

## WRITING AS LEARNING FOR BASIC WRITING TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS

Our seminar-practicum for teachers of basic writing began as one hour of optional credit in a course on the teaching of composition in the two-year college. The requirement: spend two hours a week for six weeks observing the way teachers work with underprepared students in the Writing Lab. The innovation was supposed to make no difference in my schedule. But, by the end of the first week, the observers had become participants. They wanted to know more about what they were seeing and hearing. They wanted to discuss our instructional goals and the basic assumptions we were making about the nature of writing and the teaching of writing. They wanted to understand the dynamics of the learner-teacher conference. And they wanted to work with at least one of the struggling writers enrolled in the lab.

For some of these prospective teachers, the optional hour of credit became a major effort. A year later, after earning a semester of credit by teaching two classes at a two-year college, the ones who had worked the hardest for their hour of "observation" returned to the lab to learn more about teaching basic writing. At the end of that semester, they recommended that the one-hour requirement become a separate course. And now our seminar-practicum attracts people from other programs, especially candidates for the M.A. in Writing (expository), the M.F.A. (fiction or poetry), and doctoral candidates with a major emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition or English Education.

Because our Writing Lab predates the latest back-to-basics movement by about 50 years, our seminar-practicum has never been limited to the development of "functional" literacy or to the mastery of the "basic skills" needed for the elimination of errors in spelling, punctuation, usage, and syntax. Instead, basic writing, like writing at all levels of development, is presented as the humanistic discipline that is basic to all humanistic study. The putting together of words to express (to make) meaning, the thinking involved in the composing (the discovery) of meaning, the sharing of that meaning (the writer's perception of experience) with listening readers--these are the basics in the concept of writing we want our teachers to understand and practice, in their own personal and professional lives and as they engage students in writing that *is* learning.

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*Lou Kelly is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Director of the Writing Lab at the University of Iowa.*

The two-hour weekly SEMINAR, which is, of course, closely integrated throughout the semester with the requirements of the practicum, follows a general sequence of informal explanations, required readings, and class discussions. To prepare my students for their work in the lab, we focus first on the individualized instruction we offer underprepared writers. But merely telling a class what to do is not enough. To become the kind of writing teachers we need, they must understand the theory that informs our practice and accept the intellectual assumptions of this approach to the development of writing abilities. So our weekly meetings are usually structured as responses to the questions, misconceptions, and anxieties I hear while reading the journals in which they have recorded their own perceptions of the course as well as their responses to specific questions I've asked them to address.

To begin the PRACTICUM, students come to the lab four hours a week to watch and listen as director and experienced teaching assistants get our beginning writers started on the opening series of writings. After reading some of these papers, the new teachers share with me their initial reactions. And, as our seminar discussions and their reading and writing continue, their increasing knowledge, self-confidence and poise tell me if they're ready to begin working with lab students during the third week of the semester. At first, each is assigned only one person at each of two pairs of regularly scheduled hours (MW or TTh), but most of them soon have four for each pair of hours, eight in all.

In the COURSE JOURNALS my students keep, their participation in the seminar and their work as lab teachers are fully merged. They're not only writing progress reports for the lab director; they're also engaging me in learner-teacher dialogues. I listen, of course, to what they're telling me and respond to the needs they express or imply, clarifying the procedures and concepts they do not understand and talking with them about their work with lab students. And, as their journal writing becomes self-involving, it becomes a dialogue with self--about the theories each person is learning and the teaching he or she is doing. It becomes the generative force that leads to new insights about the nature of writing and about self as writing teacher. Engaged in that kind of writing, my students are creating their own model of the writing-as-learning which we want all our lab students to experience.

Without the practicum, the seminar would be a course about theories of discourse and the methodologies and assignments that seem to be logical extensions of those theories. Without the seminar, the practicum could not move very far beyond simplistic, reductionist methods or how-to guidelines. Without the course journal that is a dialogue with teacher and self, the students in this course would have no credibility as teachers in the basic writing course offered in our Writing Lab.

### **Seminar and Basic Writing Course--A Symbiotic Relationship**

Like the instructional program we have developed for underprepared writers, this seminar for writing teachers begins in dialogue--both oral and written. Before our first meeting, as students come by to inquire about the

practicum hours that must be arranged, our conversations move quickly from the official to the casual, and then to the first writing for their course journals. It's not homework--just spontaneous responses to two sets of questions that are directly related to the enterprise that will soon engage us: 1) How do you see yourself as a teacher, specifically as a teacher of writing? What do you consider a writing teacher's main function? How do you feel as you approach this new learning/teaching experience? 2) What expectations do you have about the students you'll be working with in the practicum? What kinds of writers, what kinds of learners, do you think you'll encounter in the Writing Lab? Like generations of English teachers who have gone on to their rewards and many who are still with us, some folks in every class are eager to join the national guardians of proper English and correct spelling. Others hope to be spared the red-pencil obsession of a Miss Fidditch.<sup>1</sup> But all of them have heard about the stereotypes that inhabit the world of remediation--deprived and disadvantaged urban minorities, ignorant country kids, and dumb jocks.<sup>2</sup>

