Towards a Pedagogy of Knowing
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Our anxieties can be incapacitating when we discover that what we probably have to do in teaching reading and writing is “what should have been done in the fifth grade.” But once we get past blaming the victim or social and political forces beyond our control; once we undertake to learn to teach the new student, defined either as actually illiterate or culturally deprived by the fact of having been reared in an exclusively suburban or inner city environment; once we admit that neither recipes nor harangues are what we need, we find ourselves interested in pedagogy. The word is fashionable once again, though the concept is not well-formed. An uncle of mine with a lifetime’s experience of the Mississippi once explained engineering to me this way: “Any fool can build a bridge that might stand up against a flood, but an engineer is supposed to make sure that it does.” Pedagogy is not, alas, engineering and it can’t possibly offer that kind of assurance, but it can help us be less foolish about what can be done in the English classroom.

Pedagogy can mean simply the old normal schools’ “materials and methods” or it can mean the means to a profoundly political awakening, as in Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed”; it can be unconscious or it can be factored into lesson plans. I doubt that there are any cases in which it is as minimal as it once frequently was: Robert Frost remarked that the only thing his Latin teacher ever said to the class was “Next!” At Radcliffe in the late ’40’s, graduate students heard a series of lectures on pedagogy, dissections by some very distinguished professors on ways of telling how long 50 minutes is, and what to do when students fall asleep; only I. A. Richards seemed to know that the topic was complex. As I remember, he used mountaineering metaphors to persuade us to teach to the top of the class because otherwise we would surely lose them, and probably the middle too — and we might not reach the bottom third in any case. The point was that, in the ascent, everybody needed to feel the rope in tension. Nowadays, when we may well be persuaded that the whole class is, as it were, in the bottom third, that pedagogical advice would need revising: we should teach to the top of everybody’s sensibility and capacity. Modern pedagogy should, I believe, help us determine how to identify and encourage the innate powers of our students’ minds; to nurture what is native; to explore what it can mean to say “Begin with where they are.”

Any pedagogy is properly constituted by a method, models, and a theory. Insofar as a pedagogy is concerned with teaching reading and writing, a concern for language will be central to all three. The province of rhetoric, which is the structure and function of language, is thus coterminous with the boundaries of an English pedagogy. I propose here to describe certain inadequacies in the conception and realization of methods, models, and theories which make a critical assessment of what we are doing in teaching English virtually impossible, and to suggest, then, the character of a different sort of pedagogy which might be developed.

What is a Method?

True to the spirit of the age, English pedagogues — I use the term to name all those who are concerned with methods, models, and theories — have sought to be scientific, but with very ill-formed notions of what constitutes scientific inquiry. They are generally still content with variations on “What is English?” — the question raised at the Dartmouth Conference a decade ago, and a very poor question it is. (As Oppenheimer observed, Einstein did not develop his theory of relativity by asking, “What is a clock?”) Scientific or not, we need a method which encourages critical questions about goals in conjunction with ways and means: a method which does not allow for the continual exploration of purposes and premises as well as procedures will soon become doctrinaire.

Such questions should be directed both to what we are doing as teachers and to what our students are doing, and they should include questions about what is going wrong. But asking what’s wrong with a course of study or an approach is rare in our field; the primary mode of critical review is denial that it is necessary (“Students have always written badly”) or, alternately, “innovation.” Comparably, asking what is wrong with a composition is often taken metonymically for asking what’s wrong with the composer. But to make a student feel rotten is bad teaching, not the necessary outcome of a method which uses the analysis of mistakes, misconceptions, and misstatements. “A good way to study auto mechanics is to study auto breakdowns,” as Walker Percy puts it. “Vapor locks, short circuits, transmission failures may be the best evidence that there are such things as carburetors, electrical systems, and gears — especially if the mechanic can’t lift the hood.”

The primary lesson of modern scientific inquiry has not been learned by those English pedagogues who claim that a method is “neutral.” What we are looking for determines, up to a point, how we seek; the ways of searching will control, up to a point, what we find. Call it dialectics, complementarity, the hermeneutic circle; the mutual dependence of ends and means is a principle of critical inquiry shared by scientists and students of language; it should be a commonplace for anyone setting up as a theoretician. Methods are no more neutral than ideologies are value-free.

A method may require specialized language for its explication, but having a lexicon doesn’t insure that we have a method. We can’t expect jargon to do the work of instruction. In a new textbook we read, “The idea is to internalize the principles upon which these patterns are based so that when you use them they become intuitive rather than self-conscious.” The Piagetian term internalize, which is neither explained nor used elsewhere in this passage, is metaphoric and memorable, but what are we remembering? What does
Internalize mean here in juxtaposition with self-conscious? That relationship is centrally important to an understanding of the composing process, but mere assertion of a point—especially when it's vague: the idea of the intuitive is a notorious catch-all—cannot serve as the statement of a method, as this purports to be.

We are trapped over and over by the language we have borrowed from psychology, heedless of the fact that the social sciences, in an attempt to resolve an identity crisis suffered from birth, have themselves borrowed the language of other disciplines; in our hands, these terms are at an even further remove from physics, communication theory, neurology, molecular biology, etc. Here's a psychologizing discussing what he calls "the student's ability to store meaningful[sic] semantic units and to encode these units in syntactic form." Changes are due, he says, "not to central effects, that is, changes in linguistic ability of students, but to peripheral effects, that is, changes in certain skills which students utilize in the writing process." The sly importation of "central" and "peripheral" is meant to substantiate this entirely problematic assertion (linguistic? ability? effects? skills? utilize? writing process?) by lending it the rigor of neurological description. This language also tends to distract us from considering the absurdity of trying to separate what we do with language (if "linguistic ability" means something other than getting case endings right) from how we think.

Methods of scientific inquiry cannot be adapted by aping the language of the laboratory. That strategy has not helped psychology become a science, nor can we bring "English" up to date by taking over psychology's second-hand language or, indeed, its pseudo-concepts. Psychologists imagine that they are being scientific when they speak of persons as "hominid individuals"; English pedagogues are peculiarly susceptible to this kind of self-delusion. If we want to speak of "scribal fluency," we should know that the term can have as much to do with skywriting as it does with the composing process. Although a method can take the form of a list of steps, such a list is not necessarily a method. Like language itself, method is reflexive; it is dialectical by definition; meta + hodos, about the way. Method is a way of relating ends and means, and that is a dialectical process. Method lets us discover how X in conjunction with Y becomes Z, which in turn may convert Y to W. Discovery procedures should be dialectical; that is to say, methods of invention should keep the what and the how together, should continually relate the why and the what and the how. More often than not, however, such methods are presented as something to be applied mechanically to some pre-existent subject matter. Heuristic procedures are frequently conceived of as directions for thawing out frozen, pre-baked topics on a tectonic grid. Rhetoricians are now intoning "pentad," paying no attention to Burke's dialectic—the calculus of the five dramatistic terms. Dialectic is, as Richards has it, paraphrasing Plato, "the continuing audit of meaning." Without an understanding of dialectic as the heart of a method, we are doomed to see one after another promising technique disappear without ever having been given a fair chance.

Models — or Muddles?

The same sort of misconception is evident in the way English pedagogues use what they call "models." The term is borrowed from psychologists who borrowed it from natural scientists who use models to conceptualize and represent functional relationships. A model represents a mode of operation; it allows us to see the structure of a process, a system in action. A model is an analogy, a representation of one form by another. My guess is that our childish interest in "models" derives from a McLuhanesque notion that "linear" representations are misleading. Scientists don't worry about the linearity of their equations; they build models to represent those equations, not to abrogate them. Models also serve heuristic functions for scientists: "You know it's working," Francis Crick has remarked in an interview, "when you get more out of it than you put in."

What does the concept of "model" mean when it is used in discussing rhetoric and pedagogy? What, for instance, is a "communication skills model" of the composition course, which is often set in opposition to a "personal growth model"? Communication I will return to in a moment; as for skills — another problematic word which has been taken over from educational psychology — they are identified by one who has written of such a model as "organization, unity, coherence, development." Those sound remarkably like characteristics of discourse, not of a discoursor. (Is a logical error what we get out of this model?) The pseudo-concept of "skills" breeds one poorly-formed idea after another. We read, for instance, that "the act of writing . . . engages behavioral as well as mental skills." But wherever language is concerned, there is no "behavior" which is not also "mental." Do we not continually find it said that if we add up "the basic skills" we will reach a total which can be recognized as "improvement in the ability to write"—or, as it is likely to be put, "an increase in performance capability"? Learning to compose is often in rather limited respects like learning to hit a tennis ball or to flip an omlet; there are skills involved in composing, but composing is something other than the sum of basic skills and some super-skills; otherwise, we could teach it by means of drill. In any case, neither skills nor model seems a well-formed concept, with the results that skills model is an obscure and muddling phrase.
Nor is the other half of the opposition any clearer—that “personal growth model” or “self-awareness model” which is generally described in language that bespeaks exactly the same presuppositions about learning as those underlying the skills model. Thus “expression” is considered another kind of “response,” and encouraging self-awareness is seen as a matter of getting the right stimuli. It is remarkable that the more highly behaviorist and positivistic the conceptual framework of the model builder, the more likely it is that, sooner or later, the Self will make an appearance. Gordon Allport (a literate and humane psychologist who can be read with profit and delight, but I have never seen his work cited in any essay by an English pedagogue) has the following observation: “Many psychologists re-invent self when they find no coherence in positivist analysis. This self is the obscurantist’s homunculus.” Self is certainly a more difficult concept to form than skills, but as Allport suggests, when it is used in this way, “self” is little more than the ghost in the positivist machine.

