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# "MY OWN VOICE": STUDENTS SAY IT UNLOCKS THE WRITING PROCESS

ABSTRACT: *This essay presents the quantified results of a questionnaire which asked students to distinguish the most helpful instructional factors and activities aiding their writing progress in a Story Workshop (R)-taught Comp I course. It explores the results—six items ranking 80% or better—and a strong confluence around personal voice. From a study of questionnaire responses, student portfolios and interviews, the author concludes that the student's own voice is his/her most accessible tool for progress in writing, that acceptance of the student's voice is crucial to such progress, and that the speaking-writing connection is the most important working principle for developing writers.*

> A report by the Educational Testing Service finds students are poor writers, they do not like to write and they like it less as they go through school.
>
> — *The New York Times* (6/12/91)

The problem of helping students experience more immediate encouragement and progress in their writing is one that concerns nearly every teacher of writing.

At Columbia College, Chicago, five Composition I classes completed a 142-item questionnaire designed to find out which instructional factors and activities students felt most helpful in

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changing and improving their writing. Questions were asked in several ways to minimize "teacher-pleasing" responses, and touched every instructional dimension of the course. Respondents' previous writing education overwhelmingly did not include "process" or "expressionist"-based approaches.

The computer-tabulated results quantifying these students' findings identified six activities, each of which no less than 80% of students responding found distinctly helpful to their development as writers:

1) Coaching to use your own voice
2) Hearing others' work read aloud in class
3) Hearing your own work read aloud in class
4) Conferencing with the instructor
5) Reading aloud in class of literary models
6) Class recall of your writing

Eighty percent and better found these activities useful, and 70% found nearly all of them enjoyable as well.

The following conclusions emerged from a study of this list and from overall questionnaire results:

a) The student's own voice is the single most useful and accessible tool for virtually all developing writers
b) Acceptance of the student's own voice is the key to immediate progress in the writing classroom
c) The connection between speaking and writing is the most important working principle for developing student writers

Students participating in this project have contributed to a rarity in the current professional literature: quantified evidence based on the learner's own observations of the effects of teaching on their own process. Such direct report of classroom practice precedes interpretation; therefore it provides a genuine substratum from which to test our theories. Teachers can and do infer much from classroom performance and written work; but such inferences will always be dangerously partial without the input of students, who alone are the intimate observers of their own experience.

A description of my study, its results, and the conclusions I draw are the subjects of this paper.

## Background

Every semester in my Story Workshop (R)-taught Comp I classes I saw strong advances—often leaps—toward writing that was clear, lively, and effective—even among "undeveloped" writers.[1]

I wanted to know if students could identify the teaching activities which triggered these advances. In particular, I wondered if our weak or "undeveloped" writers (those not as yet achieving effective writing results—see the definition for "effective writing" below) could pinpoint the activities or factors which helped them most as developing writers.

The questionnaire was designed to fine-tooth comb the methodologies of our semester-long, four-hour weekly Comp I class, in order to elicit from students frank responses about the value of class activities to their own process. Although I realized answers might tabulate in a total scattershot pattern, even a weak concurrence would give teachers something concrete with which to help their writing students move forward more quickly, and so combat the demon, discouragement.

In fact, not one but six items of strong concurrence, listed above, emerged.

"Coaching to use your own voice" was acknowledged as "most helpful," with a positive tabulation of 93%. This result is particularly noteworthy. A somewhat smaller sampling of the students in this project showed the idea of using your own voice in writing was outside of the educational experience of the large majority of participating students. Seventy-five percent of students questioned had *never* been told to use their own voice in their writing; the remaining 25%, except for one, said one or two teachers out of twelve years of schooling encouraged them to do so.[2]

## The Controversy over "Voice"

Students' vote of confidence in the use of their own voice comes at a time of intense, and occasionally heated, interest in "Voice" (e.g. Hashimoto, "Voice as Juice").

The "Voice" our Comp I students elected as "most helpful" is the individual voice—"my own voice"—which bridges speaking and writing, and which Schultz explored pedagogically in Story Workshop classes in 1965. This "Voice" is central by implication to Elbow's "Freewriting" (*Writing With Power*, 1981) and matches his "one's own voice" in "The Pleasures of Voice" (*Literary Nonfiction*), and that which Moffett (*Teaching the Universe*), Stewart (*The Authentic Voice*), Shiflett ("Story Workshop"), NCTE (*Students' Right*), Jordan ("Nobody Mean More"), Smitherman-Donaldson ("Toward a National Public Policy"), and others are in general agreement is the right description of the term, "Voice."