To enable my seminar students to assess their basic linguistic knowledge and to examine their attitudes toward the language diversity they'll soon encounter, I ask them to complete a questionnaire at our first class meeting. Deciding where they stand on thirty semantic differential scales requires thoughtful deliberation about linguistic, social, and pedagogical issues that we return to in many seminar sessions. And they get a mini-course in "bonehead" linguistics by reading an explication of the questionnaire.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, knowing how language works does not necessarily change people's attitudes toward low prestige dialects. I tell all my students about the reactions of one sociolinguistics class to the kind of writing they'll soon be working with. It was a typical group of undergraduate and graduate English majors, some with teaching experience. Near the end of the term, after hearing the linguistic facts and discussing the major

<sup>1</sup> Martin Joos, *The Five Clocks* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961). In the introduction, Albert Marckwardt identifies Miss Fidditch: "...a character originally named by Henry Lee Smith, Jr., in one of his more devastating moments but described by H.L. Mencken two decades earlier as one of the old-maid schoolteachers who would rather parse than eat" (xiv). Joos' book, "designed to overcome...the English usage guilt feelings of the normal American" (xii), is the story of Miss Fidditch's metamorphosis through "the power of looking at language and seeing it whole....[through] thinking and learning about language, not only as a human instrument but as an instrument of humanity....Here is the message and the hope for those of us who are professionally dedicated to the study of language" (xv, xvi).

<sup>2</sup> To correct any stereotypical thinking about underprepared students, I recommend the following: Iowa English Bulletin, ed. Lou Kelly, *Theme: Integrating Our Minorities*, 29, No. 1 (Iowa City: University of Iowa, November, 1977); William Labov, *The Study of Nonstandard English* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1974); Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Geneva Smitherman, *Talking and Testifying: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Lou Kelly, *Basic Linguistics for Teachers of Writing* (monograph in progress).

research, after feeling liberated from uptight traditional attitudes toward language and joking about their newfound reverse elitism, they were asked to read a piece of "illiterate" writing.<sup>4</sup> The collective response was the old conditioned reflex: clean up the grammar and the Black dialect, teach the kid what a sentence is, drill him on punctuation rules, give him a fourth grade spelling book, advise him to drop out of college. Obviously, these students were not *reading* this young man's paper; they were not hearing what he was saying. They were only seeing the errors.

### Reading Lessons for Writing Teachers

To help underprepared writers avoid demeaning putdowns in a culture that values "correct" writing, we must help them learn the conventions of written English. But that is not our first task. Our first task as teachers of basic writing is to learn to *read* and *hear* our writers. It's not easy, of course. Their handwriting is often painfully juvenile, sometimes illegible. On almost every line, they've misspelled some words and omitted others. Most of them find commas very confusing and some of them use no punctuation at all. If their syntax is not painfully simplistic, it's so disjunctive that getting the meaning requires close analysis. And these beginning writers are certainly not using "correct" English. But in spite of the errors and the muddled meaning, we can hear the promise of mature thought in our students' work--if we screen out the interference.

To help my practicum students learn to do that, some of our early seminars are reading lessons. For they must learn to listen instead of seeing errors as they read. They must learn to *attend* to the text--of student writers. Carefully and thoughtfully considering what they are hearing, they must ask what each writer is trying to tell us. Do the facts and opinions expressed say anything about the *person* we're listening to? What personal traits and attitudes are revealed in text or subtext? Is there anything here that parallels our own experience, anything that helps us relate to and understand this person? Anything that would help us engage this person in conversation?

When I share the work of beginning writers in our seminar, I ask everybody to tell me, first in writing, what they hear as they read. And as they write, the reading lesson continues. They are not only answering my question; they are learning how to become more perceptive readers of writing that is full of distractions. For homework, I ask them to read several more papers--screening out the errors, listening to the human voices, attending to the meaning of what these voices are trying to say. And then they write about that reading experience, saying what they are learning about these writers and about themselves as readers.

As our reading lessons continue, we talk about the way we read literature: immersing the reading self in the world the writer is creating, hearing

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<sup>4</sup> Jay L. Robinson, "The Wall of Babel; or, Up Against the Language Barrier," *Varieties of Present-Day English*, ed. Richard W. Bailey and Jay L. Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 441.

the resonances of text and subtext, taking on the consciousness of the person who is addressing the reader's consciousness through a work of art. Then we ask ourselves if we can give as much to our students' work: attending to text and subtext; immersing the teaching self in what the writer is trying to say, easing into the consciousness that pervades the undeveloped, unpolished prose. It's not easy, of course. But necessary. Responding to student writing is indeed the teacher's major responsibility in our basic writing course.