Everything that makes it difficult to apprehend the relationship between language and thought makes it difficult to explain to ourselves what we should do in teaching composition, or even what we think we are doing. We are not helped in that endeavor by a pair of models which separate precisely what we should be aiming to keep together from the start. As the author of this particular formulation observes (in a typical sentence): “The whole area of getting from students’ needs to content in the more traditional sense is a sticky one.”

And one reason is that the concept which is relied on most frequently to articulate the relationship between the writer and his writing, between both and an audience, is communication. Its obvious failings as a critically useful concept, whether deployed in devising methods or in model building (What is communicated? Why? How?), have been ignored because, I think, “communication” is protected by its presumed scientific status. Communication (or information) theory is, of course, a scientific construct of central importance to computer engineers, but when others use them, the chief terms of the theory are extremely hazardous. Despite the warnings of engineers and logicians that information has nothing to do with meaning, that word is used continually as a synonym for meaning. We should continually be defining the meaning of meaning, but instead we consider that there is no need since we are using a scientific term.

Consider the use to which Roman Jakobson’s diagram of “the communication situation” has been put. This schematic representation has been widely reproduced in rhetorics: an addressee encodes a message which is decoded by an addressee; the message has a context (reference), a code, and a contact (channel, a physical means of being realized). His friend I. A. Richards has analyzed Jakobson’s diagram many times and in “Towards a Theory of Comprehending” has devised his own schema to represent other factors in transmission. Let me summarize his objections: What is between speaker and hearer in the diagram is not message but signal and it is with signals that communication (or information) theory is concerned. Distinguishing signal and message is a central issue in any study of language, but, applying the Crick test, what we get out of this model is not a clarification of that relationship but a conception of language as, in Richards’s metaphor, a verbal butterfly net for catching non-verbal butterflies.

The Jakobson model perpetuates the inept separation of “form” and “content” which seems to legitimate teaching “the message,” a term which even Jakobson’s wiring diagram can’t de-mystify. But the model is popular with those who would like to conceive of interpretation as a straightforward, scientific procedure, as in this explanation by a rhetorician who knows better: “The next step is to see if we can translate the literal meaning, the surface meaning, into a code other than the one the poet uses and still keep the bare ideas that were in the original.” Anyone guiding students in reading Marvell—the poem whose bare ideas students are contemplating here is “To His Coy Mistress”—should be wary of assuming that “literal” is a term with self-evident meaning. In Jakobsonian terms, the message is decoded, not “translated” into another code. Chomsky doesn’t speak of “surface meaning,” but the Chomskyst term “surface” (from “surface features”) is used to dignify the empty concept of “the words on the page.” Such jargon is not needed to legitimize paraphrase, which is essential to critical reading; our task, however, is to teach students how to paraphrase, not to pretend that it’s a matter of “decoding.” What we have here is not a new model but only another version of “What is the author trying to say?”

Jakobson’s diagram of “the communication situation” presupposes a positivist, epistemology according to which we process “the raw data of experience.” This model encourages us to teach that there is an immediate (i.e., unmediated) response or recording, as distinct from “reflection about the moment.” But unless we understand that there is no immediate experience, no reality known to us formlessly, we won’t be able to get from “experience” to “reflection,” or from “skills” to “personal growth”; we won’t be able to get from here to there.

Know that/Know how

If it is to be more than a collection of recipes, an English pedagogy will be, necessarily, theoretical. But theoreticians in the field of English have shown little interest in pedagogical theory, devoting their energies instead to theories of the aims, elements, and modes of discourse. These theories are often little more than taxonomies and sometimes they are illogical, at that. It is not instructive to be told, for instance, that the Essay is a Linguistic Principle or that “Literary discourse embraces the genres [sic] of literature, songs, puns, the limerick, jokes and the TV drama.” A more hopeful point of departure for developing a theory for an English pedagogy is the study of how we learn.

All theories of learning (and language) must give an account of knowing. The formulation offered by John Warnock differentiates two kinds of knowing but begs the question of how they are related. The opposition of know that and know how, a contribution of the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle, has that beguiling positivist character of seeming to make rigorous distinctions in ordinary language, but like Moftett’s spurious distinction of “English” as a “subject” and an “activity,” it muddles rather than clarifies. Know-how gives Warnock no trouble. He explains it by the example of bicycle riding; know-how is a skill which can be exercised without the intervention of knowing that. (“Who’s Afraid,” 19) Earlier, however, Warnock has told us that it is, epistemologically speaking, impossible “to have practice without theory.” How is “having practice” different from “practicing”? Who “has” this “practice”? As for “theory,” he means, I think, that presuppositions and assumptions are logically unavoidable.
and that theory can always be adduced from practice. But is knowing that presupposition, then, or theory? Is knowing that contingent on theoretical formulation? What the ordinary language philosophers leave out must be put back in by anyone trying to use their concepts.

Warnock has a hard time not only explaining what he means by knowing that but also describing the place it should have in the composition course and the role it should play for the composer. To help him out, he calls in Peter Elbow, citing his differentiation of producing and editing as stages of writing. Warnock then comments: "One might also call them the performative and the critical stages or . . . the operating and testing stages." ('Who's Afraid," 19) I have no wish to cavil, but this interpretation surely confuses the issue. Producing can continue — it does continue — until the final stages of revision. Whatever research has been done corroborates what every experienced writer knows, that the form of what is being written helps discover the substance; that intention and representation are mutually contingent. Editing is what editors (or writers-as-editors) do; it is not an integral part of the composing process. To call producing performance and editing criticism falsifies the distinction Elbow is making.

What is gained by calling any phase of the composing process a performance? Is performance a synonym for a "behavior"? And what is that? (Is it a "subject" or an "activity"?) Is performance something we can talk about as a "real" as opposed to an "abstract" matter? Is the term performance intended to remind us of performative speech acts? Are we meant to think of a Chomskyan performance, in contradistinction to competence? When Warnock remarks that "after performance, theory can help us get a view of what the writing is finally trying to do," ("New Rhetoric," 20) does he mean that the writer performs and the performance then has the intention? (That sounds like the stomach talking to the body in the Alka Seltzer ad — an interesting kind of dialogue; but I don't really know what Warnock means by "what the writing is finally trying to do.") "Theory," he goes on, "can help consolidate the enterprise and give it a sense of direction." You bet it can — but why do we have to wait until "after the performance" for this beneficence? I see circus horses getting their sugar.

As for separating "performance" from "criticism," that is the oldest of the new pedagogies. But sooner or later — "after the performance" is one occasion — theory and practice have to be brought together, preferably by the practitioner, but at least by the theoretician. Since positivist models are fueled by behaviorist concepts, it is not surprising to find this passage in Warnock's disquisition on the relationship of know how and know that: "In non-reflective behavior, know-how implies first of all an organism's ability to know that it has encountered an unsatisfactory state of affairs . . . and, after operation, that it has achieved a satisfactory one."

('New Rhetoric," 3) If this "organism" is acting "non-reflectively," it is not a specimen which can provide analogies for an English pedagogy (Warnock is describing instinctual reaction, presumably); nor is it a specimen which a zoologist would know how (sic) to categorize, since, though it is allegedly non-reflective, it nevertheless knows that. There ain't no such animal; nevertheless, "it" functions as a model, for in the next paragraph Warnock writes: "Assuming now that we are dealing with non-reflective writing . . ." But there's no such thing as "non-reflective" writing, if "non-reflective" means what an organism does instinctually. This is what happens when pedagogues take "verbal behavior" seriously: it allows them to concoct pseudo-concepts like "non-reflective" writing. Warnock, I suppose, is trying to be rigorous about "uncritical" writing by re-naming it "non-reflective" by analogy with instinctual animal behavior. It's a maneuver comparable to calling conceptual acts of mind "mental skills," by analogy with playing softball or riding a bicycle.

