TEACHING COMPOSITION: GOALS, DEFINITIONS, AND STRATEGIES

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The word is out: composition is in. It is so far in, in fact, that English departments are hardly doing or thinking about anything else these days. At one level this emphasis is entirely appropriate. The teaching of writing had, until recently, been so neglected — relegated to the basement of our disciplinary activities where drones disguised as graduate students were forced to labor in darkness until they could tread the stairs to the upper storeys of literature — that its present importance must be seen as a much-needed correction.

Like other kinds of corrections, however, the recoil from neglect to prominence is in some respects more violent than is needed. Composition has almost become the specialized tail wagging the disciplinary dog. Since this seems true — since composition seems to be the most valuable stock in our disciplinary portfolio at present — then there are some fundamental, almost primitive, issues we absolutely *must* get clear about if we are to sustain the development of composition's importance with intellectual and academic integrity, not to mention with sound programs and curricula. These issues are simple to state, but how we meet them determines the character of everything else we do.

First, we have to be clear about our *aims* in teaching writing, both for the student and for the larger society in which he or she will inevitably play a role. Second, we have

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to be clear about the *kind* of writing we want to teach, which means that we have to have some operating definition — preferably a theory of writing, but, if not that, at least a working definition — of what sort of writing we want our students to learn. Third, we have to be clear about the *teaching strategies* we are going to use. In what follows I am going to sketch, briefly, my views on these three issues, not to wrap up but to open up, discussion. It is important for us who teach writing to fertilize each others' notions about its theory and practice. *College English, College Composition and Communication,* and *Language Arts* for instance, innumerable conferences, and the formation of new organizations (such as the Indiana Teachers of Writing) all provide teachers of writing the forum they need for sharing and criticizing each other's ideas and practices.

I

There are at least three claims that teachers of writing need to make and defend concerning the *aims* of teaching writing, the why of our collective enterprise. First, we need to claim that writing is one of those indispensable skills — like knowing how to balance a check book, how to count change, or how to read a road map — without which it is almost impossible to operate in modern society. It is a nearly indispensable skill for employment in today's world, a claim that is surely true not just nearly, but universally, for college graduates. Even scientists, engineers, nurses, technicians, and policemen have to write volumes in today's versions of their jobs; the business world veritably floats in a sea of memos; people who work in government, social services, management, teaching, the ministry, journalism, real estate, and insurance — to mention a few examples — are constantly forced to explain, describe, defend, or analyze in writing what they do on their jobs.

Our first aim, therefore, as teachers of writing is to make people verbally sophisticated enough to handle these modern-day jobs with effectiveness. A few years ago this practical argument was not much credited by students, many of whom thought that they really could get along in the non-university world without writing skills. As the public outcry against functional illiteracy grows louder, however, and as more and more employees in industry, management, and business return to college for refresher courses in writ-

ing because they simply cannot avoid embarrassing themselves, or rendering themselves unintelligible, every time they touch pen to paper, the claims about the practicality of writing begin to sound more and more persuasive to more and more people.

Above and beyond practical claims, however, a second reason for teaching writing is the contribution it makes to student development. Writing is one of the most important ways in which students create and develop an increased awareness of themselves and their world. The discipline of constructing cogent, thoughtful, and developed responses to ideas, social issues, politics, religion, or any other human activity, forces students, will they or nil they, to question unexamined opinions based merely on prejudice, habit, or external authority. As this happens, of course, the world is not only enriched by the blossoming of more thoughtfully grounded opinions than it formerly possessed, but the writer examining his opinions has in fact enriched his or her own life. As James Miller argues in *Word, Self, Reality,* writing creates a more shaped and developed personality, a self (or ethos, as the Greeks taught us to say), because the necessity of choosing words when we write becomes, in fact, the act of making up our minds about things, and that act, in turn, determines not only *what* we are (in the sense of whether, for example, we hold Democratic or Republican, conservative or liberal opinions), but *who* we are (in the sense of bringing our opinions, as Socrates advocated, to as high a level of self-awareness and scrutiny as possible).