### **Learner-Teacher Dialogues and the Basic Writing Course**

When students arrive for their first lab hour, we talk with them, first in person and then from the pages of a text (*From Dialogue to Discourse*).<sup>5</sup> It's a *talking* book, we say, and their first reading (13-16) is a continuation of our conversation, a brief monologue, like the ones that frequently interrupt, and momentarily delay, the give and take of our daily exchanges with other people. Their first writing is a direct response to that reading--a monologue directed to the person who's been "talking on paper" with them. That's the basic procedure during their first three weeks in the lab: they read one of a carefully crafted series of "invitations-to-write" and then they talk to us--on paper. By direct assertion and implication, we are assuring them that we need to know their answers to the questions posed in each invitation, that we want to know more about them and their ideas. With rare exception, they write as if they believe we mean what we're saying.

After completing the first required readings and studying the opening series of invitations-to-write, everybody in the practicum-seminar knows the initial intent of our basic writing course: to help students think of writing as authentic discourse instead of an academic requirement or an exercise to develop "basic skills;" to help them bring to all their writings the spoken language they have already mastered, permitting, releasing, the grammatical and rhetorical competence they have gained from a lifetime of talking; to engage each writer in a learner-teacher dialogue that is the context for writing that *is* learning.

But how can a worried teacher inspire confidence? We spend a lot of seminar time anticipating the first one-on-one conference, that existential encounter when the dialogue begins between writer and writing teacher. Within the supportive seminar circle, it's easy to hear the possibilities for sympathetic and provocative responses to the student work we're reading together. At first, we need only acknowledge a moment of experience a writer has shared, or affirm an attitude or opinion that comes through with unmistakable clarity in either text or subtext. It's the kind of response everybody welcomes in everyday conversations, the kind that would assure any of us that our ideas are worth writing about and that our reader is willing to look at the world from our point of view.

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<sup>5</sup> Lou Kelly, *From Dialogue to Discourse: An Open Approach to Competence and Creativity* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1972).

Because most basic writing students are not fluent enough to fill even one page, teachers must make a second insistent message clear: I want to hear more. Of course, it's essential to make that assertion specific to the piece of writing we're responding to. So we consider the possibilities as we give more seminar time to student writing. At first our tell-me-more questions are direct and simple, for anything that generates more writing and keeps the learner-teacher dialogue going also generates more self-confidence, for writer and new teacher. And writing more, day after day throughout the semester, is the only way that the underprepared can develop the syntactic fluency they need. But we must never allow them to think that we only want longer papers. Our responses to their writing must assure them that we are perceptive interested readers. We must also make their responsibility clear: you cannot learn what we're trying to teach unless you give us thoughtful written responses to our questions, responses that satisfy the need to know which your earlier writing has evoked in us.

By the fourth week of the semester, most of our writers are ready for a third kind of response from their teacher: *Tell me a story* about the experience(s) remembered in this piece of writing. Let me *see* you and the people you were involved with at that particular time in your life. Show me what happened. Help me feel what you felt and hear what you were thinking, long ago or only yesterday. Tell me what you now think about this experience. Help me understand the experience from your point of view.

New teachers soon learn not to expect anybody to achieve all that in their next writing. They also learn why we're not merely asking for more details. As our story tellers move beyond their usual superficial perceptions of experience to write longer and more graphic stories, we want these stories to become reflective and self-involving. For only then can they discover that writing can be a means of interpreting and understanding their own lives.

### **Practicum Student Becomes Writing Lab Teacher**

The passage from practicum student to Writing Lab teacher occurs during the third week of the semester. Though some folks may still feel reluctant and uneasy, they are, with rare exception, ready to assume their initial responsibilities. Through seminar and required readings, including lots of student writing, and by observing experienced teachers working with lab students, they certainly have an extensive overview of our basic writing course. And while reading their writings about these experiences, I've found the intensive self-involvement that one-on-one teaching requires. So I introduce teacher to student and the official relationship begins in casual conversation. Before their next meeting, the teacher will carefully study the six to eight short pieces the student has already written--trying to hear everything this writer is saying, in text and subtext; learning the writer and the person who's revealed in the undeveloped, unpolished prose; anticipating the first one-on-one conference and hoping to get a congenial but productive learner-teacher dialogue started by affirming the worth of each person's experience and by asking the tell-me-more

question that seems most appropriate for this particular writer. (By the end of the fourth week each teacher usually has eight students who attend twice a week.)

For the rest of the semester, our seminar-practicum is a community of learners, with each teacher working with their own students but all working together to achieve the goals of the basic writing course. In seminar and throughout the week, there's lots of talk about students and their writings. Delightful or troubling stories are retold and one-to-one conferences are re-lived as teachers share their experiences. Everybody knows they're supposed to ask for help, from lab director or other teachers, whenever they need help with a particular writer. Our seminar discussions of theory and practice are now enlivened with supporting evidence and challenging questions based on the way students are responding or not responding to new invitations-to-write and to the teacher's tell-me-more questions. But week by week, the seminar must also prepare teachers for the ongoing instructional sequence of the basic writing course.