The notion of "non-reflective writing" makes it seem feasible to isolate criticism as a factor, but this won't do — and Warnock belatedly realizes the basic absurdity of a conception of writing dichotomized as performance and criticism. He uses the prime positivist strategy of smuggling back into the model what has just been removed as a component. Thus know how re-enters (rather surreptitiously) as "heuristic procedures" which can be learned "in advance"; they are a way "to enhance the chances of intuiting a solution to a particular problem." ('Who's Afraid," 19, 20) Now intuition is, as a logical concept, simply the capacity to discover analogies, and that is an operation of mind which is not beyond the pale of reason. (A syllogism, as Langer has remarked, is a device for getting from one intuition to another.) Intuition is neither mystical nor mysterious, but in the hands of positivists, who can't accommodate non-propositional logic, it becomes mysterious and vague. The same sort of thing happens when tagmemic theorists (who, by the way, provide those heuristic procedures to be learned in advance), realizing that problem solving is likely to become prescriptive or rule-governed, re-name it "creative problem solving."

In any case, the writer using these heuristic procedures will be no closer to know how because he will not know in advance just what the "particular problem" is. Indeed, I would say that is a shortcoming of most of our students: they do not easily recognize particular problems because they do not have a method, that is, a means of formulating critical questions. Heuristic procedures should, of course, be carried out, not just "in advance," but in continuation, throughout the composing process. It is also certainly true that the writer must learn to intuit, to grasp relationships, to see how things are related; he must form concepts. And that has nothing to do with non-reflective or instinctual behavior; it is an operation of mind and it requires thinking with concepts and not just about them. To intuit means to see the relationship of parts to the meaning of a whole. In composing, that whole is coming into being: the question of questions for the writer is — or should be — "How can I make the whole until I have the parts — how can I find the parts until I know the whole?" The paradox of intuition can only be resolved by a dialectical method of composing in which the whole is hypothesized and the parts identified, created, and gathered accordingly; in which the parts can be seen tentatively as representative of the meaning of the whole.

That method maintains knowing that and knowing how in a dialectical relationship. For instance, knowing that chaos affords the materials of composition (ex nihil nihil fit) is a way of knowing how to begin by naming, by proceeding without concern for "thesis statements" and all the claptrap that goes with the irrational maxim, "Don't write until you know what you want to say!" Knowing that chaos is the source is the condition of knowing how to use it. Learning the uses of chaos is a method for learning to intuit the relationship of parts in a whole which is coming into being, which in compo-
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sitional terms means coming to mean: the juncture of thought and language is the making of meaning. That is to say, the answer to the writer’s most important question comes by way of another question: “How do I know what I mean until I hear what I say?” It is language itself which is the indispensable heuristic. It is language that enables us to know that we know that, and to know how to know how. It is language which allows us, as Coleridge put it, to know our knowledge.

John Warnock has come further than most in recognizing the philosophical character of the issues involved in pedagogical theory. But since he tries to work with the concepts of a positivist epistemology, there is no way for him to avoid begging the questions we must raise if we are to understand the relationship of the several kinds of knowing. Without that understanding, I can’t see how it will be possible to conceptualize “a grammar of pedagogy,” new or old.

Towards a Pedagogy of Knowing

If the only thing we can count on these days is the power of the human mind, then we should have a theory which can account for that power in its own terms, not in those appropriate to the study of snails and chimpanzees. As my references to Richards here and elsewhere attest, I believe that it is from him that we have most to learn. Having recently freed himself from the bonds of behavioral psychology and logical positivism with the help of Mencius and Coleridge, Richards knew that the new rhetoric for which he called in 1936 would have to be philosophical. The “contextual theorem of meaning” really was new and The Philosophy of Rhetoric became one of the charters of the New Criticism, providing as it did a conceptual framework in which metaphor could be the focus of a study of meaning; ambiguity could be seen as a resource; and the “interanimation” of words be understood as the dynamic of meaning. With Interpretation in Teaching two years later, Richards turned to an exploration of the pedagogical implications of a philosophical rhetoric. That search has continued through half a dozen books, in one of which he recently described a pedagogy which would provide “sets of sequenced exercises through which millions of people could explore, for themselves, their own abilities and grow in capacity, practical and intellectual, as a result.” The “millions” referred to are the illiterate peoples of the world who could benefit from a model which does not oppose skills and personal growth but makes them contingent upon one another, a method which would amount to offering “assisted invitations to attempt to find out just what they are trying to do and thereby how to do it.” We learn how by means of reflecting on the what: that method is consonant with the dialectical character of thought and language and with what teachers continually re-discover (if they are really watching) about how their students learn.

This dialectical method is also consonant with Paulo Freire’s dialogical “pedagogy of knowing.” Perhaps it is not just coincidence that this other model from which we have most to learn is the creation of another teacher devoted to the adult literacy process. The Archimedean points we need in order to undertake a critical inquiry into our teaching of reading and writing in college are provided, I believe, by the pedagogy of ESL (English as a second language), literacy training, and the teaching of reading to youngsters.

Freire’s conscientization, like Richards’ design for escape (i.e., an escape from the dangers of planlessness and the merely self-centered) is based on a philosophy of language which takes full advantage of the critical character of language — we interpret our interpretations, as Kenneth Burke puts it; it depends on a psychology in which all acts of learning are at once creative and critical; it points to a pedagogy in which knowing subjects encounter one another in dialogue mediated by the world of common experience.

I close with a passage from Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in which method, model, and theory are all consonant with the idea that to begin with where our students are is to learn to trust the power of the human mind.

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. But while to say the true word — which is work, which is praxis — is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone — nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. Dialogue is the encounter between men mediated by the world, in order to name the world.11

Notes

2Here are two examples of this thinking: “The concept of problem solving... is totally neutral” (W. Ross Winterowd, in Contemporary Rhetoric [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957], p. 90). “Some English teachers respond to words such as ‘cybernetics’ and ‘overdetermination’ as if they represented all the evil advances that communication programs have made, often at the expense of traditional English programs, over the past few decades. The words themselves are neutral, however.” (Joseph Comprone, “Cybernetics and Rhetoric: Freshman English in an Overdetermined World,” ADE Bulletin, Sept., 1975.)

Problem solving is not comparable to 0 in mathematics about which we need not entertain a belief; it is a method whose presuppositions are themselves problematical. For instance, to decide to convert an issue to a problem is to pass a kind of judgment which may or may not be called for. A critique of problem solving should always include this question: “Is whose interest is it to pose the issue as such and such a problem?” In problem solving, as developed by technologists who are given problems to solve, there is certainly a prejudice towards quantification and sequencing according to rather rigidly defined conceptions of causality. Like every other method, problem solving comes with certain philosophical assumptions about purpose and aim; it would be useless if it didn’t.

By “advances” made by “communications programs” over “traditional English programs,” Comprone presumably means substituting audio-visual “experience” for “print media.” In any case, concepts, not words, are the proper
subjects of critical inquiry; words are always "neutral" in the dictionary.


3There are scale models and theoretical models, as well as analogue models. For a thorough and lively discussion of the logic of models, see Max Black, Models and Metaphors (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), especially Chapter XIII.


4Some models of the composition course quite deliberately keep students in the dark about what they are doing, for shorter or longer periods of time. In the famous Amherst course, for instance, puzzling assignments were given without explanation. However, with criticism coming on the heels of each performance, and with performances every week, it soon became possible to think of the criticism as coming "before" the performance. For a careful analysis of the philosophical foundations of this course, see James H. Broderick, "A Study of the Freshman Composition Course at Amherst: Action, Order, and Language," Harvard Educational Review (Winter, 1958), 44-57.

In other instances, the separation of two allegedly different phases of composing has been instituted in order to encourage the unspoiled reaction or, more accurately I think, to rationalize the deplorable practice of requiring students to produce terrible writing before instruction can begin.


8Richards' long career as a critic encompasses everything from neurology to the study of textual variants, but the pedagogical dimension is there in almost everything he has written. Adult literacy is a recurring topic of So Much nearer (New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1968) and Design for Escape.

12Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 76. Freire's critical language is an odd mixture of Christian and Marxist idioms. His exposition is turgid; repetition is virtually the only means of emphasis; his terms can be found very confusing. However, the struggle to read him is worthwhile: no one else writing on literacy (one of the meanings of "English") has so profoundly a philosophical foundation. The best introduction to his work is "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom," HER (May, 1979), 205-25.

Toward a Positive Remedial English Program in the University

Joan Williams
Auburn University

Some type of remediation has, in the past five or six years, become a necessary part of freshman English at most universities, including the Ivy League schools. The attitude toward such programs is almost always negative. The university does not want remedial programs but must have them since an increasing number of those students admitted produce compositions in which errors exceed five percent of the total words they write, and academicians stop "reading ideas" when a student's paper contains more than a two to three percent error rate. Distain for remedial programs stems from the belief that remediation is not a proper function of the university, but most teachers feel an obligation to provide an opportunity for success to each student admitted to the academic community.

Such grudging acceptance often results in, at best, members of the English Department apologizing for the inclusion of remediation programs in the university's curriculum while at the same time arguing that the university needs such programs. This apologetic attitude is not necessary, for a carefully designed remediation program, while created primarily to provide aid for students deficient in the basic writing skills, can be a positive, even a dynamic part of the total English program. One such remediation program, with the aim of serving more than just a limited number of specified students, is found in the open composition laboratory at Auburn University.