A third reason for teaching writing is the contribution it makes to our political and social life. The survival of a functioning democracy depends upon its citizenry generally possessing some developed degree of critical intelligence. Modern citizens have to decode and, ultimately, resist a multitude of daily appeals designed to seduce, coerce, or hoodwink them into buying this product, supporting that cause or candidate, signing this petition, or ascribing to that argument. A supple and active critical intelligence — one that is not simply a retreat to scepticism about everything but can take both the offense and defense — doesn't just come to one like a suntan, by basking in the rays of someone else's authority or superior intelligence. It must be earned. Since writing cannot be taught apart from reading, and since the twin acts of reading and writing are the primary means by which critical intelligence is acquired,

then it follows that the writing class is one of the best places in the world to begin to learn that skill.

II

The implication that what university students do in writing class is develop critical intelligence brings me to the second issue I said we need to get clear about: the *kind* of writing we think it best to teach. In my opinion the teaching of writing at the university level should concentrate on developing the skills of critical inquiry and critical argument. By this I mean that students should learn how to probe arguments and ideas, see how they are constructed, and recognize the strategies that make them effective. This is all a necessary part of their learning to make independent arguments of their own. They can no more learn to make their own arguments without studying the already written arguments of others — preferably by the best arguers the language has to offer — than they can learn to master the piano without ever having heard anyone else play it.

This position clearly implies what I think writing at the university level is *not.* It should not be mere affective burble and not mere self-expression as ends to the writing process. I say this because I take the purpose of writing classes to be one and the same with the purpose of a liberal education, which has the aim of lifting students up and out of indulgent self-absorption, in order to make them worthy participants and contributors within the larger life of the culture and community around them. The goal of a liberal education is not to help students "discover themselves" — at least not in the simplistic, therapeutic, self-indulgent sense that phrase usually possesses — but to discover the world around them.

Writing classes that encourage students to be expressive rather than analytical, indulgent rather than critical, and self-accepting rather than self-examining, cut right across the grain of liberal arts objectives. To substitute *exclusively* practical objectives, as is now common, puts writing classes in the same category as auto mechanics: learn to grease up your commas and fine tune your antecedents, students are told, and your sentences will possess enough mechanical ingenuity to get themselves rolling. To substitute mere affective burble as the only objective puts writing classes in the same category as therapy: learn to let your feelings spill out, students are told; learn to hear yourself and like yourself, and you may not only be lucky enough to create sentences

that possess real power as emotional cries, but make you feel good too.

The substitution in writing classes of merely mechanical and therapeutic objectives for liberal arts objectives is not the product of plots or conspiracies, but of real confusion about the history and role of writing within culture. It is worthwhile remembering, for example, that in the history of all societies and all languages that we know anything about the first writings to be cherished, preserved, and passed on have not been the office memo, the job application, the thank-you letter, or the affective moans of adolescents wondering what their lives mean, but epic poetry. The first writings that societies valued enough to save (even when all else was being lost) were neither utilitarian nor expressive, but highly-charged, symbolic, powerfully-structured views of a given culture's perceptions of itself, its history, and its gods and goddesses. It is not the business of writing classes, of course, to teach students to write epic poems (although one sneak assignment in this vein might terrify a whole class into being uniformly attentive and alert, even riveted, and might be justified on those grounds alone), but to teach them to begin forming ideas and opinions neither in mechanical nor narcissistic blindness, but in relation to the world of people, events, feelings, and values coursing around them and forming the inescapable context of their own lives. For meeting this objective only writing conducted as critical inquiry and argument will do.

In addition to the skill of critical inquiry, the kind of writing we teach at the university level should also develop the skill of rhetoric. Writing as critical inquiry implies that writing should have analytical rigor, but does not necessarily point to the means of achieving passion, charm, conviction, tone, or voice — those features that make essays not just exercises of the intellect but acts of communication. Dully wielding one's logical bludgeon, or, worse, using that carefully neutral voice that suggests the writer is either an anonymous committee or a very clever computer may be writing, but it is not rhetoric.

