WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

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THE WRITING PROCESS:

A RESOURCE FOR THE WRITING CENTER*

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In a way, this is one of the easiest articles I ever tried to write. It also has been one of the most difficult. And both the ease and difficulty of the writing job are natural extensions of the burgeoning writing centers movement and of the resources available for writing centers.

If I were going to write about resources for the writing center a decade ago, the situation would have been much different. In 1972, people trying to establish new writing centers would not be able to subscribe to The Writing Center Journal, or The Journal of Basic Writing, or the Writing Lab Newsletter, or The Journal of Remedial and Developmental Education, though they might have read the first issue of Freshman English News. In 1972, we would not be able to begin zeroing in on the nature of a writing center by reading Joyce Steward's 1975 ADE Bulletin article, "Learning the Laboratory Way," the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 1976 Learning Skills Centers Report, Carol Lacque and Phyllis Sherwood's A Laboratory Approach to Writing (1977), Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (1977), or Kenneth Bruffee's and Donald Murray's most frequently quoted articles on collaborative writing and conferencing. In fact, in the bibliographies on "Background" and on "Conferencing" in Joyce Steward and May Croft's The Writing Laboratory: (Scott Foresman, 1982), only 8 of the 43 citations were written before 1973.

Today, of course, the situation is very different. There is a large and growing body of information about how to establish and manage writing centers. In fact, we have begun to arrive at the point where the number of competing pedagogic suggestions, claims for effective lab procedures, and expositions

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of theoretical underpinnings to instruction make a totally different sort of "resource" invaluable to the future of the writing lab. This resource is the analytic, coordinating, synthesizing intelligence of the well-informed writing center director.

The coordinating intelligence is essential because the resources we need to draw on for the future cover such a range of topics--social and cognitive and linquistic causes of writing problems, professional developments in rhetoric and writing process and pedagogy, techniques of management and evaluation and public realtions. It also is essential because the number of articles offering advice on such topics has entered the exhilarating if confusing period of growth that is has.

In "Balance Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers", I wrote that writing teachers need to develop "some theorectical framework with which to sort through the ideas, methodologies, and conflicting claims" of textbooks and journal articles, "so that they can more intelligently develop their own teaching styles and select compatible teaching materials" (CCC, May 1977, pp. 135 and 137.) And today, I feel strongly that developing integrating perspectives on this diverse field is one of the central priorities of an effective director of a writing center. I agreee with what Aviva Freedman writes in "A Theoretic Context for the Writing Lab": the development of research and theory in composition and the development of writing labs often have remained separate. "Too frequently, the teaching of writing in writing centers has not been placed within any theoretic context that would justify, for example, the choice of one methodology or technique over another" (Tutoring Writing, Scott Foresman, 1982, p.2). And so I think, to modify words by Frank D'Angelo, that all of us seriously involved in planning and administering writing centers need "to identify the most significant principles and concepts in the field which will make intelligible everything we do" (CCC, May 1976, p. 143).

I do not have the space--nor, I fear, the ability--to identify all these principles precisely. But I would like to suggest that the search for the concepts is one of the major resources for the writing center. And I would like, very briefly, to mention three interconnected principles that seem to have the power to make more intelligile what we do in writing centers. Here are the principles:

-Rhetorical concerns of audience and purpose are integral to the process of writing, and so they must be integral to the working of writing centers.

-Revision is a complex matter central to the whole process of writing.

-Writing is too dynamic a process of discovery and communication to be understood--or taught--by any neat formula.

That rhetorical concerns of audience and purpose are integral to writing processes, and so to effective writing and effective writing instruction, is clear in various articles that Linda Flower and/or John Hayes have written in the past several years--for instance, "The Cognition of Discovery" (CCC, Feb. 1980), " Cognitive Process Theory of Writing" (CCC, Dec. 1981), and "Writer-Based Prose: a Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing" (CE, Sept. 1979). Helping a student develop a sense of an audience to which he or she wants to communicate, it may seem obvious, is critical to most of what we may hope to

(to p. 7)

SISTER LORETTA & THE CHICKEN SOUP

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Each year, early in the semester, I ask my student-teachers to talk about a past learning experience that stands out in their minds. They might choose to describe a special teacher, or that wonderous memory of "wanting themselves to become a teacher," or to describe their first awareness of having actually learned something. As part of the seminar, I often recount one of my experiences. This article is one of them.

