

THE SOCIALIZATION OF WRITING TEACHERS

"I never start my paper at the beginning; an outline would be out of the question. I write parts of the paper first, often on whatever I have with me when inspiration strikes--a paper towel, the back of my grocery list. But I wouldn't tell my students that."

And she would not tell her students this secret simply because she was trapped by the conventional wisdom of our profession. She felt she was bound to uphold the conventions of writing instruction which many textbooks pronounce: that writing proceeds in an orderly linear fashion, from formal outline to topic sentence to the summary paragraph. She finds herself divided; her individual process of writing conflicts with the way she thinks she should teach others to write. And she is not alone.

Her statement was like many made the first night of our class--a practicum in the teaching of writing, a one-semester course required of all graduate students who are simultaneously teaching for the first time in New York University's Expository Writing Program. We had asked the class to jot down a specific ritual they follow when a paper is assigned to them. They wrote without hesitation, often laughing as they recalled their own behaviors as writers, those idiosyncracies like needing a yellow legal pad or a glass of wine to see them through.

Our next question, however, stumped them: "How can you transfer your behavior into a writing strategy for your students?" We doubt it was the question itself that puzzled them. The students selected for the program are all quite intelligent individuals, usually with teaching experience in a field other than writing instruction--English and American literature, music and media ecology, near Eastern studies and economics. Rather, their confusion stemmed from the idea that their processes as writers could in any way be meaningful to someone else. Their model for teaching came from the courses they were taking, courses where there is a body of material or content to be studied and learned: the teacher lectures or leads a discussion. The idea of looking at their own processes--the way in which they go about writing--was completely new. And so our task began, one of helping teachers redefine themselves as writing teachers on the basis of who they are as writers.

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Too often this need for a radical shift in perspective is overlooked in teacher training as mechanical solutions and procedures for teaching writing are magically unveiled. Such an approach, however, would hardly have been appropriate in our case, working as we do in the context of the NYU Expository Writing Program, a two semester sequence in writing for all undergraduates, staffed almost entirely by graduate teaching assistants. Each semester the students complete eight compositions, including several that require outside research. Each paper must go through at least three drafts, the first of which is submitted for peer group review and commentary. The program has no required texts or syllabi, but instructors are encouraged to share with each other successful assignment sequences and classroom lessons as they are developed. This interaction is facilitated by both the one-semester practicum and the ongoing supervision the instructors receive from the full-time English Education faculty who work with the Expository Writing Program.

The major theoretical underpinning of the program is that writing is a recursive process: writers discover their meanings in the act of writing; ideas take shape in the ongoing dialectic between the intentions of the writer and the demands of a reader. At the heart of such a recursive process is the notion of revision. Thus, a series of drafts or reformulations are needed to decrease the discrepancies between what the writer wants to express and what the reader perceives in the text. Therefore, helping students find ways of revising a piece of writing becomes central to instruction. All assignments go through multiple drafts where revision can be based on teachers and students responding as readers to texts. In such a setting, it is important that writing teachers also remember their own experiences as writers, understand their own anxieties about writing, their desire for perfection, the false starts, the awkward sentences--processes and feelings we all share as writers as we fulfill our need to communicate.

Based on this philosophy of writing, a typical NYU writing workshop class begins with some stimulus to write--a problem derived from issues that students face: a current campus problem, conflicting interpretations of a text, a personal ethical dilemma. The students write, read what they have written to their writing groups, receive reader response to what they have written, revise, receive teacher response, revise again. This process is repeated throughout the semester. All the work is collected in a portfolio and evaluated at the end of the semester. In sum, the writing program tries to instill the natural process of writing: that writers' first drafts are seldom their final ones and that writing must meet the expectations of readers.

Because the writing program treats writing as an organic process, the teachers are not compelled to give students structural models to emulate, such as the traditional forms of classification or comparison/contrast. Rather than having students write five paragraph themes and slot information into boxes, teachers encourage students to grapple with ideas, allowing content to dictate form. The study of arrangement, the need to elaborate or to reorder, springs from the students' own struggle with questioning readers and the need to communicate their ideas to their peers and

the academic community.

