THE PREPARATION OF TEACHERS OF WRITING: A COOPERATIVE WORKSHOP APPROACH

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Most college professors and high school teachers would agree that there has been a lot of confusion on both levels over the changes in approaches to the teaching of writing in the past fifteen years. The decline in SAT scores of entering college freshmen has intensified the confusion and added an element of alarm. The high school and the college teacher may reproach each other, or the various approaches thought to be employed by the other. In fact, however, this mutual scapegoating does little to dispel the confusion over approach. And the confusion, ultimately, generates more hostility and frustration.

It is difficult to know who started our current problem, and I'm not sure that it matters. It is possible now to look back with tongue-in-cheek to a combination of the early seventies' educational climate and the "freewriting" or "open writing" approach espoused by innovative and sensitive thinkers who were in tune with the times. On the college level, Ken Macrorie advocated an initial movement away from the then rigid emphasis on traditional English basics such as formal diction, grammar, and sentence structure.[1] The purpose of his "open" writing approach was to engender enthusiastic self-expression, and it was a "write first, worry

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later" sequence for the writer. In some cases, however, some instructors and students forgot to worry at all about the stuffier "mechanics" of the language. One point of the exercise was to break the prim, confining, pedantic stereotype of the English teacher and writing curricula. The new "open" instructors who jumped on the bandwagon usually also jumped onto their desktops, exhorting their students to get the ink flowing, and rewarding "real," spontaneous, "natural" language — and sentence structure, I guess. (I should mention that the approach blossomed in colleges and high schools alike, and that students were not the only casualties. Some instructors injured themselves attempting to jump from floor to desk and vice versa; introverts sustained comparable psychic injuries from exertions of the personality, or, worse, felt like total fools after their leaps met with little effect and no success.)

In reaction to the "open" approach, and in an effort to calm things down and restore standards, somebody came up with a method which I have named the "basic steps" approach. Actually *a limited (quite limited) variant of the theory of composition as process,* this method assumes that *nothing* in the writing process need be left to the imagination or intuition. Everything must constitute a "step" in the writing process, and there are almost infinite variations on the number steps, all of which, however, are authoritative or dogmatic. All of the "basic steps" approaches have in their favor the inclusion of at least one "step" or phase, which allows the writer to correct or edit his prose after it has taken shape on the page.

In fairness to the latest versions of the "step by step" school of thought, I should mention that most consider it desirable to combine the "open" and "back to basics" approaches. In this unified perspective, "openness" is merely the first step. Unfortunately, not everyone has heard about the possibilities inherent in this happy combination of approaches, what has come to be known as the process or classical approach to composition. My students, for example, in my freshman composition course, are still "into" openness and, for the most part, loathe editing. Since I "know what they really mean" in a paper full of misspellings, comma splices, and grotesque diction, they tell me, correction of the errors is "really" my stuffy insistence on imaginary standards. This leads me to confess that although I have entitled this article "The *Preparation* of Teachers of Writing," few are

ever prepared, personally, to cope with the conflicting demands of being a pal and a teacher, of getting the students to write fluently and to edit once the ink has stopped "flowing." Furthermore, all teachers of English on all levels share this same, rather schizophrenic predicament. I know this as a matter of fact, since I "share" my Freshman Composition Program with area high school teachers who are part-time college composition instructors. All of us have literally "shared" the teaching of some of our students.

When teachers on all levels share problems and approaches, potential interlevel conflicts and resentments surface and work themselves out. The recent conferences for Indiana Teachers of Writing,[2] organized for those on the elementary, middle, secondary, and college levels, demonstrated this point rather well. Panelists in these three areas worked well together, and produced excellent and insightful discussions.

It is those who have no opportunity for interaction on a multi-level basis who experience resentments and misunderstandings about theories of teaching writing and the problem of failing literacy we are seeing in our students. This became very clear to me when I taught a graduate course in literature to area high school teachers who were working on the completion of master's degrees. Unlike the high school teachers I worked with every day in the Composition Program, some of these English teachers regarded the entire field of English — and me — with a combination of fear and revulsion that approached that of a freshman on placement testing day in English. I realized then that I had to approach these teachers, to discover what their concerns were, and to meet those concerns.

During that semester, I developed a workshop approach which served three main functions. The first was to address the areas of insecurity which these teachers identified, the second was to provide information about new developments in the teaching of writing (since these teachers would have to write some papers in my course — and didn't want to do it), and the third was to establish a support group and "think tank" for those who were involved. Each of those functions is an important component of what has become, for me, a course for high school and junior high teachers of English, but which might also become a part of short-term workshops given on a cooperative basis between area high school and college teachers. The initiative will probably have to

come from the college teachers of English, if the first problem I encountered — that of areas of insecurity — is a general one.