### **Hearing the Syntactic Disjunctions that Obscure Meaning**

As fluency and confidence replace the lab students' fear of the empty page and they can fill at least one page in one hour, when they know their teacher's listening to their ideas, it's time for a seminar discussion about the procedures recommended for working with the ones who write sentences that don't say what they mean. Whether it's a simple omission, one confusing word, or a serious syntactic derailment that blurs or disrupts the intended meaning, we do not cite grammar rules for them to memorize. Instead, writer and teacher read the sentence together--aloud. Is anything left out? Does it say what you mean? How would you say it in a conversation? As we suggest possibilities for clarifying and rephrasing, we again read the sentence aloud, so the writer can hear the version that sounds right for her or him. But that is only the beginning of a slow, painstaking process. Whenever a sentence is revised, the writer must read the original and the revision, aloud, many times--*listening* to the difference each change makes, *hearing/feeling* the rhythm and sound of the syntactic patterns that make the difference, *consciously* trying to internalize the new patterns so they'll eventually become habitual unconscious patterns. As our students begin to trust our editing abilities, we offer written suggestions to be used not only as they rewrite their sentences, but also for the oral practice that will help them develop a critical ear for the syntactic disjunctions that may again diminish the clarity of their ideas. But, as Mina Shaughnessy recommends, we are always

[...] wary of substituting our stylistic preferences for those of our students, riding (and writing) roughshod over the student's meaning in the interest of grace or economy, or ferreting out errors without commenting upon or even noticing what the writer is getting at, as if thought were merely the means for eliciting grammatical forms (84).

## Developing and Shaping Ideas

Over many years, many seminar students have pointed out that their work in the practicum would be a lot easier if we began our basic writing course by teaching paragraphs as units of thought that are developed from topic sentences. After explaining why we abandoned that tradition,<sup>6</sup> I ask them to read Arthur Stern's "When Is a Paragraph?"<sup>7</sup> This short critical review of the history of paragraph definition begins with Alexander Bain, a nineteenth century Scottish logician, then moves through the Unity-Coherence-Emphasis triad, Christensen's rhetoric of the paragraph, Becker's TRI and PS paragraph patterns, and finally, to Richard Braddock's empirical study of topic sentences. Using an exemplary research design and meticulous procedures, Braddock showed, quite conclusively, that the published essayists he studied did not rely on topic sentences, indeed, did not write the kinds of paragraphs prescribed in composition textbooks. Stern argues that the "new" rhetoricians are also making false claims about paragraph development. To conclude our seminar discussion of this pedagogical issue, we look at some writings which illustrate the stylistic and substantive differences students can achieve when they're trying to say something that's important to them instead of struggling against the constraints imposed by somebody's limited definition of paragraph or theme.

Our basic writing course begins with talking on paper because this naturalistic expressive mode accommodates whatever level of writing and thinking a student is capable of. Like the spontaneous responses we shape as we utter them in a conversation, the responses to our invitations-to-write are relatively unstructured, but coherent enough for any sympathetic reader to understand. While talking to us on paper, our beginning writers are recording general impressions and opinions, or stringing together loosely connected descriptive and narrative details, or momentarily reflecting on whatever they're saying. They frequently ramble and backtrack, of course, as most oral story tellers do. And they usually seem unaware of the need to analyze the experiences or ideas they're sharing with us. But my seminar students/lab teachers are not learning how to evaluate organization as they study their students' work. They're searching for questions that will engage the mind of each writer they're working with.

Responding to a well-focused tell-me-more question requires more cognitive effort than does the spontaneous response invited in our opening series of writings, because the writer is being asked to extend and elaborate a brief and superficial narrative, or to clarify and elaborate a vague and general statement. As he or she attempts to do that, the writing becomes what I.A. Richards has called a "*completion*" of experience, "the occasion and the means of growth which is the mind's endless endeavor to

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<sup>6</sup> Lou Kelly, "One-on-One Iowa City Style," *Iowa English Bulletin* 1, No.1 (Fall/Winter, 1980), 4-19.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur A. Stern, "When Is a Paragraph?" *College Composition and Communication*, 27 (1976), 253-7.



order itself."<sup>8</sup>

Asking why--frequently and insistently--may be the most productive response a teacher can offer when attempting to challenge the shallow perfunctory thinking that impedes or prevents the development of our students' minds. Indeed, whenever they're trying to explain why, they're moving, slowly but steadily, toward the higher-level goals of analysis and synthesis. Again, the teacher's question must be specific to something the writer has already written, but the possibilities seem unlimited: 1) Why is the experience shared in this writing important to you? Did it shape your attitude about anything which you still value? If so, what implications could it have for your future? 2) Why do you make this statement? What does it mean in relation to a specific time or particular incidents in your life? Has anybody ever disagreed with you on this matter? Have you ever questioned your point of view? Why do different people have different opinions on the same subject?