Writing as rhetoric is creating a voice that reaches persuasively toward — at its most effective it is a voice that reaches persuasively *into* — the heart and mind of a reader. It is the attempt, as Sidney said of poetry, "to paint a speaking picture" that draws the reader not only within the sphere

of the writer's meaning, but within the sphere of his or her character, his or her *created* character, his or her rhetorical voice.

As this definition implies, rhetoric is a powerful tool. Because of the abuse to which this powerful tool has been put — mainly dishonest manipulation — some people will always think of rhetoric as a perfidious, sneaking activity. They are right to be wary. The powerful rhetorician, like the poet, can dazzle, softening his listeners' critical judgments and bending their wills into the shape of his well-chosen words. The spell that Coleridge enchants in "Kubla Khan" to protect one from the power of the poet could be equally applied to the rhetorician: "And all should cry Beware! Beware!/His flashing eyes, his floating hair!/Weave a circle round him thrice,/And close your eyes with holy dread,/For he on honeydew hath fed,/And drunk the milk of Paradise."

Rhetoric dished out to serve unethical or manipulative ends, however, is not proof of some intrinsic corruption in rhetoric itself; it is only proof, available to us in a thousand other examples, that human beings can turn any tool of reason or imagination to evil ends if they so desire. The proper defense against rhetoric used unethically — proper because it is the only workable defense — is not to turn our eyes sanctimoniously away, which only renders us more vulnerable, and not to denigrate its every appearance, which only renders us obstinate, but to learn to tell good rhetoric from bad, honest persuasion from dishonest persuasion. This can only be done if we study its devices and techniques well enough to know when they are being used against us. Our students, in other words — and we teachers along with them — need to know how to use rhetoric, how to resist its use in others, and when it is more appropriate to do one or the other.

III

As for the third of those issues I began by saying we must get clear about — the issue of what practical strategies to use in teaching — I have three points to make. First, I think we have to attack head-on the issue of what is practical versus what is impractical. I have already alluded to the fact that finally, at long last, English teachers are being listened to about the practicality of writing. Frankly, however, I do not expect our arguments on this score to be attended to forever. The moment SAT scores go up a few points and the

moment that industry, business, and government stop complaining so loudly about functional illiteracy among their employees, teachers of writing will find themselves right back where they were seven or eight years ago. They will be accused of fostering elitism, or cultivating school-marmism, or peddling an anachronistic craft in an age dominated by word processors and print-out terminals. The fact is that arguments for doing *anything* on practical grounds alone simply become boring once the practical urgencies that initially made them appear vivid have faded. The arguments that learning to write well can lead to good jobs are unquestionably valid; but practical arguments will hold our attention and loyalty only for as long as the practical conditions that brought them into existence, and no longer. If we want our students to care about being literate one day longer than the present movement to combat the nation's low SAT scores, which are finally recognized as scandalous, then we must have some argument that is grounded on more than practical reasons alone.

We can base such an argument, I think, on a commonsense appeal to universal experience. After all, it is easy to show that most of the things that attract us in life — especially those things that call forth our deepest commitments — do not attract us on practical grounds. We don't believe in God; love our families; devote ourselves to art, music, religion, or sports; respect our friends; fight for our country; or fall in love because these things are "practical;" nor do we, at a shallower level, buy fashionable clothes, attend sports events, spend money on hobbies, go to the movies, enjoy eating out, or take time to play games because *these* are practical. From the superficial to the sublime, the objects that command our *deepest* loyalties do so not because they are objects of utility or profit, but because they are objects of desire, and desire is a river that seldom flows passively between practical banks. As Saul Bellow observes in the opening paragraph of his novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet,* human beings fill the world with rational sounding explanations of the things they do, but the truth of the matter more often than not simply boils down to this: "The soul wants what it wants."