According to Schultz, individual voice—"my voice"—incorporates ALL the language of personal background, includes "the

powers of the conscious and unconscious . . . is the articulation of all perceptions . . . including the so-called non-verbal . . ." (*Writing from Start*, 1982, 85). The concept of "my voice" provides the basis for students to absorb the "literary voice" of published writers of which Booth (*The Rhetoric*) and Elbow speak, in order to individuate it in expression.

Such a point of departure for "Voice" places it usefully in Berlin's "Expressionist" or Center category (484). This "Voice" is never Hashimoto's non-Voice of Academia's "voiceless prose" (74), nor Ritchie's "constructed voice," like outfits assembled off a clothing rack (155). Rather it is Alber's "Voice" as "apprehensible presence" (7) making itself clearly and powerfully felt in the moment. This "Voice," the same in college freshmen as in great writers (Stewart 2), literary, common, and committee (Elbow 220) is "my *own* voice." Person-centered/generated, "the expression of the whole person, an extension of speech, an extension of the body" (Schultz, 1984, 86).

It is this "Voice" we coach for, and help our students to identify and develop when we ask them to "Listen to your voice . . . . Listen *for* your voice, discover your voice and its potential for expressing perception" (Shiflett 159).

Oral and written speech differ both in structure and mode (Vygotsky 98). Schultz' Story Workshop approach takes deliberate and conscious pedagogical advantage of the *connections* between speaking and writing. "The cultivation of speaking-writing connections through activities involving speaking, writing, reading, and listening enables language incorporation and development and connects seemingly contradictory concepts of voice," Schultz holds. (1990).

## Standards and Controls

Students from five Comp I classes participated in the study and became the control group or standard field of comparison against which three students, whom I designated as "undeveloped" writers, could be studied. The students so designated were drawn from my Comp I class participating in this project.

Three colleagues, veteran Comp I instructors, assisted me in developing the following working definition of "effective writing" as a standard to use in judging the semester's progress of these students' work:

> Effective writing engages the reader and moves him/her authoritatively toward a clearly conceptualized goal.

It was agreed that voice, audience, and sense of address, movement, imagery, and overall impact were essential factors of "effective writing," and that designated students' work would be evaluated for clear progress at the end of the semester on the basis of incorporation of these elements.

## Participants

Columbia College is a "distinctly urban, commuter institution" whose principal commitment "is to the arts, communications, and public information"[3] with an all-ages, all-walks-of-life student body.

My choice of "undeveloped" writers to follow for this study was based on their earliest semester's work, in which I noted the qualities of "effective writing," in accordance with our definition, were only minimally present.

Below are brief profiles of the "undeveloped" writers and their progress:

Student #1, female, African-American, in her early work, was torn between her urgency to tell what she was seeing in Black English Vernacular and her desire to write "correctly" in Standard English.

> On the way driving towards his house I finally decided to open my 1 pound bar of hershey's. Frantic that I was to eat it but lagging to pull it towards my mouth, I notice something that I thought to be crumbs moving on it. Now being that I couldn't see it due to the night driving lights flaring through the car, I asked my father to pull over in a gas station that was near by.

By mid-semester she was bringing the two desires strongly and successfully together, for example in this character description of her high-school friend Harold, "The Gump":

> I don't mean ordinary nappy hair, I mean African Genny man, knotted up, filthy dirty, nappy hair . . . It's not just his hair, it's also his glasses, headphones, shoes, clothes. There's nothing wrong with wearing glasses but, for some reason Harold's look goofy . . . When he pushes the glasses up he always squints and opens his mouth, showing the gap in his mouth.

Sure of perception, therefore sure of itself, her voice carries a well-sustained portrayal to the reader of "The Gump" as she sees him. By semester's end Student #1 had written convincingly in parody, fiction, letter story, essay, and journal forms. Her sense of

address and audience remained sharp, image conscious and bright, her voice strong and appropriate.

Student #2, also female, African-American, wrote in a Standard English that was generally correct except for the occasional common error. However, her writing strained at a kind of idealized speech, was weak in image, and failed to engage the reader. This example is from a journal entry:

> We worked around with the children to help them develop what talent they were trying to display. One day Joyce and I were sitting down in her house talking about the show and listening to the radio. Then this record Jealus girl by New Addition was being played. I came up with an idea that there should be a group in the talent show singing that record. Then five little boys came to mind, Irving Givens would be my lead singer, Leonard Taylor would take second vocals, Marquie Shamble would third vocals, Johnny Wright and Terrel Mosely would sing back up.