I must have been a puny or a clumsy kid. At least, I remember falling down a lot, into snow banks mostly. When I did, Sister Loretta would bring me into the little room behind the girl's lockers. I remember it being a tiny room with a long narrow row of radiators along the wall. Sister Loretta would have me take off my long brown stockings. She would cover me with a blanket. It was old and soft. I think it was plaid. Sister Loretta would hang my long brown wet stockings on those radiators and while they were drying we would sit and eat Lipton's chicken noodle soup out of plastic cups.

I was in the first grade and it was Sister Loretta who taught me both to read and to write. She was my teacher in the second grade too. I honestly can't remember the thrill of either of those learning; but I know that by the time my mother had sold the hotel we lived in and we had moved to an apartment on the west side of town it was third grade and I could both read and write.

I do, however, clearly remember the brown stockings, the long row of radiators and the Lipton's chicken noodle soup. I also clearly remember Jerry. Jerry was another first grader. He was like me in that he fell down a lot too. He was different in that he didn't learn to read or write. He could hardly talk and his head wobbled a lot as he tried to force the words out of a twisted mouth.

None of us really knew what was wrong with Jerry, we just knew something was. He had been around for three or four years, he was still in the first grade. And he was still falling down a lot.

It was a summer's day. Jerry had just fallen (or been pushed) from a swing. His face was lying in the gravel, his mouth was moving and twisted sounds were coming out of him. Most of the kids were laughing. No one went to help him. He just lay there. He was sort of looking across the yard. I had the spooky feeling he was looking right at me. His eye was very blue and very still and it was staring right at me.

I got up from whatever I was doing, swinging or playing hopscotch or whatever, and I started to go toward Jerry.

I knew everyone was watching me. I knew they might laugh at me like they laughed at Jerry. I knew no one ever helped Jerry. My face felt hot. I thought

I might start crying. I thought I might turn around and run for home as hard as I could.

But I didn't. I bent down and helped Jerry to his feet. I brushed the grass and bits of sawdust out of his hair. There was a piece of gravel sticking to his lip. I picked it out and suddenly Jerry and I were walking toward the small room behind the girl's lockers. Suddenly I knew Sister Loretta wouldn't mind. In fact I was suddenly sure that she liked Jerry. I knew from the tone of her voice when she spoke his name. I knew from the way they cleaned brushes together and walked in the playground holding hands. And suddenly I knew whoever was good enough to be a friend of Sister Loretta's was good enough to be a friend of mine.

It seemed time to share a bowl of chicken soup. We weren't Jewish. I'm pretty sure Sister Loretta wasn't Jewish either. But she sure knew about chicken soup.

Others have known it too . . .

Children Learn What They Live.

"Identification, like the self concept, is learned . . . . One learns to identify with others, depending upon the nature of his contacts with the important people in his life."
--A. Combs in Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming: A New Focus for Education (prepared by the ASCD 1962 Yearbook Committee), p. 55.

"The person who is in the process of becoming is . . . a human being in flow, in process, rather than having achieved some state . . . sensitively open to all of his experience--sensitive to what is going on in his environment, sensitive to other individuals with whom he is in relationship, and sensitive perhaps most of all to the feelings, reactions, and emergent meanings which he discovers in himself."
--C. Rogers in Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming, p. 235.

"Teachers not only educate (in a more narrow sense) through modeling: they also socialize their students by infusing attitudes and values about behavior. A teacher who models rationality, emotional maturity, politeness and good manners, and personal respect in his or her classroom behavior will tend to induce these qualities in the students."
--T. Good and J. Brophy, Looking in Classrooms (Harper and Row, 1978), p. 151.

WLA NEWSLETTER IS TEN YEARS OLD THIS SUMMER

WLA Newsletter began as a workshop on "Writing as a Liberating Activity" at the Conference of the NCTE College Section in the Summer of 1973. That, you may recall, was a relaxed summer-camp sort of conference. And a dozen teachers--along with workshop leaders Richard Gebhardt, Barbara Genelle Smith, and Ray Kytle--spent several afternoons thinking about the role of writing classes in freeing student creativity and outlook and about how to expand the instructional options of writing teachers. When the week was over, someone said, "It's too bad that this all has to end." And that was the start of WLA Newsletter.

THE WRITING CELL STIMULATES THINKING/LEARNING IN CONTENT-AREAS

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How often we say, "Teaching students to write is the responsibility of the composition department." Yet, how seldom do we non-English instructors ask ourselves can we contribute to the writing ability of our students? In truth we seldom use writing in our classes as a tool to help students to learn. We justify this by thinking that we must be trained to teach writing. Or, we complain that because they write so poorly, it is difficult to find out what they have learned. What writing we do assign usually only evaluates what the students have already learned. However, this evaluative type of writing does not actively promote student learning. And yet, learning is our desire for students in our classes.