We cannot, however, assume that these assumptions are shared if the teachers have not come to them independently. Because most teachers have experienced traditional schooling--that one must learn grammar first, then sentences, and finally paragraphs and essays; that one lectures about form; that every two weeks an essay is required, one structured around a given form--new teachers are often bewildered by NYU's Expository Writing Program. We have stripped away every assumption they have about how writing is to be taught. They do not know what to do in the classroom, and they often do not feel comfortable doing it our way. That is precisely the reason we begin as we do, by first discussing how we as writers write and what this can mean for our students.

We follow up this initial in-class writing and discussion by having our teachers do a more detailed analysis of their behaviors as writers. This assignment is deliberately made as wide-ranging as possible in order to tap the talents and personalities that make up the class. In giving this assignment, we begin by clarifying the distinction between retrospective macroanalysis and immediate microanalysis. In the former case we encourage our teachers to think back on how they developed as writers. What are their earliest memories as writers? Did any teacher or other person have any strong positive or negative influence on their writing. Did they ever keep a journal? What kind of school sponsored and/or creative writing have they done in the past? What are their attitudes toward writing? Is their image of themselves as writers positive or negative? In some instances, this line of questioning sends our teachers back to their early writing or journals, some perhaps having been buried in family attics for years, only to discover earlier triumphs, fears, and disappointments. This retrospective macroanalysis also refers to the larger patterns they might go through in completing a longer piece of writing for themselves, for school, or for the real world, keeping track of everything from their first glimmerings of an idea to the handing in of a final product. Here they might record a number of items: their plan for generating ideas, their research strategies, their revising procedures, or even their quirks like typing standing up or using longhand on lined yellow legal pads.

The micro level, on the other hand, refers directly to an audio-taped monitoring of some time span when the writer is actually setting words to paper. This research technique, known as protocol analysis, comes from the "composing aloud" approach being utilized in much current writing research. While writers compose, they speak their so called stream of consciousness into the tape recorder. Admittedly, this act of talking-writing is not possible for all--for some severely interferes with their ability to write. For those who can relax with this technique, it is possible to answer a number of interesting questions about their fluency in writing. Are phrases or clauses continually reconsidered or is there a smooth flow through all of the sentences making up a paragraph? Is the writer easily distracted? How does the writer discover new meaning connections as sentences are being composed? Does having to get a sentence "just right" ever hamper the over-all flow? For how long a period can the writer write

effectively? Although we indicate the detail with which such microanalysis can be carried out (see, for instance, Sondra Perl's coding scheme in *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13, No. 4 [December 1979], 317-336), our purpose here is merely to expose as many of the class as possible to this procedure so that they might at the appropriate moment use it as a diagnostic tool for themselves or for their own students.

After the papers are written (the suggested length is seven to ten pages, but many students make this assignment their own and report back with more than twenty pages), we share our discoveries with each other. Making the process self-conscious and finding out that other writers share the same anxieties and doubts is illuminating to beginning teachers. Not one writer's paper sprang fully edited from the pen. Not one writer followed a formal outline to fruition. All had struggled; all had been frustrated at various points; all had discovered something that they did not know they were going to write until they had actually begun. They procrastinated, desired perfection, needed an audience, had quirks. The teachers found that they and their students shared the same difficulties: writing is not easy for anyone; it is deliberate; it is idiosyncratic; yet when the right connections are made, it can be deeply rewarding.

In order to nurture this new sense of a shared community of writers, all of whom have similar needs, we ask the teachers to form writing groups with other members of the class. Groups of no more than five teachers meet weekly for one hour to read their work to each other, work written for this class or any other that they might be taking. The group provides an audience, one that can reflect back to the writer what it perceives the piece of writing to be saying, what the attitude of the writer is, and what expectations the writer has built up in the reader. The group's interactions form the foundation for demonstrating appropriate responses to their own students so that they, in turn, can profit from their peer writing groups. The teachers discover where in the composing process writers need support for their efforts and how to withhold evaluation until the appropriate moment. In other words, what is most useful to a writer is not a deductive summary judgment. Rather, writers must inductively reach their own conclusions regarding whether or not a piece of writing is working on the basis of the descriptive paraphrases generated by their peers. For example, if the peers say that the paper makes a point that the writer did not intend, then the writer must sort through this "dissonance" while reworking the original draft.