Within a month she was making real attempts to let go of the crippling aspects of the awkward attempts at Standard English that she learned in high school in favor of her own voice, incorporating standard BEV features and syntax. Here is an example from a daydream about preparations for her wedding:

> I had a 10:30 appointment to get my hair did . . . Margaret was her usual loud, holier than thou self. She was preaching and gossiping all at the same time. When we came in she was cross jumping between 3 people, she was washing one lady's hair, had one lady under the dryer, and had another lady sitting with conditioner on her hair. Margaret looked up and saw Sherry and I standing at the door, she stopped washing the one womans head and started doing a sanctified shout.

The teller's voice has made gains in authority, in vivid seeing in the service of dramatic scene, and in a sense of address and audience. These advances emerged about the sixth week of the semester and held firm thereafter. Confidence in what she was seeing and to whom she was giving the seeing became her norm.

Student #3, a male, White, wrote in Standard English generally free from gross punctuation and usage errors. Distance from the writing is betrayed by the flat polish of the voice and repetitive "padding" so familiar to Comp I instructors, as in these instructions for "How To Bat":

> When you look for a bat, place the bat that you have selected

. . . next to the side of your leg. If the end of the bat is parallel to your hipbone, the bat you have selected should be the right bat for you . . . First, take your right hand and grip the bottom part of the handle on the bat, just above the collar (the "lump" at the bottom of the bat), then take your left hand and place it below the right hand on the bat.

Like Student #2, Student #3's writing is limited in image and literary device; he does not play actively with his mental sights, a sign he does not trust his audience. In a month his imagistic seeing has sharpened, and he is expressing it more freely, in language that makes the audience see what he is seeing, as in this swift view of a neighborhood:

The sun had already cracked up over the trees that lined the streets a couple of blocks down

More confident of his own voice responding to his mental seeing, his sense of image continued to strengthen through the April rewrite of "Trip to Notre Dame" in which exaggeration heightened sights of the packed family automobile—"You couldn't even see out the windows"—towed before a crowd of *gapers* to Notre Dame stadium. Confident expansion into fiction and essay came from gains made in rewrites of this piece. "I wrote (it) three times and every time I dug more out of what was to be told," he noted on his questionnaire.

At the end of the semester, I reviewed the folders of these three "undeveloped" writers for steadily increasing use of the elements of "effective writing." All had made clear progress. My three collaborating colleagues who had mutually shared in developing our definition of "effective writing" for the purposes of this project, reviewed these three students' completed folders and each agreed with my findings.

**The Questionnaire**

The questions fell into equal categories of 1) perceptions of change and 2) perceptions of helpfulness. Spring semester questionnaires were administered by class instructors; those given in the Fall semester by myself.

Subject matter was approached from several directions to try to ensure reflection "in the round," and honest responses. For example, Questions 7, 8, 9, and 10 ask in different ways about perceived changes in levels of confidence about writing. Space for additional essay answers followed each question.

The prioritized "most helpful" list below came from students'

evaluations of Comp I activities in terms of service to their writing in both general and specific ways.

## Questionnaire Results

By high concurrence participants chose the six activities mentioned earlier as being of greatest service to and most responsible for the development of their writing effectiveness. Here are the prioritized percentages:

1) Coaching to use your own voice (93%)
2) Hearing others' work read aloud in class (92%)
3) Hearing their own work read aloud in class (90%)
4) Conference with the instructor (84%)
5) Reading aloud in class of literary models (82%)
6) Class recall of your writing (80%)

Final results showed no difference between instructor-administered questionnaires and those given by an outsider.

Questionnaires of "undeveloped" writers tabulated EXACTLY the same on the above list as those of their peers, the control group of five participating Comp I classes.

## Interior Confirmation of Results

Confirmation of these choices marks all questionnaire tabulations. For instance, in nearly every prioritizing question concerning "helpfulness" (Qs. 26, 27, 28, 29), leading results connect directly with the top three choices named above "Coaching to use your own voice," "Hearing others' work read aloud in class," and "Hearing your own work read aloud in class."

As an example, from among choices of how-to, journal, letter, essay, short fiction and prose, 70% picked "journal entries" as the texts read aloud in class or outside of class which were of most service to their writing process (Q 26)—nearly twice that of the next top selections of essay and fiction.

Students perceived the journal entries as most helpful, the premier form of privacy, therefore of risk-taking, the form synonymous with the use of their voice as well as "Voice" exploration. You can try anything in your journal without fear of reprisal, including the reaches of your voice—giving it free rein to see what it brings back to you in subject matter, imagery, interplay of forms, audience address.

This selection affirms result #1, "Coaching to use your own voice" and #3, "Hearing your work read aloud in class." Result #2,

"Hearing others' work read aloud in class" is also validated in terms of use of your own voice because another's voice is my own voice "in potentia": in another's voice I recognize what belongs to, or can or may belong to, "my voice."

