Newsletter
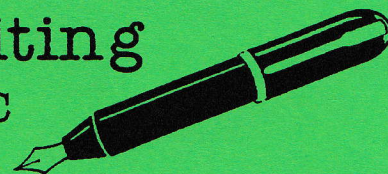
Conference on Basic Writing
A special interest group of CCCC

RETHINKING BASIC WRITING:
CCCC '98 All-Day Workshop

On Wednesday, April 1, the Conference on Basic Writing will host an all-day workshop focusing on issues critical to the field of basic writing, with the intention of giving basic writing professionals a setting in which to discuss emerging areas of interest. The workshop, "Rethinking Basic Writing," will feature presentations and break-out sessions on a wide range of topics, including the impact that varied institution-specific profiles of basic writers can have on curricular design, the use of portfolios in basic writing classes, basic writing pedagogy for second-dialect and second-language learners, the emerging field of working-class studies as it applies to basic writers, and the increasing need for basic writing programs to launch public relations campaigns that educate and inform the general public and the legislature.

Here is a list of the workshop presenters and their presentations:

- William Jones, Rutgers University, "Teaching the Basic Writers among Us: Profiles

Reading and Writing
Bill Robinson
San Francisco State University

Poor writers are poor readers. We don't know whether there's a cause-effect relationship between these failures or whether they are correlative, but if, in our basic writing classes, we don't tackle reading as well as writing, we leave our students without a skill they need and make our task as writing teachers more difficult than it needs to be.

It is surely a truism by now that reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. Creating a text is impossible when one doesn't understand how a text works. Writers give readers signals about where their texts are going—e.g., introductions, topical indicators for paragraphs, signposts at the beginnings of sentences—but readers who don't understand these signals and the organizing principles behind them, who cannot locate main and supporting points, can't understand such texts. And if they can't understand them, they can't make them. The reading problem is rarely a decoding problem. It's a comprehension problem.

Poor readers read acontextually. Here is the first sentence of a paragraph in a study

showing that handgun ownership is dangerous: "Critics of handgun control have long claimed that limiting access to guns will have little effect on the rates of homicide, because persons who are intent on killing others will only work harder to acquire a gun or will kill by other means." Students typically read this sentence as representing the authors' views, even though that contradicts not only the tenor of the study but the rest of the paragraph, which is a refutation of this view. We may expect such readers to write propositions that don't follow and conclusions that have little to do with the essays they conclude. This is not a matter of learning six kinds of introductions, seven kinds of paragraphs, thirteen kinds of transitions, and eight kinds of conclusions.

But though reading is the problem, reading classes prerequisite to writing classes are not the solution. We do not learn performance skills in increments that we put together later. We do not learn how to ride a bicycle by taking, first, lessons in balance, next lessons in pedaling, and finally lessons in steering. We learn by trying to ride—at first poorly and only with help, then somewhat better, then well. Coaches know that the only way to be a better basketball player is to play basketball. You can and should practice subskills—dribbling, shooting, footwork, passing—but doing that stuff without, at the same time, playing the game is a waste of time. We teach our athletes better than we teach our basic writers.

In college, basic writers/readers can learn to think and to write by a combination of receiving direct instruction and doing lots of reading. If they learn to create texts by both learning how texts are created and doing the same thing themselves, they will improve as both readers and writers, and advances in each skill will reinforce advances in the other.

Some dim awareness of this seems to be emerging in an increasing number of texts "with readings," essays tacked on at the end of textbooks. But this doesn't solve the problem, or even address it. If students are asked to read a clutch of essays as a kind of general source of inspiration, two undesirable things usually happen. One is that they don't do it (because they can write the paper without doing it), or they do it but they don't get anything out of it (again because they don't have to). Students must write on assignments that require them to use what they've read. Only in that way will they start learning to read with accuracy and comprehension. Such assignments, if well designed, should also bring the world of the university into the basic writing classroom, where it surely belongs. Reading research has shown that summary writing is one of the most effective ways of improving reading comprehension, and every BW class should incorporate it. Rereading for main points is another effective method.

My students have just finished reading about how 17th century Puritan families were organized and why they were organized that way. Having done their reading, they then had to return to the readings in groups of three and give me the main points so I could put them on the board. They understood that this material would form much of the substance of their next essays, so they worked at it.