The composition laboratory is designated as open because it is designed to provide supplemental help in composition to anyone in the University, from the entering student struggling with freshman composition to the graduate student working on an article for publication.

One of the lab's primary functions, to be sure, is to offer remedial instruction to those students so deficient in basic English grammar and mechanics that they cannot be placed in the regular freshman English courses. The open composition laboratory is uniquely beneficial for these students for at least two reasons: First, even though they meet in the lab on a regular basis with an assigned instructor who determines the type of remedial work they need and selects or prepares materials for them to use, they may be assisted by any number of different instructors since all teachers of freshman English work in the lab one hour per week. At least one of these instructors is likely to help a student with basic writing problems understand the reason for those problems and to overcome them. Second, because these remedial students meet in a lab frequented by other, more successful students, the stigma of separation from the rest of the academic community which often accompanies a student's assignment to a remedial class is removed; a student's presence there is not necessarily an indication of failure.

But basic remediation is only one of the lab's functions. Since students with a variety of writing deficiencies attend the University, many students who have mastered the basic grammatical and mechanical skills still require more personal attention than they can possibly receive in a traditional English class if they are to produce effectively written papers. The open composition laboratory seeks as actively to aid these students as it seeks to aid students with more basic writing difficulties. It offers them that additional individual attention they need to become better writers. In fact, even the gifted freshman student can find in the open composition lab aids to improving his work. Certainly most writers need other eyes and other ears to aid them as they work; they can find them in the lab, both from the instructors who are there to provide professional help and from other students in the lab who may
read and comment upon their work. These better prepared students may be referred to the lab by their instructors, but most come voluntarily, seeking teacher judgments with no grade attached; sometimes they come simply to talk through an idea or to ask for clarification of their classroom instructor's comments on a paper. What they find in the lab is another voice, a slightly different approach to a rhetorical problem. They leave the lab conscious of a wider audience for their writing and with more confidence in their ability to write.

These students will remember the lab even after they have passed their last required freshman English course; consequently, because any student may walk in at any time the doors are open, the open composition laboratory will continue to serve these students until they graduate. The senior student seeking advice about style, syntax, grammar, or form in the economics paper he is writing is as welcome as the freshman trying to overcome basic writing deficiencies. The upperclassman, even, at times, a member of the university faculty, will find that the open composition laboratory may be the only place he can go to find a trained professional willing to sit down and look at his writing with a critical eye.

Obviously, the open composition laboratory's primary importance is to all the students of the University, but the very fact that it does serve all students requires that it also provide a major service for the freshman English faculty. In order to staff a facility that, during the course of the quarter, may be visited by every freshman student as well as numerous sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and graduate students, every instructor of freshman English must become a lab instructor, also. By donating one office hour per week for work in the lab, the instructor makes himself available to help students other than those assigned to him in class. At the same time he acts as both a consultant and as a participant in a continuing teachers' workshop, for the interaction among several teachers working together in one large room to improve the student writing must result in a constant exchange of ideas.

The open composition laboratory thus provides a service to the freshman English program that can be found nowhere else. Too often, teachers of freshman English are the most inexperienced in the department; their training has been, most likely, in literary criticism, not in teaching composition. Consequently, they may be able to write well and to recognize poor writing when they see it but not be able to specify why the writing is poor or how to help students transform poor writing into good writing. Usually these teachers face the task of learning to teach composition in the isolation of their classrooms. However, participation in an open composition lab brings them out of that isolation into contact with teachers with varying degrees of experience in teaching writing. In the lab, inexperienced teachers learn much simply by listening to others talk with students about writing problems. They also learn by talking with other teachers, both experienced and inexperienced, as they work together in the lab; and as the camaraderie develops among those working in the lab, their hesitancy to ask for advice or to ask someone else to look at a student's paper disappears. In addition, a well-stocked lab contains a basic library of rhetoric texts, composition texts, handbooks, and workbooks, all available to instructors as well as to students. With these resources to call upon, the inexperienced teacher gains confidence in working with individual students in the lab atmosphere, and this confidence usually carries over to the classroom.

But the new teacher of freshman English is not the only faculty member who benefits from this interaction with other teachers and the close contact with student writers. Experienced teachers are exposed to new approaches to old problems and are forced to evaluate old techniques; consequently, their teaching often improves.

Thus, both students and faculty benefit from the open composition laboratory. Freshman students receive the kind of individual help that can lead to improvement in their writing ability; upperclassmen, forced by standards in other classes to acknowledge the work of the freshman English classes, find the help they should have sought as freshmen, and the members of the English faculty learn from each other to be better teachers of composition. The open composition lab is a dynamic place where learning on many levels takes place. It has a legitimate function for which the English Department need not apologize. It is an integral part of the University.

APPENDIX

A Suggested Design for an Open Composition Laboratory

Facilities for the composition laboratory should be as unlike an ordinary classroom as space and financing will allow. A large room (at least 20' x 40') can be made both attractive and functional for this purpose. Furnish it with several large tables and comfortable straight chairs, add a small couch, a reading table filled with magazines, and brightly colored prints on the walls, and the classroom is transformed into a comfortable and appealing writing room.

Personnel manning the lab should be directed by one instructor who is assigned to the lab full time and is responsible for its operation. Because the open composition lab operates under the assumption that the best possible instructional situation is one instructor sitting down with one student, the director is assisted by all the teachers of freshman English who donate one office hour per week to the lab.

Student attendance is motivated in three ways. It may be the result of teacher referrals; a classroom teacher fills out a referral slip which lists those areas in which the student needs help, and the student brings the slip to the lab at the time designated on the slip. Most students will attend, however, in response to publicity about the lab, and will simply walk in and ask for help themselves. Of course, those students assigned to a remedial English class meet in the lab on a regular basis.

Operating procedures for dealing with these students begin when the student enters the lab. The walk-in or referred student is greeted as he enters by an instructor who determines what he needs to work on. The instructor sits down with the student to talk through his writing problems, after which he provides the student with supplemental reading or exercises or simply has him work on his paper, returning to him from time to time to comment or to allow the student to comment or ask questions.

The student assigned to a remedial class enters the room and picks up a folder, prepared by the lab director, containing his previous work and his assignment for this class hour. He begins work and, as he works, any instructor in the lab may
stop to help, ask questions, answer questions, or make suggestions. Since several teachers will be working in the lab at any given hour, these students have the advantage of working with a number of teachers.

Problems will pop up in any program involving as many individuals as does the composition lab at Auburn. This past fall quarter we had an enrollment of almost eighteen thousand, of which almost thirty-two hundred were entering freshmen. To teach these students freshman English were forty-seven graduate teaching assistants and twenty-three regular faculty members.

From the student body, over fifteen hundred referred or walk-in students came to the lab for help. In addition, on the basis of ACT or SAT scores and a writing sample, forty-nine of the entering freshman were assigned to Basic English (EH 100), which met in the lab three times per week for the quarter. We kept busy.

Some of the problems of providing a lab service for this many students are still with us, but we are working toward solutions.

1. We cannot predict when walk-in students (the major part of our business) will come to the lab. Since we are open from nine until four Monday through Friday and could have twenty students at nine and none at three, we were often understaffed during our first year or two of operation. But after studying the pattern of attendance for two years, we were better able to predict when the maximum numbers of students would come to the lab and arrange our staffing accordingly. Sometimes our predictions go awry, however.

2. When we do guess wrong and are caught short of help, some students must spend time sitting around waiting for an instructor to be free. And, indeed, during our first couple of years, many did. We have gradually built up a file of self-help materials which allow us to put self-help into the hands of most students while they await an instructor. The student who comes to the lab seeking help with grammar or mechanics can go to the file, select the materials he needs and begin work. An instructor will move to him as soon as possible. However, when students who need to talk over an organizational or a stylistic problem in a particular paper may still have to wait for an instructor to be free.

3. To minimize this wait, we schedule at least four instructors in the lab during peak periods. In addition to the volunteer help from teachers of freshman English, a one and one-fourth teaching load is assigned for work in the lab. We divide this load among three instructors who have had experience working with remedial students and have asked to be assigned to the lab. Since a one-fourth load in the lab amounts to eight actual hours, an experienced and interested instructor is available forty hours per week. The lab is open only thirty-five hours per week; therefore, we can schedule two experienced instructors to work during peak attendance hours and supplement their work with one or two volunteers. We always have at least two instructors on duty.

4. Not everyone likes or has the aptitude to work in the lab. Some of those required to spend one office hour there resent it. In an attempt to motivate interest in the lab, I meet with the freshman English teachers at the beginning of each year and try to dispel fears about such close work with students and to convince each instructor of the personal advantages of the experience they will receive in the lab. I do not always succeed. Those who resent the work or simply cannot do it work in the lab during their first year, and because we are fortunate to have a large staff, are allowed to drop out of the program thereafter. However, we have always retained enough volunteers (at least forty-five each quarter) to provide an adequate staff for the lab.