Our beginning writers, and their teachers, soon realize that responding to an explain-why question is not as easy as talking on paper. So we call it thinking on paper and attempt to clarify the difference by discussing the relationship between thought and language as it is envisioned by L.S. Vygotsky in his studies of the development of language in children.<sup>9</sup> To talk on paper, writers need only transform what Vygotsky calls the outer plane of thought which is available for immediate utterance because it is already "connected with" and "embodied in words." But thinking on paper involves them with their "inner speech," that "dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and [non-verbal] thought" (149). Transforming this undefined "thing" into coherent syntactic structures is rarely spontaneous for writers at any level. Instead, we grope for clarity in the verbal, non-verbal confusion that fills our heads as we struggle with difficult concepts and disturbing situations, trying to sort through our perceptions and analyze the implications of what we have perceived, trying to make the connections that lead to understanding.

To engage our students in that kind of mental activity, we tell them to continue using their own expressive language as they respond to our explain-why questions. And they're not to worry if their initial thinking on paper is disorganized and full of fragmented ideas. The learner-teacher dialogue will again provide the guidance they need as they try to make the connections that will help them clarify and structure their own "dynamic, shifting, unstable" inner speech.

In our discussion of the kinds of questions that enable our writers to move from talking on paper to thinking on paper, we look for parallels in James Moffett's study of the relationship between the development of writing abilities and abstraction.<sup>10</sup> As Moffett says, "Abstracting, like

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<sup>8</sup> I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 130-131.

<sup>9</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. and trans., Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1962), pp. 33-51.

<sup>10</sup> James Moffett, "Kinds and Orders of Discourse," *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 14-59.

breathing, goes on all the time" (27). From our earliest perceptions of reality and our first attempts to learn the language with which we represent our perceptions, "we grow slowly through the whole abstractive range during our period of maturation" (25). But we do not discard one level of abstraction as we go on to the next one: "at any time of life we are constantly processing new experience up through the cycle of sensations, memories, generalizations and theories" (25).

Such a range of abstractive ability is apparent in our students' early writings: bits of highly personal interior monologue that tell us what's happening now; episodic glimpses of what happened back home in high school; general expectations about what always happens; speculations about what's likely or sure to happen in the future (35). But we find little evidence of the abstractive abilities needed to elaborate or analyze an incident or an idea or to bring related incidents and ideas together in a unified piece of writing. Even as our writers try to respond to specific tell-me-more and explain-why questions, many of them do not seem capable of sustaining a narrative or a concept beyond a brief summary which suggests or asserts what they know. But, as Edward Sapir pointed out a long time ago, language is heuristic.<sup>11</sup> So we keep them talking/thinking on paper, because each writer's expressive speech is the language of discovery and learning for that person; it is the language which enables everybody to respond to their own thought processes and to use all their abstractive abilities while they're writing. And when that begins to occur, they're edging a little closer to higher levels of thinking. Within the context of our learner-teacher dialogues, their writing is becoming a means of looking at their own experience more analytically and seeing the relationships that will help them impose order and create meaning as they structure their personal knowledge of the world. Moffett would say they are moving--freely and naturally--up and down the "abstraction ladder" (35).

There's no way to show my seminar students how this happens. But we give them examples of student work that grew increasingly reflective and analytical as the teacher asked well-focused questions and the writer responded. We also point to the kinds of questions the underprepared cannot address successfully because they have not yet developed the intellectual maturity such questions require. Of course, a student's writings do not provide a precise measure of cognitive development, but their early work provides the signals we need as we try to adapt the instruction we offer to the capabilities of each writer.

Every semester I'm again amazed that yet another seminar-practicum class is willing to give the effort it takes to sustain productive learner-teacher dialogues with our beginning writers. I always tell them to let me know if they ever discover that the same results can be achieved by teaching topic sentences or other means of "simply" focusing and organizing a paper before they start writing. But our hopes for any simple way to teach

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Sapir, *Culture, Language and Personality*, ed. David Mandelbaum (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), p. 7.

writing diminish when we consider how language is inextricably bound to all that we experience and to all our thinking about experience. Our own native dialect enabled us to order and understand the world even as we were learning that dialect. And so, we assume, that same expressive language enables our beginning writers to order and develop a coherent and unified narrative or explanation as they talk/think on paper in response to their teachers' well-focused questions. For the learner-teacher dialogue not only provides a starting point for the thinking that sustains their composing processes; that dynamic context also reveals the relationships and connections that shape their ideas.