The assignment is to compare families today with Puritan families, to explain the values that determined the structure of the Puritan family and thus what we have lost since Puritan times. So after the rereading/board work, I had them work in their groups on two questions: 1) We now know that their religion determined the organization of Puritan families; what principle

(Reading and Writing, continued)

or principles do you think determine the organization of ours? 2) What have we gained and what have we lost since the 17th century in our families?

Their conclusions were insightful and perceptive. Next, they will bring trial outlines of their papers, and we will put them on the board and critique them, shooting for papers that will progress in an orderly and logical way to whatever conclusion each student wants to come to. After that, they will bring in rough drafts for peer review, using criteria sheets provided, the focus again on organization and content. (They work on their sentence skills through sentence-combining and their errors through individual exercises.)

These students have read adult texts and understood them. Now they will create their own, using a combination of what they've learned and their own insights. They will also have advanced both their reading and their writing skills. And that's what I'm aiming for.

Conference on Basic Writing, SIG Meeting

CCCC Convention

Thursday, April 2, 1998
6:45 p.m. - 7:45 p.m.

While we enjoy complementary beverages, cheese and fruit, we will share our ideas about Basic Writing. The board members will be there to hear about your interests concerning our group. You can find the room in your CCCC's program.

(CCCC '98 All-Day Workshop, continued)
and Approaches"
- Kathleen Yancey, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, "Using Portfolios in the Basic Writing Classroom"
- Gary Tate, Texas Christian University, "Using Working-Class Literature in the Basic Writing Classroom"
- Terrance Collins, University of Minnesota, "Basic Writing Programs and Access Allies: Finding and Maintaining your Support Network"
- Kate Mangelsdorf, University of Texas at El Paso, "Second Language/Second Dialect Students in Basic Writing Classrooms"

—Gerri NcNenny, co-chair of CBW
University of Houston, Downtown

Students, Teachers, Readers
Cynthia Gwyn Hicks
Chabot College

What do good readers do that poor readers don't do? As Bill Robinson suggests in his article above, good readers recognize text organization. They also infer logical connections between ideas in a text, supplying connectors even when the text does not (Marshall and Glock, 1978-79 in Pearson and Camperell 454). In addition, good readers often bring more background knowledge to the reading than poor readers do.

Having the schemata noted above allows good readers to make predictions about a text. They go on to test the accuracy of their predictions as they read, which enhances their comprehension and recall. (Goodman in Tierney and Pearson 571).

Both good and poor readers seem to know when a problem with comprehension exists, but good readers, who use meaning-based cues to check their comprehension, are better able to identify the source of a problem and choose an

appropriate strategy for solving it (Block 329, 336-337).

What can we college teachers do to help poor readers become more proficient? When we introduce reading assignments, we should tell students the purpose of the assignment, tell them how they will use the information. We also should involve students in activities that will help them discover relevant background information. We need to help students see how the text is organized. We should question and paraphrase texts so students can learn from our example (Brown et al. 769), and we should urge recalling, discussing, and writing of main and supporting ideas. We should engage students in activities that encourage them to draw inferences, to make predictions and comparisons, and to consider cause-effect (Smith, 1961 in Brown et al. 761), as well as to see connections and, to echo Robinson, "to use what they've read" (2).

Works Cited

Block, Ellen L. "See How They Read: Comprehension Monitoring of L1 and L2 Readers." TESOL Quarterly 26 (2): 319-343.

Brown, Ann L., A. S. Palinscar, and B.B. Arbruster. "Instructing Comprehension-Fostering Activities in Interactive Learning Situations." *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading.* Ed. Robert B. Ruddell, Martha Rapp Ruddell, and Harry Singer. Newark: International Reading Association, 1994. 757-787.

Pearson, P. David and K. Camperell. "Comprehension of Text Structures" *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading.* Ed. Robert B. Ruddell, International Reading Association, 1994. 448-468.

Robinson, William. "Reading and Writing." *Newsletter: Conference on Basic Writing* 13 (2): 1-3.

Tierney, Robert J. and P.D. Pearson. "Toward a Composing Model of Reading." *Language Arts* 60 (5): 568-581.