Responding carefully as a reader in a group parallels responding carefully to students when writing comments on their texts. Traditional evaluative modes of commentary, which often send contradictory messages, do not serve the purpose of stimulating rewriting and rethinking. Teachers must understand that students will revise based on what the instructor points out as the key areas worth further attention. If, for example, a teacher writes after a particular sentence "comma splice" and "wrong word" and then next to the entire paragraph comments, "This paragraph does not fit in with your entire piece," the student will be confused, not knowing where the revision should begin. Does the writer "fix" the sentence-level

problems in hope that this will clear up the noted misplacement of the paragraph or does the student omit the entire paragraph and disregard the teacher's other comment? New teachers readily grasp this point and they quickly learn to order their responses according to a hierarchy of concerns. It is harder but nonetheless crucial to help teachers find alternative ways of articulating responses so that they will not be directives ("Move this paragraph nearer to the beginning and order your paper the following way...") or vacuous ("Think more about what you are thinking").

To accomplish this end, we do several commenting exercises. First, teachers write an in-class paper. Papers are then exchanged so that no one knows whose paper they are commenting on. The teachers comment on the papers and return them. The teachers then explain how they feel as writers when they receive the kind of commentary that they have. Most often they feel that the comments have not respected the integrity of the writer, have missed the point of the paper, or have pointed out extraneous things. The few comments which are appropriate, those comments which tend to address the lapses of logic within the text and thus stimulate the writer to rethink an issue, become the starting point for our next exercise.

In this exercise we bring in three student papers, all having been commented on by three different teachers. The individual comments, however, are placed on separate cards and are not written on the text. The teachers in the class must decide what comments were written by which teacher and for which text. Traditional modes of commenting like "be specific" or "wrong word" or "Is this what you mean" or "Needs more development" can be placed on all the writing because they are not text specific. On the other hand, comments made in direct response to the logical entailments in the piece of discourse are readily matched with the appropriate composition. Such comments, by necessity, change from piece to piece because the teacher/reader is addressing the specific issues and referents within each piece. Rather than saying "be specific" to the sentence "All colleges are alike," the teacher would register her confusion to what the writer had said: "In what ways are colleges alike? size? student body? course offerings?"

Having teachers look carefully at new strategies for responding shows them alternatives are possible. Our third exercise, then, is an on-going one in which we explore alternative commenting strategies. For example, for several weeks we begin each class with a short piece of writing that the class reads. We ask them to find the key problem in the text which, if revised, would improve the piece of writing. They then formulate a comment which may stimulate revision. The comments are critiqued by the class and on occasion by the student who wrote the essay. This procedure not only helps the teachers find alternate strategies but also provides them with a way of seeing just how their comments affect the hearer.

One commenting procedure that we found invaluable derives from a model of teaching writing developed by Ann Berthoff and Dixie Goswami which emphasizes the notion of dialogue in the composing process. Since the purpose of any commentary is first to dramatize the presence of teachers as concerned readers and second to instill in writers that they too must

be active readers of their own texts, we designed a strategy for commenting which has the students make explicit their intentions as they reread their initial drafts. In a wide column to the right of the essay, students set up dialogues with their texts, stating what it is they are trying to say, what language they are using that enforces their messages, and what they expect the reader to be thinking at strategic moments in the discourse. The teacher then has an inroad into the thinking processes of the student. The teacher can see what the student was intending and point directly to the disparity between the student's stated purpose and the reader's interpretation or understanding of the text.

The success of teacher-written dialogue with students is directly related to the success of the ongoing classroom dialogue. The language that teachers use with the class sets the tone for the acceptance of instruction. Since our pedagogy demands that the teacher is no longer the center of the classroom, often new teachers again need new models. So that the teachers can actually observe their dialogue with their classes, we ask our teachers to tape-record a portion of their class and transcribe and critique themselves. This act, simply of hearing, ironically, for "the first time," their interaction with students, provides the teachers with a way of distancing themselves from the dialogue in which they were initially engaged. They become observers rather than participants. The transcribing process provides yet more distance. Writing down their statements allows them to see just how much or how little they have dominated the classroom exchange. The critique demands further reflection. Here they not only interpret for themselves what was actually taking place, but they also have the opportunity to make new discoveries: to see where communication may have broken down, to see where connections were made with students, to see communication in action. By listening to themselves--to those junctures where they thought that they had understood a question at the time but on reflection may have missed the point, where they did not give the students enough time but went ahead and answered the question--they discover new approaches to both opening up and directing the ongoing classroom dialogue.