The secondary school teachers who became my students were so heavily burdened with teaching duties that they scarcely had time for their own lives. They felt that they would never have time to "study" English; that even if they were to have time, they wouldn't understand the subject matter; and they would be too embarrassed to ask questions. This mysterious and difficult subject which they called "English" was actually what I call grammar and usage, and some of the language arts teachers had never had formal courses in these subject areas at the college level. Obviously, even though most of these teachers did not have serious grammatical deficiencies, those who thought they had created for themselves the most serious deficiency of all — a dislike of "English" and a desire to avoid writing in their classrooms, and in mine.

The first thing I did to address their obvious feelings of insecurity was to assure them that the workshop time they spent wouldn't be part of their gradepoint, and that it might be the last opportunity they would have to find out what they needed to learn. In addition, the workshop would require *no* homework from them; we'd go over everything together by spending just one hour a week or less, perhaps, during the course of a sixteen week semester. Then, when the proposition seemed relatively free of risk, the students all took the same sort of two-part diagnostic test which our freshman composition students took. The exam consisted of an hour-long essay and an hour-long one hundred item test on grammar and usage.[3] I graded both of the exams, identifying errors in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, usage, organization, and fluency. We then discussed all of the errors in our workshop sessions, covering such matters as how verbs form their tenses, what constitutes a comma splice, and how to use the dictionary. Most of the teachers found it a relief to have these things clarified, and some felt confident enough to begin to make an occasional writing assignment to their own students rather than relying exclusively on classroom plays, the illustration of stories, or activities other than writing.

It was clear that the whole process of sharing anxieties and errors which had been hanging around in our mental closets for some time had prepared the way for the second

stage of the workshop, that of learning about various developments in approaches to the teaching of writing. During our first session, we examined and evaluated some textbooks which were newly "out" on the market. We discussed the books' formats and approaches, and even got around to some debates in subsequent sessions on the pros and cons of including literature in the writing classroom.

The consideration of composition as process developed naturally from these discussions. I pointed out that most of the current approaches to writing regard composition as an exercise which entails a minimum of three stages or "steps," often categorized as prewriting, writing, and postwriting. For me, those steps consist of "brainstorming,"[4] writing, and editing. Frank D'Angelo, in his *Process and Thought in Composition,* identifies similar elements in Aristotelian terminology: invention, arrangement, and style.[5] Still other authors and texts view the composing process in technical rather than rhetorical terms. One such text, *Writing for Career-Education Students* (Hart and Reinking) gives the student a step-by-step procedure to follow for a number of different formats such as comparison and explaining a process.[6]

After examining the approaches to the composing process, the teachers found it useful to know about books that might help them translate their knowledge into modified classroom assignments for their own students. They particularly liked Joseph Comprone's *From Experience to Expression: A College Rhetoric*[7] for its sample essays and assignments and William Strong's book *Sentence Combining*[8] for its potential classroom use. The concept of sentence combining, learning to generate different types of sentences from groupings of simple, primer style statements served as one entire workshop session. We started with an attempt to combine "The sky is blue," "There is one cloud in the sky," and "The sky is bright," and became increasingly creative and competent in producing other exercises of our own; the sky was not the limit, fortunately.

In fact, one of the concepts the teachers gained from the workshop was that "college" material could be creatively modified and adapted for use in their classrooms. We took a look at Kenneth Koch's *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*[9] to explore his concept of teaching "adult" poetry to children, and later evaluated a number of publications on "college" writing. Most of the workshop participants were un-

aware of the many helpful publications put out by the National Council of Teachers of English, simply because these books were directed to a college and university audience. *Ideas for English 101: Teaching Writing in College* (Richard Ohmann and W. B. Coley)[10] and *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (Charles Cooper and Lee Odell)[11] were of applied and theoretical interest to most of the group; for those who wanted less abstract teaching aids, I pointed out the NCTE publications which catalogue topics for composition.[12]

The transition to the third phase of the workshop, a support group and "think tank" for problems, came easily. We focused on problems related to our own experience of the teaching of writing. Almost everyone agreed that grading posed the greatest threat to confidence about teaching. Many felt that with so little time available to spend on the evaluation of student compositions, grades weren't fair to students who had different capacities for various aspects of composition. After discussing the criteria I used for grading college compositions,[13] we devised a grading system which consisted of a grade for each of the following categories: 1) Volume/fluency, 2) Imagination/creativity, 3) Grammar/sentence structure, and 4) Organization/editing (spelling, etc.). The final "grade" for each composition was an average of the grades for the four categories, and, although the system required that the teacher make more rather than fewer evaluations, it seemed to clarify the grading problem and to save time. We named the system the "VIGO SCALE" after a county (Vigo County) in Indiana.