Questionnaire inquiries about "change" sometimes rounded out or deepened other questionnaire results, as below:

> Q 7: What do you do now in your writing that is different from when you started the class (check all that apply): expand more, tell more, use my own voice, use more imagery.
>
> Q 8: Do you feel more confident in your writing? Yes, no, not sure. (Circle one)
>
> Q 9: Are you feeling more confident about the writing you do for other classes? Yes, no, not sure. (Circle one)
>
> Q 10: What have you learned in Writing Workshop that has helped you with your writing for other classes? (Check all that apply): telling more, basic forms (how-to, letter, parody, essay, etc.), more "seeing," imagery, examples, illustrations, using my own voice, awareness of audience, organization.

The results showed that:

> 84% felt more confident in writing at semester's end (Q 8).
>
> 64% felt more confident in writing for other classes (Q 9).
>
> 84% saw as many as four different ways in which their writing skills had advanced (Q 7).
>
> 85% used six areas of writing-learning in other classes (Q 10).

Students distinguished between performing with increasing capacity, and feeling more confident; and they acknowledged expanded mastery, whether such mastery "feels good" as yet, or not.

### Questionnaire Results and Enjoyment

I wanted to know how the list of results would match against student responses to Q 41, which contains 35 sub-items, and asks students to scrutinize the various activities and aspects of our methodology in terms of "enjoyment": "most enjoyable," "enjoyable," and "less enjoyable" were the options.

Correlations among the six "most helpful" items of the results list and enjoyment were generally high. Below I have combined responses of "most enjoyable" with "enjoyable" to arrive at the overall percentage of those who found the given activity "enjoy-

able." Percentages from the results list of "most helpful" activities are also given as an additional basis of comparison.

Q 41: What parts of the class did you find: most enjoyable, enjoyable, and less enjoyable? Mark below.

| "Most helpful" results (%) | most enjoyable | + | enjoyable | = | total of enjoyable |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Instructor coachings (93%) | 10% | + | 42% | = | 52% |
| Hearing others' work (92%) | 52% | + | 40% | = | 92% |
| Conference/instructor (84%) | 30% | + | 50% | = | 80% |
| Reading aloud of models (82%) | | | | | |
| by the instructor | 38% | + | 42% | = | 80% |
| by other students | 26% | + | 38% | = | 64% |
| by yourself | 20% | + | 52% | = | 72% |
| Class recall/your writing (80%) | | | | | |
| all recall during class | 20% | + | 50% | = | 70% |
| recall at end of class | 20% | + | 48% | = | 68% |

Students say the least "enjoyable" of the six "most helpful" activities, "Coaching to use your own voice," is nonetheless both the most "helpful" and most "useful." They indicate a working understanding that "my own voice," the natural endowment of every speaker, can become a powerful, dependable, flexible instrument of communication. Students tell us by these results that the persistent conscious effort required to develop "my own voice" is amply rewarded.

**Useful vs. Enjoyable**

I also wanted to see how responding students distinguished between "useful" and "enjoyable," as well as between "helpful" and "useful." "Helpful" denotes "aid," support, "to make it easier for something to happen," whereas "useful" adds the meaning of "practical utility" and the "advantageous."

| "Most helpful" results (%) | "useful" | "enjoyable" |
|---|---|---|
| 1) Coaching/"your own voice"  (93%) | 93% | 52% |
| 2) Hearing others' work  (92%) | 92% | 92% |
| 3) Hearing their work  (90%) | 88% | 90% |
| 4) Conference/instructor  (84%) | 84% | 80% |
| 5) Reading aloud/models  (82%) | 82% | 80% |
| 6) Recall/their writing  (80%) | 80% | 70% |

The percentages of "Coaching," in these last two tables reflects students' natural ambivalence about the actual hard work required for a deliberate stretching of consciousness. In a Story Workshop class, the instructor, using a broad spectrum of perceptually

principled coachings, places a demand on students for heightened awareness. These percentages indicate not only that students must "reach deep" and sometimes resist the demand, but also, in response to coaching to use their own voice, that they must go against the grain of previous schooling to comply with such a coaching as "Use your voice; tell it in your own way."