But even when we clearly define the question, for ourselves or for our students, composing ideas can be a messy process, and the ideas we have composed may need to be slightly or extensively altered and rearranged. In our basic writing course, we do not address this problem until the writer can extend a narrative or sustain an idea beyond the usual one-page effort. Again, asking questions is recommended. First, we ask questions that will enable the beginning writer to see the relationships which determined the ordering of ideas in a coherent piece of his or her own writing. Then we ask some questions that point to the sentences that are not clearly related to the idea(s) the writer is trying to develop. More specific questions point to sentences that are juxtaposed but not joined in semantic relationship. Other well-focused questions reveal the sentences or blocks of sentences that need to be deleted because they are irrelevant, or rearranged so that related ideas will be clearly connected. We never ask all those questions during one conference, of course. But the dialogue about the coherent ordering of ideas almost always includes a question or two about the need for further development. Again, the illustrative materials for our seminar discussion are successive drafts of papers that have been rearranged and expanded as writers responded to their teachers' questions.

Throughout the semester, asking the right question at the right time is the teacher's greatest challenge. As that challenge is met, our students' brief expressive responses to our invitations-to-write grow longer and clearer, less simplistic, more thoughtful and more engaging. But one semester is never enough time for them to internalize the model of writing-as-learning which they have been given. Within the context of our learner-teacher dialogues, however, while responding to their teacher's reassuring comments and challenging questions, they begin the long process of becoming perceptive critical readers of their own writing. Achieving that goal without the continuing guidance of caring teachers is, of course, impossible. But our writers do learn how to move in that direction--looking for the relationships and making the connections that enable them to compose coherent ideas, anticipating the reader's need for clarification and elaboration, hearing the syntactic patterns that need to be revised and the ideas that need to be rearranged or deleted.

### **Copyreading**

Throughout the instructional sequence described here, the interactive processes of writing and thinking are certainly more important than a

completed product that's been corrected and polished for the sharp eyes of a Ms. or Mr. Fidditch. But when you value *what* your writers say while they are engaged in the processes of composing, when you know they value the ideas they have tried to express, you also value the written statements of those ideas: the products that have evolved from the processes. Though incomplete, incorrect and unclear, the product is a presentation of the self--the writer, who, like all the rest of us, needs the sense of worth that comes when other folks seem to be attending to what we are saying. To make graphic the pleasure we take in our students' writings, and to present some of their work as products to be enjoyed by readers beyond the teacher, we publish a dittoed handout, *Voices from the Writing Lab*, three or four times a semester. It's a joy to see their eyes light up when they find their own words in print. In fact, it seems to be the evidence needed to confirm what we've been telling them: you are a writer.

While they're still feeling good about this early success, their teachers have a new question for them: do you see the differences I see between your original copy and the published statement? Very few of them can point out those differences, even though the editor of *Voices* has attended to the omissions, misspellings, and punctuation that would distract most readers. She has also made other changes, like the verb forms that most people on campus would consider illiterate. But almost all of the underprepared are aware of the value our culture places on "correct" writing; most of them have already told us about their own "bad" grammar and spelling. So their teacher takes this opportunity to tell them about a special kind of reading they'll be learning how to do before the end of the semester. We call it copyreading. It's not a part of the composing process. but a time for writers to consider what they have already written; a time to ask if we have followed all the conventions that make it easier for readers to hear what we are saying; a time to *consciously* attend to punctuation, spelling, and usage. Copyreading puts error where it belongs--at the bottom of the writer's list of concerns. And it frees the underprepared from the paralyzing worry of not getting every word "right" while they're trying to say what they think.

Lab teachers know why they're not supposed to begin marking and correcting errors after this first learner-teacher dialogue about copyreading. Developing syntactic fluency and learning to elaborate ideas takes time--more time than a few weeks can provide; for most of our students, more time than a full semester. For most of them it would no doubt be best to postpone any attempt to work on surface errors until the next semester. But learning what to look for, then learning to *see* the mistakes in all their writings is a long and tedious process. So we usually begin copyreading around midterm. But we never let it take on more importance than content. And we always insist that they never let their concern about errors interfere with their composing processes.

It's not easy, of course, for teachers to find and maintain the balance between a continuing disregard for error while listening to the ideas composed and the careful attention to error demanded as they help their students learn to copyread. But it is possible--if they're willing to learn yet

another way of reading student writing. So I ask them to study the body of work they have from each of their writers, identifying and classifying the most frequent errors in punctuation, spelling and usage. Such an analysis reveals the patterns of error that make possible a systematic approach to learning how to find and correct specific kinds of error--periods *or* misspelled words *or* third person singular verbs, for example. Until students have learned to copyread systematically, we do not ask them to look for more than one kind of error. To help them recognize the same kinds of mistakes in later writings, each of them keeps a record of their mistakes--corrected, of course. This Copyreading Guide develops in three parts: a correct list of all the words they have misspelled; examples (that is, corrected sentences from their own work) of their punctuation mistakes and omissions; examples (again their own sentences) of their usage mistakes. Before copyreading a new piece of writing, students are urged to review the examples recorded in their personal guides, and then to *consciously* look for the specific errors and the kinds of errors they've identified and corrected in their previous writings. Since they look for only one kind of error at a time, most of them need to copyread every page several times.