Once our teachers have analyzed their tapes, we visit their classes. Our observations are nonevaluative. We seek to give the instructors support and open the way for them to question their teaching methods. We try to observe an entire writing instructional unit, from its inception to the completion of a writing assignment. We meet individually with the instructors before actually going into the class to find out the goals of the assignment, the method the teachers are going to use to meet the goals, and the context in which the teachers want us to observe what it is they are doing. During the actual classroom observations, we take copious descriptive notes of what it is we see, what questions the teaching strategy raises, and what we see as the student response to the teaching method. After completion of the observation, we share our written critiques of the unit with the teachers and discuss with them what we have observed. Since the critiques are nonevaluative, we trust that these observations initiate a collegial dialogue. We enter this relationship as supporters, keeping the door

open for questions not only from us concerning what we have seen but also from the teachers concerning our interpretations of the events happening in the class. The teachers have indicated that this dialogue provides them with a means of explaining and thus clarifying for themselves what it is they are doing. The process of transforming an exercise into a way of learning, a discussion into a meaningful writing assignment, a question into an exploration of a concept is what they want to have happen. From our vantage point as observers, we can see things happen that they may have missed because their attention was directed on another matter. Yet from their previous interactions with their students, they have an intuitive, if not conscious, awareness of strategies which will or will not work. The exchange, then, that we have in our discussions with teachers allows both of us to explore teaching in action.

The casting of assignments is yet another critical area we consider with our teachers. Again we begin inductively by asking our teachers to bring in for analysis the most recent assignment they gave their own students. After the members of the class have exchanged their assignments we have everyone write briefly on three questions related to the assignment they now have before them: 1) What audience and purpose have been set up by the assignment? 2) What is it you have to know or do in order to complete the assignment? 3) How committed would you be to writing this assignment?

In the class discussion that follows, we begin to see the range of problems which occur in framing adequate assignments. Generally in their assignments our teachers have assumed an "omniscient teacher" as reader, and the students' purpose in writing is merely to impress this teacher with their writing. The teacher, in formulating the assignment, did not have in mind some specific communicative or aesthetic goal. These shortcomings are highlighted when we ask the teachers to reflect on their own school-initiated writing experiences, contrasting those papers they had written to have a specific influence on a specific reader and those papers done perfunctorily to complete the assignment. We then ask them to attempt to reformulate their assignments, keeping precise purposes and audiences in mind.

Further discussion in this area leads to a consideration of the scope of assignments ("To complete this assignment properly, I would have to know how to interview people, and I have never done this before"), the arbitrary and fragmented nature of assignments ("Describe in detail everything that you see before you on your desk"), and the lack of involvement the student feels toward many assignments ("I don't really want to write on abortion anymore"). Throughout all this discussion we realize there are no easy solutions, that what might work in one instance may be a dismal failure in the next. Yet in the midst of this relativism, we get the teachers to see the importance of continually doing their own assignments alongside their students and of continually assessing their assignments, trying to ascertain how they are being perceived by their students. This means that during the course of a semester, a student needs to encounter a number of writing tasks, each of which will be successful to the extent to which it

engages the students' intentions and commitments.

To pursue our exploration of the relationship between assignments and committed student writing, our teachers read *Uptight* by Ken Macrorie, *The Plural I* by Bill Coles, and *Writing Without Teachers* by Peter Elbow. Each book in its own way addresses the issue of genuine student writing as opposed to "Engfish" or "Theme Talk," besides considering what role the teacher might take towards students in class. It must be emphasized that these texts were selected not to give our students a "method" to follow; rather, our point is to foster an inquiring, exploratory approach toward teaching. In this respect, all three authors are powerful advocates of educational positions that in turn force our own teachers to define themselves as writing teachers. While many of our teachers applaud the authors' attack on the vacuous mechanical nature of most school writing just as many are alarmed at the apparent laissez-faire attitudes of Macrorie and Elbow and at Coles' supposed glee in "beating up on" students. In working through these contradictions, we force students to return to the texts and resolve for themselves the way teaching style influences the developing student writer.