## A Survey of Questionnaire Responses and the Prioritized List of "Most Helpful" Activities

### 1) Coaching to Use Your Own Voice

"Your own voice" coachings is only one of a range of coachings for "Voice," as well as of coachings for all other major elements of writing—image, audience, formed—used in our Story Workshop composition classes.[4] So, students' identification of "Coaching to use your own voice" as the greatest single help to their development as writers is of significance, especially when viewed with affirming responses of the students that at semester's end they:

(Q 7)   use their own voice more now in their writing  (72%)
(Q 20)  feel more free now to use their own voice in writing  (77%)
(Q 10)  found use of their voice helped their writing for other classes  (45%)

The relatively low reading of 45% above may point again to the lack of permission regarding use of your own voice that students tell us is often present in their other college classes, despite much good research (Labov and others) which shows that the fear that students' use of their own voice will cause them to write ungrammatically is unfounded.

In postsemester interviews, the three students designated as "undeveloped" writers told me that using their own voice was a new idea. To demonstrate the change for him, Student #3 parodied his high school term paper voice—a ponderous, inflectionless monotone—afterward explaining, "It was like 'I'm gonna pretend I'm not writing this.'"

The Story Workshop approach uses many kinds of coaching for "your voice" throughout a four-hour class of prewriting, writing, and postwriting activities, and instructors develop a wide variety of principled coachings for on-the-spot situations.

Here are student responses concerning instructor coachings of all kinds, including those for "your own voice":

- −75% found instructor coaching during the inclass writing activity helped with the writing (Q 34)
- −60% found it enjoyable to follow the instructor's writing coachings during the inclass writing activity (Q 41)
- −85% found the instructor's coachings (all coachings) throughout the class helped with their writing (Q 35)
- −42% noticed instructor's coachings (all coachings) helped other students' reading, telling, recall, writing (Q 31)
- −52% found following the instructor's coachings (all coachings) enjoyable

These percentages indicate the positive intervention of coaching makes a difference to writing success, and that the contribution of pre- and postwriting activities to the outcome of writing is recognized by these students. We see these students grasp the meaning of "writing process" in their acknowledgement of the connections among imaging, listening, reading, telling, and writing.

The two great stimulators of personal voice, image and audience, also received notable attention in questionnaire responses. When asked what they do now in their writing that is different from when they started the class, 94% responding said they "use more imagery" (Q 7). Fifty-two percent said using more "seeing, imagery, examples, illustrations" helped them with writing for other classes (Q 10). Ninety-one percent responding said they now try to put more of what they remember, think, imagine, and have to say in their writing than when they started the class (Q 16).

Our designated "undeveloped" writers spoke in interviews of "Voice." Student #2 had never been aware of her own voice "until you (the teacher) mentioned it" (by coaching for "Voice"). She also said coaching for identification of "Voice" after the reading aloud of a student piece helped her significantly with her own voice, and that coaching during Recall ("What comes right back? See it and give it!"), after oral telling and reading, made her aware of her voice as the carrier of image to her audience.

Student #1 said coaching in class made her aware of the connection between her own voice and her writing. Responding to coachings while reading aloud, and to coaching for exaggeration made her able to hear her own voice for the first time. "Sometime it come to you like in a dream," she said.

Student #3 said awareness of his own voice was the change he was most conscious of at the end of the semester.

Rhetorical forms ("basic forms") are a function of "Voice," organizing the expression and content of voice. Seventy-five percent of students responding say that the use of rhetorical forms/ (how-to, letter, journal, folk tale, essay, parody, short fiction) improved their writing[5] (Q 23). Forty-nine percent say that learning such forms helped their writing for other classes (Q 10). The forms students identified as most helpful for their writing were: 1) journal, 2) essay and short fiction, 3) how-to/sequence and process (Q 26).

### 2) Hearing Others' Work Read Aloud in Class

Of all activities in the Comp I class, students declared that hearing other students' work read aloud in class was the most enjoyable (Q 41). These are benefits students mentioned:

- — it helped with their own writing (Q 11)   90%
- — it helped them feel more free to use their own voice (Q 12)   83%
- — it made them feel more free to say what they saw in their minds   93%
- — it helped them see how they could make their reader more able to see what they were saying (Q 14)   85%
- — it made it easier to try a wider range of subjects (Q 15)   84%

Students also said hearing others' work read aloud helped more than any other activity with organization in their writing (Q 27). It was the second most helpful activity for using their own voice (Q 28) and for seeing more in their minds to write about (Q 29), and for grammar and punctuation (Q 33).

Student #1 told me she thought, after hearing one student write about his brother dying, "If he can write about something so painful, I can write about something too." Hearing other students' work also made her want to write longer pieces to keep pace with her classmates, and to try riskier material.

### 3) Hearing Your Own Work Read Aloud in Class

Student work is read aloud by instructor, by classmates, and by the author. Student responses showed that hearing their own work read aloud in class was the second most enjoyable activity of the semester.