Becoming a competent copyreader is indeed a long and painstaking process, even when spelling and punctuation are the main problems. It takes even longer, and it's far more frustrating, when writers are expected to find and change linguistic patterns they've been hearing and using all their lives. So very few of our basic writing students are able to correct all the mistakes in the last writing they do for us. But they do know *how* to copyread. And this systematic approach to error enables them to compose first drafts in their own everyday language, without worrying about their "bad" grammar.

### **The Functions of the Course Journal**

Our discussions of theory and practice, of general principles and specific writers, are never limited to the seminar, but carry on through assigned and unassigned hours in the lab--in one-on-one conversations and in small groups, from the opening days of the semester throughout the next fourteen weeks. But our learner-teacher dialogues find their most compelling form in the course journals. Though the response varies from class to class, most seminar students/lab teachers enjoy the freedom of expression and the time for personal reflection that journal writing permits.

From the perspective of a lab director, the rationale for asking them to write seems obvious: from the beginning, I need to know how they are hearing what I am asking them to do. What attitudes and values have shaped their perception of writing and the teaching of basic writing? What concept of self determines the level of confidence they feel about the responsibilities I'm asking them to take on? When will each of them be ready to engage their students in the kind of learner-teacher dialogues I'm trying to engage them in? In their journals, I find implicit if not explicit answers to these questions, and I respond by letting them know that I understand both the joys and frustrations they are feeling and by trying to

clarify anything I have not made clear and anything they have misconstrued. Though daily entries are not required, the habit is encouraged, "...for taking note of one's *experience*, of *witnessing* one's life...", as my colleague Sherman Paul says about the journal he requires in literature classes.

I think I want for my students what I want for myself: a form (mode) of writing that brings us closer to experience, is, in fact, of the experience, hews to it. Isn't one of the rites of participation the right to participate in one's own experience? To have that as source, and as endless resource: to know that because of such engagement one will always have something (relevant) to say, that one will never be at an end of words.<sup>12</sup>

The questions I ask students to address at the beginning of the seminar place them at the center of their own learning, enabling them to center their writing within their total experience as life-long users of language and engaging them in writing that brings them closer to what they are experiencing as seminar student and basic writing teacher. I want their journals to be a vital inexplicable part of their learning and their teaching. But some people feel uneasy when asked to express their own ideas--with their own voices--in the open form of a journal to be shared with teacher and classmates.

Last night I dreamed I was standing on the steps of Old Capitol completely naked. And trying to hide my nakedness. I was still looking for my clothes when I woke up. That's how I feel whenever I write anything for anyone else to read.

That confession from a former seminar student may explain why a hackneyed response that involves no risk or a rehash of somebody else's ideas is a more popular form of academic writing than the journal that "*hews to*" experience and engages both mind and emotion. A few people actually seem incapable of writing open-form expressive prose, at least in a course journal. It's as if learning to write the depersonalized prose of academic papers has robbed them of the expressive language of everyday speech. Some students, like some of their teachers, regard such writing as the radical or romantic notion of an anti-intellectual. That stance can be shaken, of course, with a few compelling excerpts from the journals of their classmates or from the journals that are part of our literary heritage. And the questions that evoke the early entries get most folks writing, quite enthusiastically, before they have time to succumb to their anxieties.

When seminar students become lab teachers, they no longer need generative questions from me, for their students are now the focus and the stimulus for their journal entries. Shaping their ideas at the "point of

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<sup>12</sup> Sherman Paul, "Journals," *Iowa English Bulletin*, 29, No. 2 (Spring, 1981), 5-6.

utterance," as James Britton would say,<sup>13</sup> they write with the easy flow of friendly talk, for they know they are writing for a sympathetic reader within an "accumulating shared context," about our "shared interest and expertise."<sup>14</sup>

The relationship is both personal and professional; the writing and my response to it, a learner-teacher dialogue. In the language of Britton's audience categories, I am not "teacher as examiner;" I am not grading their writing or the teaching they're writing about. Instead, I'm listening to and learning what only they can tell me about their work with the lab students whose writings I read during the opening weeks. For the rest of the semester, I follow the students' progress by reading their teachers' journals. And when anybody asks for help, explicitly or implicitly, in person or in their writing, I respond, with written comments or in conversation. If specific and detailed suggestions seem to be needed, I review the lab student's work and sometimes join in the learner-teacher dialogue about a particular piece of writing or a particular problem. I'm not a stranger, of course, because I've been talking with everybody all semester--from the pages of the text we use and from dittoed invitations-to-write which supplement the text.

