of better writing through better technology and better critical conditioning, I suspect that we'll be left with basic humdrum stuff: setting simple, limited goals, creating some simple, basic methods and developing our own materials free from mystery and duct tape—and free from all the contrived busy work that we don't believe in ourselves. And we might, in fact, begin to admit that there's not a hell of a lot we know about the teaching of writing that goes beyond what good teachers have always known: that some students—especially our best students—learn without us or in spite of us; and that some students learn if we give them simple assignments, read their papers with a certain amount of respect, set modest goals, talk to them, allow them to make mistakes, and, most of all, try to teach the *few* simple things that we can actually demonstrate without the help of tape recorders, workbooks, fly paper, paper hats, tachistoscopes, invitations, Jonathan Swift, and taxonomies.

NOTES

¹As quoted by Paul Northam in "Heuristics and Beyond," *Writing and Reading Differently*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson (Lawrence, Kansas: U. of Kansas, 1985), p. 122.

²For what it's worth, I only made up one of these terms myself.

GENDER AND "WRITING FORMATIONS" IN FIRST-YEAR NARRATIVES

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"Woman's desire most likely does not speak the same language as men's desire."

—Luce Irigaray

Recently there has been an emphasis on determining the constraints regarding gender that are thought to be inscribed in our language and its forms.¹ The discussion prompted by this emphasis takes as a given that our language reflects the concerns and values of our society's dominant (male) group. Hence, such discussion centers around the attempts to refine a picture of the way those constraints operate on women and, by so doing, to give voice to the non-dominant group's concerns. So Flynn (1988), for example, writes on "Composing as a Woman," and Schweickart (1986) urges a new feminist story of reading, one that "will speak of the difference between men and women, of the way the experience and perspective of women have been systematically and fallaciously assimilated into the generic masculine, and of the need to correct this error" (p. 39). If, as this literature suggests, our very language institutionalizes a bias, then the forms used to teach that language must fall under suspicion. In bemoaning feminism's relatively slight impact on composition studies, Flynn specifically mentions the way it has not called writing samples into question for possible gender bias:

[T]he parallels between feminist studies and composition studies have not been delineated, and the feminist critique that has enriched such diverse fields as linguistics, reading, literary criticism, psychology, sociology, anthropology, religion, and science has had little impact on our models of the composing process or on our understanding of how written language abilities are acquired. We have not examined our research methods or research samples to see if they are androcentric. Nor have we attempted to determine just what it means to compose as a woman. (p. 425)

Ignoring the difference, she states, can only come at our women writers' expense, resulting in "a suppression of women's separate ways of thinking and writing. Our models of the composing process are quite possibly better suited to describing men's ways of composing than to describing women's" (p. 432). Flynn, however, may be even too cautious in speculating on a possible bias in our writing tasks and models, for if men and women do write differently—if they, for example, interpret a common writing task in very marked, distinctive ways—there can be no argument about whether an assignment is either gender-neutral or andro- or gynocentric by definition; rather, there is always already a built-in gender bias in any writing sample (or even paradigmatic conceptualization of the writing process)—any occasion for the actual production of written discourse is going to reflect the way that the writer (as well as the text) has been inscribed into the forms of gender's discourse.

I should state now that I do indeed feel that men and women write differently, and, hence, I feel there is a corresponding need to attend more closely to the forms we use to teach text produc-