Ninety percent responding said it helped them to hear their own writing read aloud (Q 17), and that hearing their own and others' work aloud helped more than any other activity with organization (Q 27). It was the second most helpful activity (along with "Hearing others' work read aloud") for using their own voice in their work

(Q 28), with seeing more in their minds to write about (Q 29), and with grammar and punctuation (Q 33).

Prioritizing Question #39 asked which activities were: a) "most difficult," b) "less difficult," and c) "easy" at the beginning of the semester, and Question #40 asked for observation of change in such perceptions by semester's end. Students ranked "Hearing their own work read aloud in class" at the semester's start and end:

| Most difficult | less difficult | easy |
|---|---|---|
| Q 39 (start of semester) 23% | 38% | 48% |
| Q 40 (end of semester) 6% | 29% | 77% |

Our designated "undeveloped" writers commented that "hearing their own work read aloud in class" heightened their awareness of audience and sparked the impulse to write. Student #1 told me knowing her work might be read aloud sharpened her sense of audience: "You KNOW they gonna be listening, so you want to make it the best." Student #3 told me, "Whenever I'd goof up, I'd go, 'Oh, I'm losing my audience!' "

Student #1 also told me that hearing a student having trouble with her material alerted her to rewrite needs.

These responses also point to the practical value students see in the presence in the classroom of an immediate audience.

### 4) Conferencing with the Instructor

Question #38 simply asked whether the student found the conference with the instructor helpful—84% said it was; 90% found it enjoyable (Q 41).

Story Workshop one-to-one conferences include juxtaposed readings of stronger and weaker samples of the student's writing. The student reads them orally, then is asked to identify on the page words, phrases, whole sentences or sections of writing which particularly take her attention. Usually, but not always, the student selects vividly seen material strongly told in her own voice, and so discovers/recognizes "effective writing" in her own work. If need be, the instructor assures the discovery by pointing out effective passages, and assists the student in analyzing the technical ways such writing was achieved to promote success again.

### 5) Reading Aloud of Published Texts

Eighty-four percent agreed reading aloud in class from published texts—an activity in which students do most of the reading, coached by the teacher—helped them to see better what to do in their own work. Two-and-a-half times more students found the reading aloud

of professional and student work more helpful for grammar and punctuation than any other activity (Q 33), and:

—one-third found the activity helpful for organization in their writing (Q 27)
—one-third found the activity helpful for learning to use "Voice" (Q 29)
—two-thirds of responding students felt reading aloud from texts in class helped them more with their work than reading such assignments silently at home (Q 25)

At the start of the semester, 68% found reading aloud from texts "easy" (Q 39:3); by semester's end it rose to 75% (Q 40), matching percentages for enjoyment:

—73% found reading aloud themselves "enjoyable" (Q 41)
—78% found reading aloud by other students "enjoyable" (Q 41)
—90% found reading aloud by the instructor "enjoyable" (Q 41)

In interview, Student #2 told me recall of oral readings of both professional and student work made her aware of her own images.

### 6) Class Recall of Your Writing

After oral telling or reading, a positive demand is made for recall of the material on the basis of "What took your attention; what comes right back?" Students reported Recall helped them more with "Voice" than any other activity (Q 28), giving them an opportunity to compose for an immediate audience without having to invent, and to concentrate, therefore, on "Voice" and on image delivery. Recall gives the opportunity also to identity elements of effective writing through the testing ground of "what comes back"—that which was successfully communicated.

To the question, "Did recall in class of your writing help you?" (Q 18), 82% said that it did. "It felt good to hear someone else remember the paper I wrote," Student #3 noted on his questionnaire. Student #2 reported it made her more "aware of how other people hear my writing,"[6] and Student #1 said it helped her to hear how it sounded—what was successful and what wasn't. Student #2 said recall of oral readings of both professional and student work made her aware of her own images. Student #1 commented that hearing grammar rules recalled in another student's own vocabulary and syntax brought the grammar rule to mind when she needed it. "Their own words stay in your mind more," she said.

## Conclusions

As indicated earlier, internal support for "your own voice" as the student writers' most accessible tool is visible throughout these results, i.e., the emphasis respondents placed on Recall for developing "Voice" (Q 18), on rhetorical form for Comp I writing (Q 26) and for writing for other classes (Q 10). Also, interviews of "undeveloped" writers, and their folders of work support the conclusion that students' own voice is the easiest, surest handle for them to grasp in undertaking a writing task, and therefore the most likely vehicle of success—one to which teachers can appeal: "Say it in your own way, in your own voice."

The closeness of the first three results points directly to the social nature of "Voice," and especially of "my own voice," leads to the next conclusion: "Voice" acceptance is the key to progress in the writing classroom.