The series of thirty assignments that Coles presents in *The Plural I* offers our teachers a model for constructing assignments that are integrated and sequenced around specific definitional issues their classes are being asked to address. The kinds of texts and questions Coles presents to his students force them to reexamine pat assumptions about the nature of their personal and social experiences and the conventions (especially linguistic) that appear to govern them. In this set of assignments, Coles seeks to explore how the term "professional" is contrasted with the term "amateur" and what ethical stance is taken toward experience when one chooses to talk the way one does. Coles' questions appear to have answers (Assignment 3: "What are your aspirations so far as professionalism and amateurism are concerned? Are there senses in which you would like to be a professional? an amateur? Are there senses in which you would not like to be a professional? an amateur? Professional what? Amateur what?), but there are no formulas, as his students quickly discover. Only those responses that create some rich linguistic texture connecting and mediating the self and the world are adequate. Writing in Coles' sense moves beyond mere "correct" communication; it is literally an earned act of self-definition. And it is the interconnectedness of the assignments, all of which pose paradoxical problems that impresses on Coles' students the need to take responsibility for their own learning and the quality of their own prose. His students make these connections during the term because a community of concern has been established: all the students are using writing to engage a common theme, one which is never completed in the sense that most fragmented assignments are. An insight reached in one paper, then, can be tied to another in a later paper. Writing in this sense is not a skill; it's an education.

We next ask our teachers to produce their own series of five to ten Coles-type assignments. This forces them to consider for the first time how one piece of writing might lead to a second piece of writing; that

writing is not just organizing information; that it is infusing organized information with some personal significance. To get this point across, we distinguish between assignments that are "topics" (Write on anything that interests you such as baseball or the fashion industry) and assignments that turn these topics into "issues" with all the resulting tension, conflict, and contradiction which reflect our real attraction to things (Why should Dave Winfield get more money than Reggie Jackson? or Who should dictate what you wear?). The point is not simply to get students to take a simple-minded advocacy stand; rather, it is to get them to wonder at the complexities of relationships once the world of decision-making is opened up as a possibility.

A second major concern growing out of constructing Coles-type assignments is the reciprocity between reading and writing. Writing, we stress, cannot really be taught in isolation from the critical reading of some outside texts, for the ability to judge one's own attempts at creating sentences grows only as one works in the transactive presence of the sentences of others. As our teachers try to frame appropriate questions for the passages they have chosen to relate to a particular extended issue, they come to appreciate once again the problematic nature of texts and how all writing courses must in turn be reading courses.

Upteach and *Writing Without Teachers* serve the important function of tying together a number of the practical and philosophical issues we have been dealing with in the teaching of writing. First is the notion that writing is discovery, that writers seldom set out to say already formed ideas, slotting concepts into rhetorical boxes. Instead, writers find ideas by writing. The technique of free-writing (writing spontaneously, never allowing the pen to leave the paper) eliminates the artificial pressures of highly structured writing tasks, pressures which often cause undue anxiety in writers.

Most of our teachers, practiced as academic writers, had never used this technique themselves. Therefore, when we had them practice free-writing at the beginning of class one evening, many wrote what might be classified as an "exam question," a highly structured well-ordered paragraph. It took the teachers several three-minute writing sequences to free themselves of the constraints of learned writing behavior. In other words, they had to learn to relax, to let their minds wander from one idea to the next. The benefit they gained from this exercise was the freedom to explore, to find writing as a way of learning.

Finally, our teachers perceive that a writing classroom is, indeed, a "teacherless" classroom. Writing is a communicative enterprise; only in the transactions between writer and text and reader and text is meaning conveyed. Teachers do not have knowledge to impart, nor do they hold the answers to how the writing can be improved. Only the writers can discover new ways of clarifying their meanings, and this discovery can be quickened and enhanced by hearing the questioning reader. Teachers, then, are collaborators, readers among a group of readers, persons who reflect back to the writer what they have heard, what they expect to hear, what they wish to know more about. They are not authoritarians, guardians of standard written English, correctors of essays but participants in a community of

writers, taking a stance which reinforces both teacher's and students' writing groups.

To bring together the various strands of the semester, we ask our students to write a concluding five page paper addressing the issue: "What is it you are doing finally when you are teaching someone how to write?" Their statements end up reflecting both our philosophical and practical concerns for the semester. In most instances, this is the first opportunity for them to consider their *raison d'être* for teaching. Our best teachers begin to move beyond the clichés of all those well-intentioned methods texts on writing which view the student writer in static terms and the writing process as linear and mechanical. All the complexities of the dynamic student and the recursive writing process are revealed in the honest ambiguities of our teacher's own prose, and these papers become important testimonies to their commitment to a new stage of socialization.