If we content-area professors believe that thinking stimulates learning, then we must use the writing tool more effectively. Writing demands that the student think. Because this thinking process requires the organization of ideas, then the forming and reforming of ideas as we write and rewrite promotes thinking and ultimately learning. Janet Emig has pointed out this relationship between writing, thinking, and learning in her article "Writing As A Mode Of Learning" (CCC, May 1977, pp 122-127). She suggests that writing not only serves the function of informing but also the often overlooked function of discovering as one writes--of thinking.

As a content-area professor, I found that students actually learn more fully while writing to clarify their ideas, find relationships, synthesize, and communicate. As they write in the content-areas, they are thinking about the subject matter. Their thinking brings into play a wide range of cognitive skills and evolves ultimately into new learning. Because writing requires a subject to think about, writing and content are inseparable.

Just as inseparable, is our students' poor writing. It makes reading their work a demanding obstacle. Realistically, we were not trained to teach composition. Yet, we were ourselves trained to write. Our students can learn to write in our classes without the need for us to expend excess time teaching writing skills. At the same time we need not contend with more than a minimum of poor student writing which would distract significantly from the content of the writing.

One method for accomplishing these improved student writing skills is the writing cell. These cells are composed of groups of three sudents who evaluate each other's rough drafts prior to the rewriting of final drafts, which are to be evaluated by the instructor. By doing this, most student writing becomes technically presentable and the instructor can concentrate on content within the writing. The key element in this collaborative learning approach is structure. Each cell must be structured by the instructor. This can be accomplished by assigning a short writing sample to the students early in the semester. These samples are then ranked by the instructor, good, fair, and poor. The learning cell is then formed by placing one student from each rank in a cell.

These small groups seem to work best because they permit easy student-teacher role reversals and reduce non-participation by any group member. Active participation occurs as each group member assumes the teacher role and transforms his knowledge of writing in such a way as to help the others within the group.

Structuring the evaluation component does not require much class time either. A brief written guide of what to look for, usually attainable from the English Department, and a class explanation will suffice. Since the evaluation itself is done outside of the class, the students require only an occasional brief period to discuss the evaluations among themselves. This discussion often continues among the cell members after class and full use of the class time allotted to them. Once the sudents begin to understand the process, they become more proficient. The better sutdents begin to help their peers clean up their written assignments.

The resulting student work requires less time from the instructor who is now free to evaluate the content of each paper without time spent on grammar and structure. Writing across the disciplines increases student practice in writing and thus their proficiency.

Since the learning cell reamins together throughout the semester to function for every writing assignment, cooperation between members begins to replace competition. The students become responsible for the learning of their partners, shifting to a collaborative from of learning. Students become more willing to attempt the difficult task of writing when they sense the support of their peers.

This cooperative venture increases motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem among partners in the learning cell. Students seem particularly concerned with what they allow their peers to read. They actually perform the writing task with more care and diligence than when writing only for the instructor. The expansion of the students' audience beyond the instructor provides greater motivation to write effectively and to communicate their thoughts and ideas more clearly.

More importantly, if we do not also require students to write in our courses, we fail to make use of one of the most effective thinking-learning tools at our command: writing. Like writing, thinking must be practiced. We must expect our students to think about content and organize their thoughts by requiring writing. Most students find this thinking-writing-learning process to be difficult precisely because we neither expect nor require them to do it. The way for students to learn writing is not to teach it in our courses but to do it in all our courses as a powerful means for promoting thinking and learning in the content of the discipline they are studying.

KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

*The fundamental compatibility of craft and creativity in good writing and in effective writing instruction.
*The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
*Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

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ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA welcomes brief articles that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. More-or-less regular WLA Departments: Teaching Tips--2-3 page outlines of a unit or an approach to a specific teaching task. Interconnections--Examinations of approaches or materials of one level of writing class (e.g., college, high school, middle grade) from the perspective of a different level. Reading Lists--Recommendations, preferably annotated, of useful or stimulating reading. Student Perspectives.

accomplish in classes or tutoring sessions. But instructional emphasis on organization or support, on the fluent manipulation of language in sentence combining, on the mastery of spelling or documentation form or other apparently-separate subjects may tend to push this vital, motivating link to effective writing into the background. And so I think it is important that we use something like Linda Flower's contrasting terms, "Writer-Based Prose" and "Reader Based Prose," to help integrate for ourselves what we are doing when we assign freewriting or pre-writing activities, when we try to help students improve the logic and oraganization of their drafts, when we set up exercises or tutoring sessions to address flawed or unclear sentences.