5. Finally, with so many instructors working in the lab, a student may get conflicting advice from different instructors. To cut down on the student's confusion, we give each student a handout explaining what the lab can and cannot do. One of the "can'ts" is that we cannot know the particulars of a given assignment from a specific teacher; therefore, we cannot be responsible for the finished paper. We can only advise on possible approaches to organization problems or stylistic difficulties. We try to make students aware that composition is a matter of choices. We make them aware of alternatives; they make the final choices. The judges of the effectiveness of these choices are, finally, their own instructors.

NOTES

3This suggested design is based upon the design of the composition laboratory at Auburn University.

The State of the Profession: A Review Essay

Erika Lindemann
University of South Carolina

Most writing teachers are not especially concerned about the state of their profession; indeed, they may not perceive their work with students—in the classroom, in conferences, or at home with a stack of papers—to be at all related to the theories, issues, and research discussed at professional meetings and in numerous articles and books. "What is happening to my students' writing?" and "How can I help this student improve?" are questions which occur first in the context of daily teaching, and their answers, as often as not, are also prompted by teachers working with students, not the professional literature. I am not at all certain that this narrow vision of the art of teaching writing is altogether unhealthy, because for many teachers the state of the profession is extremely confusing and difficult to assess.

On the one hand, we are constantly reminded of how little we know about teaching writing. Many of the articles we read characteristically begin with the kind of apology Andrea Lunsford feels compelled to write in "What We Know—and Don't Know—About Remedial Writing," an excellent discussion of Ohio State University's remedial English program: "What we do not know about remedial writers, their processes, strategies, and stages of development, so far outstrips what we do know that I almost hesitate to include the 'what we know' in my title." The October 1977 issue of the CEA Forum, devoted entirely to discussing the state of the profession, elicited from some of the best writing teachers in this country a host of depressing paragraphs about their frus-
trations. We seem to be professionals at bay, besieged, under fire. The American public is confused about our work, knows very little about it, and protests what little it knows. Legislators, in a misguided attempt to hold teachers accountable for their teaching and to "improve" an otherwise unsupported and poorly funded system of public education, have called for minimum competency testing in at least twenty-seven states. For educators, both inside and outside English departments, the teaching of writing has assumed a new importance; yet, we seem unable to appreciate this intense attention to and concern about our work. "We don't know enough about it yet," we protest. Because so many important questions lack answers, we must remain cautious, and our reluctance to act is frequently misinterpreted by those outside the profession as a failure to address the problem.

On the other hand, we have made some progress. The job market has encouraged us rather forcefully to better train prospective teachers by offering them courses in rhetoric, linguistics, ethnography, psychology, speech, and other writing-related disciplines. The National Endowment for the Humanities has increased its support of summer seminars, conferences, and projects like the University of Iowa's Institute for Writing, which represents a significant commitment to improve the quality of writing programs throughout the country. The leadership of professional organizations, hearing the concerns of its members, has encouraged efforts like the CEA consultant program, the MLA Division on Writing, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Individuals among us — especially Charles Cooper, Lee Odeel, David Bartholomea, and Richard Lloyd-Jones — have begun to address the problems of measuring writing ability. And, we now have a professional library.

Literally hundreds of books and articles define principles and pedagogies which writing teachers can study, adapt to their teaching, and mine for their research. Thanks to Professors Larson, Tate and his colleagues, as well as contributors to the Rhetoric Society Quarterly, we may consult useful bibliographies. Valuable theoretical arguments are available to us in the work of Professors Moffett, Kinneavy, D'Angelo, and Pike, Becker, and Young. Other scholars have reported the results of their investigations of a particular problem, studies like those of Professors Emig, Shaughnessy, O'Hare, Hult, Mellon, and Britton. Anthologies edited by Professors Tate and Corbett, Graves, Winterowd, and Cooper and Odell grant us access to essays written for professional journals and conferences. Most of these works have been published since the late 1960's, many of them only within the past two years. Not only has the quality and quantity of our professional library become impressive, but so has its diversity. Despite the clamor to the contrary, we now know a great deal more about the teaching of writing than we did ten short years ago.

What we need now, it seems to me, is a way of synthesizing what we have learned, of seeing it whole. We seem to recognize the uniquely interdisciplinary nature of our work, and we appreciate our need to "know," from a special perspective, what our colleagues in other fields have discovered about language users and language processes. As yet, however, we boast few brave souls who can discover the relationships among these areas of knowledge which will provide a broadly humanistic paradigm for what we do. The call for wholeness, for a new view from the center of this diversity, has most recently been sounded by Richard Lloyd-Jones, current chair of the CCC:

In order to know more, we will have to draw into our work the scholarship of many disciplines; we will have to recognize ourselves in the roles of interdisciplinary scholars — with all of the attendant embarrassments that come of trying to speak in fields far from one's own base. But if we do not try to be in the center of all knowledge, to report the view from the center of how disciplines interact, we deserve our present "basic position, that is, our traditional place in the cool, center of the house of intellect."

I believe we need this synthesis, this view from the center, for several reasons. For one thing, I'm damned uncomfortable not having one or being there, especially when the public and my colleagues ask reasonable, necessary questions about what I do. As a rule, I'm generally forced to respond as I have earlier in this essay, with an "on the one hand . . . and on the other" analysis of the topic. I am also finding it progressively more difficult to keep up with new information and ideas; I need a way of seeing the new against the old in order to draw them both into a comprehensive paradigm. Finally, my teaching requires such a view, not only of students as whole human beings, but also of the processes students and teachers engage as we discover how language shapes what we can see and know and be. It seems to me that we must define the center for our discipline, our research, our students and our teaching in language: how it is learned, how it represents all human endeavors, how it defines our relationships to each other, how it permits us to discover the many selves we are. Perhaps because language can divide as well as unite human beings, the state of our profession currently experiences the "on the one hand . . . on the other hand" multiple personalities I have described. At the same time, however, the uniquely human power to use language underlies and informs all that we do; perhaps it can also permit us to discover the wholeness of our "doing."

Admittedly, a language-centered view of the profession is far more complex than I have suggested here. We seem to know even less about how languages work and why than do about writing. All the same, we do know that language restricts as well as elaborates, limits as well as enlarges. It offers us the choice either of addressing all of our professional concerns or of confining us to a relatively narrow area. To demonstrate how this principle operates, let me contrast two recent additions to our professional library, E. D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition and William Coles' The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing. Both books, addressed primarily to teachers of composition, are language-centered; that is, language, not writing alone, is their focus. As their titles indicate, however, each author directs his language about language differently, either outward or in on itself, to elaborate or to restrict his thesis. In doing so, each book also limits or enlarges the author's "view from the center."

Professor Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition "argues for certain privileged goals in the teaching of literacy" and "claims that an authentic ideology of literacy inheres in the subject itself, and should guide our teaching of it" (p. xii). He brings together important research in linguistics and psychology in order to define a concept which he calls relative readability: "Implicit in this conception of readability is the rhetorical efficiency of prose — its success in affecting the
implied reader in ways that transcend the mere conveying of information" (p. 75). Essentially, he maintains that, when two texts carry the same meaning, the text which takes less time and effort to understand is relatively more readable than the other. Readability, then, "understanding" a text, depends primarily on psychological principles of language processing. Professor Hirsch defines relative readability in detail in Chapter 4, tracing its history from Herbert Spencer's observations of the "principle of least effort" (p. 77) to the work of those who developed modern readability formulas. Chapter 5 refines the concept by summarizing its psychological bases. The discussion serves as a useful introduction to research in a discipline which most writing teachers need to know a great deal more about. Briefly though, readability is determined by certain constraints on language processing, by principles of closure and semantic integration, and by the capacity of long- and short-term memory to comprehend and store information.

Chapter 6 delineates the practical implications of relative readability for writing teachers. Professor Hirsch quarrels with composition curricula which are subsumed under traditional subject matters — logic, linguistics, literature, even rhetoric — and finds a good many flaws in most college writing texts. He believes, however, "that maxims are indispensable devices in teaching any practical art" (p. 144), although he is careful to issue appropriate caveats about their use. A comparison of the stylistic maxims from several handbooks (Strunk, Gowers, McCommon, Crews, and Lucas) suggests that they correlate well with the psychological principles of readability. "In achieving 'economy of attention' at the level of clause and phrase, the most important rules seem to be: 1. Omit needless words. 2. Keep related words together." (p. 154). Maxims which economize the reader's efforts to attend to extended stretches of discourse are: "3. Make the paragraph the unit of composition. 4. Use integrative devices between clauses and sentences." (p. 155). He also offers teachers certain "maxims of commentary" (pp. 160-161) for marking student papers (apparently, The Philosophy of Composition had already been written by the time Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations appeared). Chapter 7 applies the criterion of relative readability to the assessment of writing ability, an area of research which Professor Hirsch believes to be crucial to progress in other areas but about which he must remain necessarily tentative until he has completed his own investigations.