Of course, there were still some in the group who felt that teachers shouldn't "grade" writing at all. We discussed the possibilities for ungraded student journals and for practical writing assignments such as letters of application and resumes. This led to an entire session on types of writing assignments, and a discussion of everything from poetry to term papers to movie reviews.

By the time we finished our sessions together, the rapport in the group was so good that I decided to formulate a workshop for teachers which provided the same sort of sequence, but in a one-day, "no homework" format:

9-10 a.m.	Essay assignment (to be checked for organization, sentence structure, and grammar)
10-11	Diagnostic grammar exam

11-12	Review of errors, questions about grammar and sentence structure
12-1	Lunch
1-2 p.m.	Continuation of question session
	New approaches to the teaching of writing
	The composing process
	Sentence combining
2-3	The evaluation of textbooks, grammars, and teaching aids
	Literature in the writing classroom
3-4	Criteria for grading
	Assignments for writing
	Discussion of problems peculiar to the teaching of writing

The day-long extravaganza doesn't even require a cast of thousands. One facilitator can work with up to twenty teachers, but smaller groups are friendlier. The only real tough spot is the marking of the essay exam in the areas of sentence structure, usage, grammar, and organization. The facilitator must complete that task while the teachers are doing the grammar test. Usually, there aren't those many problems with the essay; most of the teachers want to discuss the grammar exam and debate the fine points. The errors on the grammar exam are, in fact, more numerous than those in the essay segment, and grammar errors seem to bother (and interest) teachers a great deal.

The afternoon lecture/discussion sessions aren't too difficult for an energetic facilitator to manage, particularly after a decent lunch break; however, different speakers or a "new" facilitator can conduct those sessions, if necessary. The rapport in the afternoon is better, of course, with one congenial, if tired, facilitator.

As for the question of rapport in general, provided the facilitator understands the participants' perspectives and problems, the workshop's general focus seems to be genuinely interesting to teachers on all levels. For that reason, the same workshop as an orientation day for part-time faculty members in English composition works well on an in-house basis at colleges and universities so long as the tone of the proceedings does not become authoritarian. Most colleges and high school departments of English have their own eccentric approaches to the teaching of composition; these approaches sometimes take on semi-religious auras. At any rate, they clearly forbid the teacher to violate any of the "rules" of a particular well-sanctioned approach. To use a workshop to dictate policy seems to me to be both tacky and boring, and I insist on going on record in favor of

the initial "openness" theoreticians such as Macrorie hoped for.

The uniformity and excellence of standards is important; approaches, it seems to me, can vary. After all, teaching and writing both come from the personality. Workshops for orientation should set standards or even provide formats for work to be "covered." But they should also provide information, and consider approaches which the participants bring with them. What we're dealing with in the teaching of teachers and in the teaching of writing is communication. If we decide on only one approach to teaching, we'll be duplicating the sort of error we made when we taught "openness" without standards or "basics" without personality. Communication is one of the "basics" we need to get back to, and the multilevel professional organization and multilevel workshop is a good way to get back to it.

Notes

[1]Ken Macrorie, *Uptaught* (New York: Harper, 1970) and *Telling Writing* (New York: Hayden, 1970).

[2]The association of Indiana Teachers of Writing is open to teachers of writing on the elementary, middle, secondary, and college level. Interested persons should contact Dr. Ronald Strahl, Director, Writing Program, IUPUI, Cavanaugh Hall, Indianapolis, Indiana 46202.

[3]This diagnostic exam was developed by Professors Edwin F. Casebeer and Ronald Strahl at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. Professor Casebeer, now Chairman of the English Department, implemented the testing program in 1971.

[4]The term "brainstorming" is used by Andrew W. Hart and James A. Reinking in their text *Writing for Career Education Students* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 24 and elsewhere.

[5]Frank J. D'Angelo, *Process and Thought in Composition,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1980).

[6]See note 5.

[7]Joseph Comprone, *From Experience to Expression: A College Rhetoric,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

[8]William Strong, *Sentence Combining: A Composing Book* (New York: Random House, 1973).

[9]Kenneth Koch, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?: Teaching Great Poetry To Children* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

[10]Richard Ohmann and W. B. Coley, eds., *Ideas for English 101: Teaching Writing in College* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975).

[11]Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* (Urbana: NCTE, 1977).

[12]The NCTE does have a new publication especially for high school teachers on this topic: David Powell, ed., *What Can I Write About?: 7,000 Topics for High School Students* (Urbana: NCTE, 1981).

[13]Professor Ronald Strahl, Director, Writing Program at IUPUI, has developed a clear and useful criteria sheet to assist faculty members in assessing student compositions.