Having said that, I already have moved on to the second concept: the centrality of revision to the processes of writing. Though texts typically describe revising as a terminal step in writing, the "viewing-again" or changing that is revision actually takes place constantly during composition, and it is intertwined with the writer's rhetorical sense of audience and purpose. James Britton addresses this fact in "Shaping at the Point of Utterance": "when we come to write, whatis delivered to the pen is in part already shaped . . . . But the intention to share . . . sets up a demand for further shaping" (Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, L+S Books, 1980, p. 63).
And Nancy Sommers describes revision as a process, occuring throughout writing, "in which writers recognize the resolve dissonance . . . between what a text does and what the writer thinks it should do, between the product and the conception" that the writer has of what the written product should be like (English Language Arts Bulletin, Winter 1980, p. 12).

Sensing such dissonance--in punctuation, nuance, phrase, organization, aptness of example, clarity of expression, and the like--is something experienced writers do, partly because they sense that, even as they are reaching into their own minds to write down what they are thinking, they also need to reach out to other people with their ideas. And as we work with less experienced writers in our centers, we can organize many of our instructional efforts toward the general end of helping students develop an intuitive ability to resolve discrepancies between what they want to say and what they are putting down on paper. For instance, when a student comes to the writing center with a completed, writer-based draft, we can accept it as valuable evidence that the writer is working out ideas and intentions for a paper; and we can help the wirter sense how those ideas and intentions could be made clearer to readers. With a student who is too blocked or insecure of assigned material to make an effective start, we can continue to hold reader-based prose as a long-term instructional goal. But we may need, first, to use a conference focused on a troublesome reading assignment, or a discussion of the issues implicit in a topic, or a guided free-writing exercise or more formal heuristic procedure to help the student begin a self-centered draft through which he or she can discover the meanings that may be worth communicating to others.

Such a flexible approach--seeing writing as a development of meaning for writer and reader--assumes the third principle: that the dynamic proceeses of writing cannot be captured in neat, teachable formulas. As Maxine Hairston puts it in "The Winds of Change," writing "is an act of discovery for both skilled and unskilled writers; most writers have only a partial notion of what they want to say when they betgin to write, and their ideas develop in the process of writing." This development does not occur methodically, but intuitively, Hairston goes on. Nor is the writing process usually linear, "moving smoothly in one direction from start to finish. It is messy, recursive, convoluted, uneven. Writers write, plan, revise, anticipate, and review throughout

the writing process, moving back and forth among the different operations involved in writing without any apparent plan" (CCC, Feb. 1982, p. 85).

Such a view of composing, of course, grows out of a large body of research that has developed in the same decade in which the other resources for writing centers have expanded so rapidly. And while it may be less instructionally convenient than the simplistic prescription to prewrite, write, and rewrite, this view can serve as a unifying core around which to organize much of what we do in our writing centers. Aviva Freedman illustrates this fact in "A Theoretic Context for the Writing Lab," the first article in Muriel Harris' collection, Tutoring Writing. Here, Freedman notes that writing is not linear but "essentially recursive, the reformulation . . . often revealing the need for more exploration, or the composing sometimes necessitating a return to the starting point." And though it means fighting "against the bias of conventional composition teaching," Freedman urges that much of our work in writing centers "should be directed toward helping students realize and respect . . . this need not just to revise but sometimes to go back to the beginning" (p.4).

Why do Aviva Freedman and Rick Gebhardt feel so strongly that the dynamic force of the writing process should be contral in writing centers? I would like to let Freedman's words provide an answer:

> In the last ten to fifteen years, . . . researchers and theorists have begun to look at the writing process as a whole and to concern themselves with strategies for encouraging or facilitating this process from its earliest stages. The structure of the writing lab allows for--in fact, encourages--such an emphasis. Because instruction is individualized and becuase teachers can help students with their writing at any stage in the composing process, writing centers are uniquely able to take advantage of the new research and theory. To maximize this potential, however, teachers and program administrators must develop their teaching strategies with some awareness of the nature of composing process, the points at which it is beneficial to intervene, and the appropriate strategies for intervention. (p.3)

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