Chapters 4 through 7 are, on the whole, well-written and interesting, with frequent signposts and summaries to guide the reader. The book's major contribution is the synthesis it achieves by drawing what has been discovered about cognition, memory, and language processing into the service of teaching writing. The first three chapters, however, introduce a troublesome, and to my mind, irrelevant historical argument which suggests "the irreversibility of this general evolution towards readability" (p. 71). Professor Hirsch would have us believe that "evolutionary tendencies" predetermine the rightness of his philosophy of composition. He derives his principles of relative readability from historical speculations about the history of the English language and the development of prose style and, consequently, seriously underestimates his argument. Again and again in the first three chapters, I find myself almost agreeing with him on a point, only to be abruptly halted by a misconstrued example, a shifted term, a quotation ripped out of context, or a questionable generalization. As a result, I find myself re-examining the entire context of parts of his argument, and if I reach the same conclusion Professor Hirsch does, it is often by accident or front quite different premises than those he is advancing.

The argument of the first three chapters runs something like this:

...the absence of actual persons, speaking in actual contexts, requires in writing the creation of implied persons speaking in implied contexts. First, the scribal, textual, and syntactic conventions of a normative written dialect had to be established — the subject of Chapter 3. Next, stylistic solutions to the problem of writing effectively for a large readership had to be learned and gradually established. This process will be the subject of Chapter 3. Hidden within this historical process, traceable in all modern written languages, may be discovered the underlying principles of composition [i.e., the psychological principles which determine communicative efficiency or relative readability — my note] (p. 31).

Few would argue with the premise of the first sentence in the excerpt quoted above. However, the argument develops in such a way that the premise of Chapter 2 also governs the premise of Chapter 3: "Now if a language like English has grown more efficient 'as an instrument of expression,' it is reasonable to guess that English prose has also progressed in the same respect, since much of the corpus from which we deduce the history of English is its body of prose texts" (p. 53). In the first place, it seems to me unnecessary to construct this historical argument in order to discuss the psychological principles which govern relative readability in a contemporary context. In the second place, the historical argument itself is unreliable for several reasons. Let us examine it more closely.

It is difficult to find a single passage which typifies my objections to Professor Hirsch's reasoning in Chapters 2 and 3, but I should like to point out several kinds of slips which, permitted to accumulate in a longer passage, call his entire argument into question. First, he consistently shifts terms to give them progressively positive connotations; what is labelled as the "process of simplification in language" (p. 34), by no means the only process at work in the history of languages, becomes the "normalization of language" (p. 40) and, ultimately, "linguistic conservatism... [which] belongs now to the sphere of historical inevitability" (p. 40). Second, he manipulates his sources, quoting passages which express attitudes and aesthetic values he would have us share but which have no necessary connection to his thesis. For example, Chapter 2 ends with the following trumpeter-call from Jespersen (1946):

If we think our logically and bravely what is for the good of society, our view of language will lead us to the conclusion that it is our duty to work in the direction which natural evolution has already taken, i.e., towards the diffusion of the common language at the cost of local dialects. (p. 50)

Third, although Henry Bradley's The Making of English (1904; rev. 1968) and works by Jespersen (1894, 1922, 1941, 1946) and Zipf (1929, 1935, 1949) certainly represent important contributions to the study of historical linguistics for their day, Professor Hirsch's argument would not seem so one-sided had he consulted more recent discussion of linguistic change, the work of Paul Kiparsky⁵ or Robert King,⁶ for example. Finally, I find it irksome to confront the brick wall
of historical inevitability every time I begin puzzling over a point which Hirsch, not history, has tripped me up on: "... I believe most persons will agree that the historical evolution of written speech has been in the right direction on the whole. [Here I pause to puzzle out what Professor Hirsch means by "right direction," only to have my confusion termed "resistance" in the next sentence.] Moreover, those who do not agree will find that resisting this historical tendency is quite fruitless in any case" (p. 64). It is not the historical tendency I am resisting, but Professor Hirsch's interpretation of what the tendency is.

The following passage reveals the cumulative effects of misquoting the linguists, shifting the meanings of terms, and confounding the readers with "unassailable," historically inevitable tenets. The catch-phrase being twisted here is the modern linguists' claim that all dialects are equally valid; that is, they meet the needs of the individuals in a speech community using the dialect.

This doctrine of universal correctness, when stated as I have just put it, is descriptively accurate and logically unassailable. [I am a fool, then, to question it?] Indeed the statement is very nearly a logical truism; the linguistic conventions shared by a speech community are what they are. [I agree.] When those conventions are formulated as rules, [What kind of rules? Who formulates them? How?] these show themselves to be just as normative [What does normative mean in this context? Are value judgments implied?] for that dialect as are any grammars of literary Latin, French, German, or English. [Intuitive grammars? Handbooks? In what sense is grammar used here?] So long as correctness [If the truism holds, a system is a system; it is neither correct nor incorrect.] is conceived to be a normative property within a dialect (and no other view of correctness would be scientifically tenable), then it must be true to say, as almost every modern linguist does say, that every dialect is equally correct. [Again, the authorities! But no descriptive or historical linguist would maintain this; valid, yes, but not correct as it is used here.] (pp. 40-41)

As my frustrated comments in brackets indicate, I believe that the first three chapters of this book are better left unread. They mislead the novice linguist, confuse the historical linguist (like myself), and misguide those with no linguistic training into thinking that Professor Hirsch's discussion of "universal correctness" is "logically unassailable." The argument from history does not serve him at all well. Because I question his assumptions about the development of the English language in Chapter 2, consequently, I also doubt similarly worded statements in Chapter 3: "This normalization of syntax alone makes modern prose a more functional instrument [For whom? For what?] than the prose of the past" (p. 58). I have serious reservations about the usefulness of his brief "imaginary history [of prose style] uncluttered by recalcitrant realities" (p. 59). Since that field, however, is Professor Hirsch's forte, I will retire my troops and leave him on it.

My protracted battle with his historical argument is intended to point out that his view from the center is limited, narrowed, because he restricts his thesis to the inevitable, to a perception of relative readability predetermined perhaps more by history than by psychological principles. English speakers did not develop the morphology and syntax of their language just to make it relatively easier to speak or write; language change is far more complex than that, even "relatively" speaking. "Linguistic and social factors are closely interrelated in the development of language change. Explanations which are confined to one or the other aspect, no matter how well constructed, will fail to account for the rich body of regularities that can be observed in empirical studies of language behavior." Professor Hirsch virtually ignores the social determinants of language change, and, had he omitted the historical argument, perhaps he might have attended more fully to the cultural and contextual as well as the psychological bases which determine relative readability.

Unlike Professor Hirsch's book, The Plural I does not limit our view of teaching or of students and teachers as language users. In fact, it deepens and extends our understanding of "wholeness" in what we do. It is, first of all, an enjoyable book, a dramatic narrative of a 1960s freshman composition class at Case Institute of Technology. War stories about writing classes, of course, can be either deadly dull rehearsals of "what I did last term" or entertaining accounts which let us see ourselves in similar situations; the difference between them often lies in the telling. In this book, Professor Coles does not curse us with The Way to teach writing. "My intention," he maintains, "is to illuminate what is involved in the teaching (and learning) of writing however one approaches it, in hopes that this will enable other teachers to take a fresh hold on whatever they choose to do" (p. 2). He invites us into a real classroom to observe his discussions with real students about real papers, and he encourages us to come away from the experience with our own conclusions about what kinds of growth have taken place — in the students, in their teacher, and in us.

The book is arranged into thirty sections, each section comprising a writing assignment, a classroom dialogue generated by the assignment, and, whenever necessary, Professor Coles' commentary. The dialogues are neither verbatim transcriptions of class discussion nor entirely fictional recreations; they capture how the teaching and learning of writing feel and sound and get done. The book does not so much describe "how to" as it conveys the actual "doing" of teaching. Although the students are all science majors, they are really no different from most freshmen. They hide behind "English classes," believe they need the security of stereotypes and specific standards ('Sir, it would help if you could tell us what you wanted," p. 34), and tend to take one step backward for every two steps forward. Yet they are also individuals — Sam, Dan, Bill — who come to learn that language has the power to define honestly the selves, the "plural I," of each student and his ways of seeing and knowing.