Our students have given us a simple fulcrum on which to redirect older classroom practices, what Shiflett calls "voice acceptance" (155). "Voice permission" forges the wheels, but acceptance makes the wagon go. If the voice you offer is not accepted, all movement stops.

"In order to enable students to begin significant incorporation of Standard Written English features and structures," Schultz says, "we must recognize the strong native English base in their speech and not only extend *permission* for them to write with their own voices, but actively *demand* that they do it, and use specific methods that aid them in doing it, in a teaching context in which they will be rewarded for *effectiveness* of communication of their writing, rather than be graded down and hopelessly defeated because their language has become a dynamic mixture and therefore deemed to be riddled with 'error'" (Writing From Start to Finish Teacher's Manual 32).

"Voice acceptance," and active means to engage students in developing their voices, are crucial and are the sole responsibility of the teacher. "It is the Story Workshop director's actual acceptance of voice and syntax as being valuable the way it is, *even if it never changes*, that allows the 'poor' student to hear his voice in all its strength, beauty, and *possibility*. Then he is free to develop the 'skills' which he lacks, and which he has been punished so long for lacking" (Shiflett 156–7). This fundamental Story Workshop premise is the critical step most often missed in writing classrooms. "The vitality released in the recognition of voice flows powerfully back into your writing," Shiflett notes (159).

Students actually need permission in the classroom for three

modes or levels of language: personal or "inner speech" brought to the level of speech as language (Vygotsky 17–18, Paivio 531); peer language—everyday speech, slang, other peer language—with their ability to solve grammatical problems (Labov 222); Standard speech, because it is the prevailing educated dialect, with its more formal syntax and conventions.

In most classrooms it is through Standard English alone that literary demand is made, and expected to be met. But "my own voice" may not be "Standard."

This entire study strongly suggests the view that the most important working principle for students in their development as writers is the connection between speaking and writing.

Students' emphasis on "my own voice" in this study underscores this conclusion in an unqualified way and affirms as well the ground out of which so-called "process" and "process-integrated-with-rhetoric" approaches to the teaching of writing have been developed by Schultz, Elbow, Moffett, and others.

Such approaches deliberately engage the interconnectedness and interdependence, postulated by the theories of Vygotsky, Piaget, Paivio, and others, of body, cognition, language, speech, feeling, and social sense as avenues through which writing may be accessed and developed.

Students' affirmation of their own voice is linguistically sound. Their choice underscores Smitherman-Donaldson's position that "indigenous speech" forms the "firm foundation" on which to build "linguistic repertoire" (Toward a National Policy 32) and agrees with Murray that students come to class with "a great deal of language . . . they are . . . quite willing to exploit" (81). It is also in keeping with the 1974 CCCC resolution which affirms students' right:

> to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects
> . of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their
> own identity and style.

"Everyone has a personal version of language, an ideolect, which is unique," CCCC goes on in its position on students' dialects (NCTE, 1974, 3).

It is meaning that impels us to speech (Paivio 84). Schultz makes clear that meaning is a product of our mental seeing ("seeing-in-the-mind"), which includes "visualization, conceptualization, symbolization, perception from the other senses, empathy, sense for points of view, the capacity for making concepts and the connections between concepts . . . with seeing-in-the-mind, we conceive and anticipate the spatial and time and other relationships that we need

and desire so urgently to communicate" (*Start to Finish* 1984, 2). Meaning is the social synapse of language, for the instinctual need to communicate meaning is commonly experienced. "Our seeing-in-the-mind exerts a pull upon language in order to produce the verbal-visual image that will communicate information to others. This verbal image is the primary discourse form," Schultz says (3).

Only "my own voice" can give my meaning with accuracy, since meaning originates in the person, is *of* the person, whether the person is presented directly or as a "second self" (Booth 71). The connection between "my own voice" and meaning makes the connection between "my own voice" and intelligence clear. Berlin says, "the cognitive and the cultural form a seamless fabric, the one thoroughly enmeshed in the other" (College English 1989 772).

Alice Walker, in *The Color Purple*, agrees:

> Look to me like only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind. (223)

The students responding to this study's questionnaire tell us that when we open to—when we encourage and support—the speaking-writing connection, something electric is activated—something dependable, flexible, inventive—capable of carrying any load, and of delivering the communication—"the goods"—perfectly intact.