So the course journal has several important functions. It is, first of all, a report, the means whereby the lab director is given the information she needs. It's also a record of the writer's experience as a lab teacher, is "in fact, of [that] experience" because it is a continuation of the dialogue that does not end when the conference with the student ends. Britton would say my teachers' journals combine two basic functions of expressive speech.<sup>15</sup> They are not only "spectating about experience" with a sympathetic listener, but also generating "speech for oneself." As they write, they're looking back on their students' writing and the conversations they've had about that writing, so they can tell me what they think and how they feel. Their writing is not only a representation, but also an interpretation of their verbal and nonverbal dialogues with their writers. They're trying to make sense of this learning/teaching experience, shaping and giving it meaning. As they talk on paper to the teacher who has engaged them in a dialogue about teaching, they're also talking to self. In the language of their own expressive speech, these fledgling scholars and teachers are trying to say what they are learning--before they have learned. They're grappling with perplexing teaching experiences and intricate theories of discourse--before they clearly see what they're trying to explain. They're tentatively exploring new concepts, uttering half-formed thoughts and attitudes--because their teacher has promised to respond even though their ideas are not clearly expressed or fully developed. Their writing is an enactment of what Britton calls the "particularly direct

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<sup>13</sup> James Britton, ed., *Talking and Writing* (London: Methuen and Co., 1967) xiii.

<sup>14</sup> James Britton et al., *The Development of Writing Abilities* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1978), pp. 65-73.

<sup>15</sup> James Britton, *Language and Learning* (New York: Penguin, 1980), pp. 50-74.

relationship" between expressive language and thinking, a relationship which suggests the importance of the expressive as a "mode of learning at any stage." So, each teacher's journal is a developing model of the concept of writing that is essential to our basic writing course. For lab students and the person who is responsible for the quality of instruction they get, that is the most compelling function of the course journal.

Given the demands of that kind of writing, I'm not surprised if somebody in the seminar seems to be merely keeping a record of their conferences with students or relying on superficial and vague generalities to fill the pages of their journal. I respond by filling the margins with questions to be addressed in the next entry. And if I find no references to the articles and books we've discussed in seminar, I urge them to establish a dialogue with those texts: attend to the concept of writing they present, compare the suggestions from other writers with the ones I've offered, see the connections between all the theories and the actual writing experiences of your students, and then--tell me what you think as you continue talking with me in your course journal.

Jerome Bruner has proposed that "interior intellectual work is almost always a continuation of dialogue."<sup>16</sup> As Vygotsky and other psycholinguists have explained, the development of thought in the young child depends on talking--verbal interactions with caring adults. So we and all our students need what Bruner calls "the dialectical, almost dramaturgic quality of dialogue as a model for pursuing our own thoughts in the privacy of our own consciousness."

I hope my teachers' journals and my responses to them are enabling dialogues--not only in their efforts to work successfully with the beginning writers assigned to them, but also as they try to make the connections between their own writing, their students' writing, and the theories of discourse we have discussed. I hope all their writing will become the origin of insight and understanding, the "source" of personal knowledge and the "endless resource" for their own "interior intellectual work."

A couple of weeks after midterm, I ask everybody to read what they have written so far: take a second look at the experiences they have already described and the conclusions they seem to be moving toward, listen for recurring themes and issues, analyze the implications of what they've been saying. This reading marks the beginning of their "final" papers, the self-evaluations of their learning and teaching which I ask for near the end of the semester. Every year I have to explain, always more than once, that I'm not asking for a research paper that attempts to summarize, explicate, or compare various theories of discourse or pedagogy. Instead, I want to know how they now see themselves as teachers of basic writing, and what they now think about the underprepared writers they have been working with. When I read these papers, I want to hear the

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<sup>16</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, "Introduction to the Expanded Edition," *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), vii.



voices I've been listening to in their journals. Don't lose the lively and engaging qualities of the expressive, I urge; don't consciously shift into a more formal style or choose a more learned vocabulary. Instead, I hope the complexity of their syntax and their diction will be shaped by the complexity of the ideas they're trying to express.

Though my teachers' "final" papers are more focused, the form less open, their ideas more fully developed and supported by ideas gleaned from reading and discussion, they are still talking about their own experience -- still participating in that experience, still engaged in a search for understanding through writing. The merging and interrelated aims of the journal may give way in this discourse to a single dominant aim, but their audience has not changed. Even if they visualize a general audience of basic writing teachers, they only need to make our shared context of seminar and basic writing courses more explicit. Their perception of experience is still the center of their writing; they are still trying to make their own voices heard, even though the paper may sound less personal as it becomes more scholarly. Of course, keeping a journal for one semester and discovering in that journal the substance, form, and style of one analytical paper cannot ensure the mastery of a new composing process. But if their move from expressive talking on paper to academic writing has been sustained by an enabling learner-teacher dialogue

...the "self" is not lost on the way...[instead] "the self," though hidden, is still there. It is the self that provides the unseen point from which all is viewed: there can be no other way of writing quite impersonally and yet with coherence and vitality (*Language and Learning*, 179).