Besides being an easily recognizable series of student portraits, The Plural I teaches us that language can be the center of a writing course. After we have cut away everything else that has been said about the teaching of writing, at the center of it all, in the "doing" of teaching and learning, we are left with students and teachers discussing papers, with language about language: "... when it comes to the teaching of art, what teaches finally is style. Learning, the other end of the activity, would seem to be connected with a stylistic response to style" (p. 1). The thirty writing assignments in this book enable the students (and the student-reader) to see language as a self-creating activity at the same time that it also defines subject matters. "Though the real subject of our assignments was going to be language — what it is, how it functions, why it is important — for their nominal, subject I decided on the concepts of amateurism and professionalism" (p. 6).
The course begins with six assignments which ask students to describe and define amateurs and professionals, "... partly to allow time for the necessary street-cleaning that has to be done before anyone even begins to think about writing anything, and partly because the notion of definition as a way of seeing, as a destruction of the definer rather than the defined, while it can be revolutionary in its implications for a student, has such implications only if a student is given time to discover them for himself" (p. 16). The second group of assignments concerns advice, a form of expression, of language, which attempts to bring professionals and non-professionals together. "... I wanted to provide a way of complicating the students' understanding of the role of a definer depending on whether he was the subject of an action, the object of an action, or both" (p. 63). Then, in the third set of writing tasks, Professor Coles asks the students to compare the advice of some professional writers on how to write about science..." (p. 120). Here, words make or destroy meaning and begin to reveal some of the resources language holds out to the definer. The next seven assignments extend this principle, illustrating "how words can come together in unconventional ways to make meaning" (p. 164). In this section, the students discover that J. D. Salinger's "professional" use of language defines a lie young people wish most to believe about themselves, whereas Nicola Sacco's unpolished, nonprofessional, but honest English permits us to see him as he sees himself. Together with the students, we are forced to perceive, order, and give meaning to the world of Edward Gorey's The Willowdale Handcar, and we discover that "... no one can read nonsense or write it without in some way understanding it as a world that is created through the use of language which in turn creates its creator" (p. 181). With the final group of assignments, we learn to see our diverse disciplines as different language systems and return to our definition of a professional "as someone able to use the language of his system to grow as a person" (p. 213). Professor Coles, of course, returns his students to their definitions of themselves as professionals in scientific disciplines; yet the "nominal subject" of his assignments might just as well concern how we define "professional writing teacher," given the language systems of the disciplines we must integrate to define ourselves.

My analysis of the assignments, however, does not do justice to the feeling of wholeness, of synthesis, which The Plural I creates. Despite bad days, when the dialogues reveal student frustrations or when Professor Coles admits that a writing assignment was poorly designed, he demonstrates how language creates a "fit," a unity, among reading, writing, class discussion, teachers, students, amateurs, professionals, disciplines, and interests. His view of our diverse disciplines and "doings" and personalities as students and teachers of writing is defined by language, interrelated by language, and ultimately made whole by language. I do not value the book because it offers thirty assignments which I might imitate in my writing class next term; I am not Professor Coles, and despite their similarities, my students are not his. Rather, I appreciate reading this "war story," this language about language, for what it has demonstrated to me about the self I am when I teach writing. For the first time, I have a notion of how oral discourse, classroom discussion, complements thinking, reading, and writing. I understand, too, why I am dissatisfied with notions of growth in writing measured by tests, courses, and behavioral objectives rather than by examining the selves we are and how we choose to define them in language. And I also recognize that this simple book, "merely" a re-enactment of a semester's work, holds a great deal more than one reading it reveals. I want to read it again, for somewhere in the midst of its deceptive simplicity lies my view from the center and the language for my own definition of professional.

Notes

1. "CCC, 29 (February 1978), 47.

Reading Theory and The Classic Essay
In The Composition Class

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Near the end of the semester one of my bright front-row students slouched low in his seat and mumbled, "Before I got here I thought I knew how to write. Now, I can't seem to do anything." Here was an ambitious pre-law student from a social background where standard English was the standard and education was considered important, a former prizewinner in a junior high creative writing contest, who had the requisite brain power and inherent knowledge of the language, but who couldn't write an essay that moved beyond the mundane. I needed to perform some magical metamorphosis to get him thinking in the rhetorical mode.

To perform such magic you need the proper rings of power. From Aristotle, via Wayne Booth, we have the three elements of the rhetorical stance: the available arguments about the subject, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker. According to Lloyd Bitzer, the rhetorical situation, "those contexts in which...writers create rhetorical discourse," also contains three constituents: exigence, audience, and constraints. Interlocking rings, overlapping yet significantly extending our knowledge of what we are about. Is there another set missing from the nine magic rings of Man? Three to serve as background for judgment, to save the students from "days or a lifetime of research among the runes, looking for facts where they are not, where seeking only reveals ignorance and where each discovery of [the student's] own opens up vast new darkness." We have the rings of rhetoric that control situation and those that provide a balanced stance, but we still seek the rings of thought. The path I intend to follow through the treacherous theoretical mists to discover the power of
awareness that my student needs is a familiar one: the connection of reading with writing.

We all believe that writers are initially readers; authors' biographies indicate the connection, and most of us began our careers as composition teachers in the pages of a favorite book. "Reading experience not only gives us knowledge about our world but can dynamically aid in the process of creativity as well." Through examination of reading theory's connection with rhetorical theory, we can establish some principles that will clarify our intuitive beliefs and provide a guideline for our reading of essays in the composition class. Those principles demonstrate that the student's participation in reading can become both a heuristic and an experience in the nature of effective discourse.

We begin the examination of reading theory's contribution to understanding the composition process with the proposition that "reading recreates the act of writing." This theory is elaborately developed by phenomenologists Georges Poulet and Wolfgang Iser, who attempt to define the active role of the reader in esthetic works. Poulet describes his own reaction to the writer of the work he is reading as follows:

I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness; the consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheared-of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels.3

His description is important to us as writing teachers because he is describing a rhetorical interaction here between reader and writer, one more compelling than most conversation, that demands more of the reader than merely processing information.

There are two factors in the rhetorical process of reading that we must grasp: immersion and identification. It is axiomatic that all reading depends on scanning, predicting, testing, and confirming. Immersion refers to the pattern of illusion-forming and illusion-breaking, anticipation and retrospection, that must happen in the mind of the reader as he or she attempts to impose a significant pattern on the text being read. Paradoxically, reading demands that the reader formulate the unformulated when he brings his imagination to the text. The author has the option of leaving things out of the text, of providing only a certain amount of information so that the reader is forced to create the links that make sense of that information. The author may purposely write ambiguously so that the reader must consider a variety of perspectives and choose those which make sense in context.

The point is this: esthetic texts invite the reader to go beyond reading for concepts alone. Esthetic texts such as the classic essay demand more of the reader than do other sorts of writings. What Phillip Wheelwright calls "soft focus," most commonly associated with poems and stories, invites the reader more insistently to participate in the creative activity of reading. (You may exercise such participation here, for instance, recreating all the references to the reader as 'he' in this text as she, or he/she.) He becomes aware of the possibilities afforded him by the literary conventions, and hearkens to the authorial voice. He recognizes the manipulation of reality which is possible through the text, and he participates with the author in the dynamic process of that manipulation. Thus, immersion refers to the recognition of parts of the texts whose very presence "draws us into the text, compelling us to conduct a creative examination not only of the text, but of ourselves." The reader's coordinate experience is identification. Immersed in the text so that it becomes his reality, a "gestalt" that he has produced for himself, the reader begins to incorporate the unfamiliar experience found in the world of the literary text, to absorb it and make it his own. When the reader thinks the author's thoughts as his own and gives them validity, he must simultaneously assert and deny his own personality. To do so, an "unformulated faculty for deciphering those thoughts is brought into play — a faculty which, in the act of deciphering also illuminates itself."4

By doing so, he can formulate his own identity, and he may discover things that had previously seemed to elude his consciousness.

Reading is a kind of structured thinking, a "phenomenon" that requires the reader to realize what he thinks, to comprehend intuitively, to raise his thought from "the depths of consciousness into the light of recognition," just as writing is. The "awareness" and "recognition" mentioned so often by these phenomenological wizards of reading psychology seem to be what my student — remember him? — needs most. When I said his writing was mundane, I was talking about more than sentence structure. Surely, he wrote one bland assertive sentence after another, despite an introduction to heuristics and to Christensen's cumulative modifiers, but he did that because he remained locked into the same old perspectives. Like the adventurous hobbits in _Lord of the Rings_, he needed to get out of the Shire for a while and meet some Wizards, Orcs, and Ents. Literary experience can do this for him because "books take on their full existence in the reader ... There disappears the subject-object division that otherwise is a prerequisite for all observation, and the removal of this division puts reading in an apparently unique position as regards the possible absorption of the new experiences."5

For reading to succeed, however, we need to establish the necessary place of readings in the composition class. We need to create situations that will facilitate real reader-writer interaction in the students' papers.

The use of readers containing essays can be powerful stuff, or it can just be a cheap trick, the expected rabbit pulled from your rhetorical hat. In "New Rhetoric and the Grammar of Pedagogy," John Warnock discusses the use of "shiny books." He warns of their political implications, that as a result of the frantic, publisher-prodded search for something to write about, "for anything that turns them on," the shiny reader becomes an idol, an object of worship enforced by teacher's almighty grade. The essays in it are admired as infallible finished works to be emulated, and teaching them as such violates the student's right to freedom as a reader and kills his chance for "response in a rhetorical context."6 In a similar discussion of essays in composition classes, Jim W. Corder explores the limited conception of essays as outside 'any hierarchy of literary types'.