## Notes

[1] Story Workshop (R) is an approach to the teaching of writing originated and developed by John Schultz which takes advantage of the connections between speech and writing. Through a series of dovetailing methodologies which constitute an individual class meeting, students' consciousness of their natural communications equipment—imaging, voice, sense of audience, and story movement—is deepened and enhanced. The dovetailing activities are designed to provoke a vigorous writing movement. Story Workshop activities include literature, rhetoric, grammar; reading and discussing of oral forms of discourse, exercises heightening awareness of voice, listening, seeing in the mind, audience sense, gestural sense; oral reading of model texts and student work, recall, oral telling, in-class writing and read-back; reading of student work; coaching of all activities by the instructor. The methodologies comprise a "guided discovery" of the elements and factors that must come together so that writing can happen through activities conducted in an arena of an immediate audience of peers.

[2] The questionnaire yielding these statistics, previous to and separate from the one reported on in this paper, was given to three of the Comp I classes which also participated in this present study. It sought to determine which qualities and/or factors were shared by students who began the semester as "good" writers. Both questionnaires were given in 1984.

[3] Columbia College's intent, as an undergraduate and graduate college, is, in part, to "educate students who will communicate creatively and shape the public's perceptions of issues and events, and author the culture of their times." Its purpose, in part, is "to educate students for occupations in diverse fields in the arts and media," and to "give educational emphasis to doing, to the work of a subject, by providing a practical setting, professional facilities, and the example and guide of an inventive faculty who work professionally at the subjects they teach" (Columbia College 1989–1991 catalog). Columbia College practices an "open admissions" policy in the undergraduate school.

[4] Below are some coachings we use regularly in a Comp I class:: "See it and tell it so others can see it," "Listen to your voice; listen *for* your voice"; "See it and listen to it in your voice as you tell it"; during opening and closing Recall, recall of texts (professional texts, student work): "Listen to your voice giving the voice of the story, giving the voice coming from the page; listen to the voice of the story coming into your own voice"; during oral tellings: "Tell it in your own words, in your own way; tell it exactly as you see it; let the seeing into your voice"; during writing: "Listen to your voice giving the story to the page, telling it to the page exactly as you see it; tell it on the page to someone in the semicircle so clearly that they can see it too"; during oral reading of student work: "Whose voice was that? Who thinks, tells, expresses like that?"; during any and every activity during which a student speaks in class, including a wide variety of word games: "Give your voice. Give your voice all the way across the semicircle."

Your own-voice coachings, however, are only one of a range of coachings for "Voice" used to heighten students' awareness of the irreducible relationship of "Voice" to imagery and audience.

Coachings should be addressed to the immediate needs of the student or students, in the immediate context and with an eye to long-term needs as well.

[5] Schultz explains the origin and importance of "basic forms" to writing: "The basic forms of discourse elicit and organize the expression of our thinking and directly and immediately involve sense for the audience, whether present or imagined. In origin their purpose was—and is—to organize and set forth abstractive seeing with speech and gesture in order to meet immediate and long-term teller and audience needs . . . . We use these basic forms daily, as our forefathers used them thousands of years ago, as we learn to speak language itself, without thinking about them." (*Start to Finish* 1984, 1–2) The recognition and appropriation of "basic forms" to individual telling and writing is foundational in Story Workshop classrooms.

[6] As Student #2 gained confidence in using her own voice, I noticed that Standard English usage and punctuation, which had been quite adequate at the start of the semester, deteriorated as she began attempting to use the Black English Vernacular on the page. Though the writing now had common errors she had previously avoided (see writing samples, 7–8), there was a great building of voice, inventiveness, narrative authority, sense of audience, commitment to seeing, and development of content. Within a few weeks, her new mixed diction began to appear regularly as "her own voice." In the semester's final weeks, Standard English syntax and punctuation began to reemerge, but without sacrifice of newly gained personal voice, seeing, or authority.

To reclaim her own voice for her writing, this student had to temporarily

replace awkwardly accommodated SE mechanics with BEV counterparts, inventing as best she could, as below:

> Margaret looked up and saw Sherry and I standing at the door, she stopped washing the one womans head and started doing a sanctified shout. (March 7)

To assure the integrity of the movement of seeing and voice together as an image, a comma splice was used as an effective punctuation. Six weeks later she turned in this writing:

> A P-Funk concert is never complete without George Clinton (boy can they give piss poor concert without George, thats the P-Funk All-Stars that I'm referring to) and George was here and everybody was ready to jam. (April 25).

The grammar works, and her own voice is secure. The sentence with its minor errors (missing comma, apostrophes) can be edited without loss of integrity. Allowed the firm foundation of her own speech, the writer developed a mixed diction which incorporates Standard English and meets the needs of her material and audience.

I have since realized other non-Standard speaking students of mine have also used this process to solve the problem of reclaiming their own voice for their writing.

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