They are not fictions; hence, they are not created. They are chunks of actuality — reports, propositions, evidences, reminiscences — written out on paper. They are not to be, but to be for.
And so what we do with essays in the composition class is limited. We see essays...to provide ideas for writing...to initiate class discussions...for outlining types...The more we do such things with essays, the more we reaffirm our limited conception of essays. One of the reasons students don't profit as much as they should from reading essays is that while we at least have these pragmatic uses for essays, students don't or think they don't.7

Shiny books full of essays to be "used"; in short, the models approach so prevalent in readers violates our notions of the value of reading.

What we know about reading, the freedom inherent in its rhetorical context, the real communication that takes place, should inform our use of the essay in the classroom. First, we need essays that are esthetic literary works. That doesn't mean they need be stuffy documents, but that they enable the reader to collaborate in the production of the work, conjuring up arguments for or against the concepts he reads, making them his own and applying them to his experience or identifying with the illustrations provided by the author, extending or qualifying them as he feels he must to assert his own identity while hardening the authorial voice. Second, if we really believe in the power of rhetoric to discover warrantable beliefs and to improve those beliefs in shared discourse, we have to allow students to voice those arguments, to hold dissenting views on the masterpieces, or to explore the experience of no response. From the bored freshman there will be complaints, of course, and that is a basis for critical response. If we believe in literary criticism, it is because critical response furthers our knowledge about the art form and deepens our capacity for understanding. When the text is the right kind, with the depth and ageless relevance that we call classic, reading elicits response, a dialectic requiring the reader to "find ways to perform for himself as his own interlocutor." This won't always happen. Not every book appeals to everyone. The knowledgeable critical stance will be impossible for some readers, and they'll need help from teachers to find their own limitations and deal with them. Such reading does assist with concept development and provides "concepts with rhetorical power."8

Looking about me, I have noticed that many composition teachers, fledglings like myself and wise old owls with tenure, suffer the same nagging doubt about the teachability of real writing. Mechanics, sentence structures, and invention procedures are teachable, and they are often helpful to students. But what is really needed is a magical metamorphosis, in which the student becomes aware of what makes good writing good, and develops confidence about his own writing. To do that he should experience the best writing available.

That's what I want to do here. This review of the phenomenology of reading and the present view of readings in the composition class should serve simply to let us develop an approach that is consistent with good theory, one that is more than just application of technique.

To try my theory, let's first establish some guiding questions. First, why should a pre-law student work with literary essays in a composition class? Because they introduce him to the world of ideas existing purely in print and make him a citizen to that world. We want him to learn to be at ease there. Then, we need to question whether his method of reading these essays facilitates achievement of such a goal. How does reading essays do this for him? Reading is itself an experience in that world, and he learns from participation in that experience. Finally, I'll suggest a few techniques to bring the student and the literature together on the path to scribal competence—or, where, when, and how will he and the essay interact?

The student I mentioned earlier needed some invention, the same as he would in any other course in the curriculum. All forms of invention dealing with patterns in language "are 'mentalistic'; they all assume a mind at work carrying out a process that is both rational and intuitive." The chaos of students' untutored responses helps to create an exigence, a feeling that action needs to be taken, action that requires writing. The desire to make that sense understood to someone—one teacher, friend, universal audience, self—requires development of a rhetorical stance. From having read, from being challenged by the author to make sense of the reading, the student learns that "having something to write about depends, from the reader's point of view, on the writing." The student assimilates that nebulous sense of an audience to be reached from the experience of being one and from someone's response, the class's or the teacher's, or both.

Essays with literary value, unlike non-esthetic polemics from popular magazines, need only be actively read to begin that process. Literature's heuristic capacity is an inherent requirement for powerful heuristics like Burke's Pentad, and that capacity is explained by Poulet's concepts of immersion and identification in reading. In addition to encouraging the kind of thinking these concepts entail, the literary essay places the thought in a composition-oriented context. One gets the form with the concept. Consider Burke's definition of form as "an arousing and fulfillment of desire...one part of a work...leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence." Certainly, an essay manipulates and instructs its reader through form as well as content. They both require thought.

I'm not arguing against the powerful conceptual discoveries rhetoricians have made recently. I'm just advocating that we don't overlook one of the oldest and most applicable. The essay introduces the student to the world of ideas; reading makes him part of that world. Ideally he should experience creating ideas from the printed page and become excited about ideas in that context. If he doesn't—and he doesn't as often as we would like—it's probably because this behavior is new to him and needs to be encouraged, even demonstrated for him, by a teacher and class making such reading a group pursuit. Approaches of this type have been advocated recently for writing students by Mina Shaughnessy in Errors and Expectations and by Carol Laque and Phyllis Sherwood in A Laboratory Approach to Writing,9 but they haven't been applied to the reading process as much as they might be.

There are, of course, other benefits to be gained from increased reading. Through careful reading, even rereadings that allow him to notice details previously unseen, the student can expand his vocabulary, learn new words in their appropriate settings, and develop a sense of them that will lead to actual use. Exposure to the conventions of the writer's world through his role as critical reader has other benefits as well. Through glossing and oral reading, he can come to understand and gain access to those conventions in a way that bridges the gap between speaking and writing. Untangling his
Of course, more academic assignments, like probing the allegorical possibilities of the scene in which he feeds the gazelle in the public gardens, or the contribution of tone to meaning, are numerous and obvious alternatives. No one could doubt that probing Thoreau’s aphoristic profundities can provide literary problems with depth enough to keep anyone interested. However, E. B. White in his essay “Walden” has made a “writing out of” assignment for himself, in the sense that he writes a letter to Thoreau about the changes, physical and economical, that have taken place since he formulated his philosophy there, telling him of “impediments” he never had to consider. And such assignments lend themselves to “writing out of” because they not only require the student to interpret, to go beyond the context, but to remain consistent too. The only restriction on the assignments you make should be this: they must be consistent with the rhetorical situation created by the reading process.

This restriction is not dictated by me but by the nature of essays themselves, by the literary experience, the phenomenon of reading. Essays may make use of techniques commonly associated with poetry and prose fiction. They may be models of classical organization principles, or of the latest grammar of style. They may be informative, entertaining, timely, “sure to turn kids on with their relevant issues.” But whatever else they may be, essays are the only literary genre that is primarily concerned with ideas. We criticize a poem that’s more didactic than evocative, or a novel wherein the character and plot serve exclusively as the grindstone for the author’s axe. But the essay is the product of a mind, whose voice is always heard, working on a subject, not a topic, consciously arguing, demonstrating, opening to discovery. The ideas and the voice, these must be responded to by the audience, not with concurrence alone but with counterstatement, extension, qualification. Such response brings the student into the rhetorical situation, but for it to occur, the student must first be introduced to this world where ideas are paramount. He must be helped to gain experience in getting and understanding ideas from the printed page. Then he can be encouraged to participate in the literary experience, to raise his own voice with an idea of his own, perhaps drawn from his reading and blended with his experiences, but not modeled on the essay he has read.

This foundation, basing the student’s writing on his reading, requires the teacher to create in the classroom a situation in which writing follows reading as a nearly natural process. That’s difficult. However, reading essays with the students, aloud, discussing and debating as you proceed together, engenders the kind of rhetorical situation you want better than always sending them home to read alone. From students’ immediate responses, or from your marginal notes, questions arise to facilitate interaction. For example, why only two cheers for democracy in B. M. Forster’s “What I Believe”? Are they indeed quite enough? I should think that in a country like ours, where the nature of democracy and its relationship to force, where dreams, American or otherwise, are so often institutionalized, this essay should raise questions about the ideas alone. Its style, so heavily dependent on British colloquialisms, on literary allusions, on terms differentiated by the capitals and lower case they begin with, as in the opening statement “I do not believe in Belief” — this style offers much to be explained to oneself, to be made personal, to be complained about.

Classic essays have a chimerical quality, much like fantasy and myth, and their appeal can often be rejected by good, literal-minded people, like many of our students. It’s not easy to write; it’s much easier to stay in the comfort of one’s hobbit-hole, eating six meals a day; never venturing among ideas that appear so tedious at first, slow-moving like Ents, and never risking the peril of criticism by Orcs or examination of one’s complacent attitudes by Wizards. The incentives to write must be strong ones.

But I’m rambling and I said I would not talk about pet techniques. I feel as if I’ve been defending my Hobbit’s traditional principles all over the new lands. 12 So maybe it’s time to give up the struggle. I’m not Gandalf the White, nor was meant to be. I only hope someday to integrate reading and writing so that my freshman will rise from his seat feeling a new power.

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair.

For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise.

I realize that such might be an opiated dream, but this essay isn’t for anyone else after all. It’s just my own way of rediscovering what I already had. The three rings I wanted are reading, writing, and rhetoric.

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NOTES


2 David Evans, “Heuristics: Some Clinical Help for Miserable Midwives,” unpublished MS submitted to a seminar in the Rhetoric of Written Composition at the University of Southern California.


5 Iser, p. 297.


8 Warnock, quotations in this paragraph are from pp. 14 and 15.