If practicalities were all that interested us, for example, we would view clothing merely as protection from the elements and not use it to identify ourselves socially or make ourselves attractive; we would take care that our food is ade-

quate and nutritious, but we would not develop thousands of cookbooks and restaurants or worry about obesity as a national health problem; we would take the university courses required by our future jobs without any regard for those extra-curricular activities, social affairs, or dormitory discussions that we take for granted as part of university life. We applaud the practical man, but we know that unrelieved work makes people haggard and dull, not fulfilled.

Even in tribal societies where existence hangs by a thread on permanently scanty means of subsistence — as in Eskimo culture before the introduction of technology — one still finds a devotion to art, ritual, laughter, and games. On the American frontier where settlers found life mainly hard and the future uncertain, they still carved their chests, tooled their saddles, and stitched their quilts into hundreds of patterns taking hundreds of hours. There is no society — however rude in technology — where art and religion, craft and decoration, ritual and games, do not exist. This points to a crucial fact about human nature: that while we cannot survive without our practical activities, the only things that make survival attractive or worthwhile are our impractical activities. As John Ciardi put it, human beings require "both orders of existence."

Whether we are watching someone else do something impractical (acrobats walking the high wire, halfbacks returning a sixty yard punt for a touchdown) or whether we are doing some impractical activity ourselves (customizing a car; playing tennis, chess, or cards; reading Russian novels; learning to play a piccolo), the point is that we do them because they enrich and quicken the very sense of being alive, not because they are practical. Our amusements and diversions, hobbies and games, talents and sports, and especially our loves, touch us too deeply for their value or attraction to be calculated in the currency of self-interest, practicality, or profit. With all due respect, then, to the realm of practicality, and with full recognition that we could not survive without it, we must nevertheless assert that to be forced to live in that realm exclusively might simplify life, but would also impoverish it unbearably.

In some such terms as these, I think, we must square off against the accusation that has plagued us with increasingly demoralizing effects for the last few decades, the accusation that what we do and what we teach are not really practical. When the present crop of arguments about writing's practi-

cality ceases being the vogue — do not all current vogues become *passé* by their very nature? — then we must be prepared to replace them with arguments that are not only timely, but timeless. And we should start building them now.

The second strategy I have to recommend is that we should not rely on one strategy. We should keep steady focus on a fixed set of aims, I think, but when it comes to a matter of assignments and exercises, variety is more useful than repetition. In a given semester, for example, I may make the first assignment a conventional one in which I require the students to discuss, define, explain, or analyze some issue or topic, and I make written comments in the margins of their papers, winding up with a brief assessment of their effort as a whole, followed by a grade at the end. The next assignment, however, may involve a workshop in which I divide the class into groups of four or five students, requiring each member of each group to bring sufficient copies of his or her paper for the other members of the group to read, and requiring each of them to criticize each other's work — using a check-list of criteria supplied by me — before they hand in the final draft of their paper at the next class session. The next assignment may involve their handing in a draft to me, followed by individual conferences in which all students and I go over their drafts individually before they prepare a final draft for grading. Another assignment may involve very specific directions for development of the topic, while the next one yet may be very general. Varying the class room strategy not only helps to avoid monotony, but gives each student a chance to find some assignment that calls forth his or her best effort.

The third strategy I have to recommend is a methodology for teaching based on the model of Aristotle's four-part, causal analysis of objects. Aristotle's scheme of analysis is designed to explain the existence of things in terms of their fundamental, necessary causes, those causes, that is, without reference to which one could not possibly account for any object's having the shape and function that one actually sees it to possess in its concrete particularity.

Aristotle's four causes are the material cause, the matter *out* of which, or the medium *in* which, an object exists; the efficient cause, the technical manner by which the material is worked up, the technical mode by which the matter is shaped and formed; the formal cause, the organiza-

tional design, or the blueprint, that operates as the organizing principle — the literal constructive principle — of the object's making; and, finally, the final cause, the purpose for which the object is being made, the function it is intended to fulfill.

To illustrate briefly how this scheme of analysis works, Aristotle would say of a simple object such as a shoe, for example, that its material cause is leather, nails, thread, and glue; its efficient cause is cutting, gluing, pressing, and nailing; its formal cause is the imaginative model in the shoemaker's head, or possibly the drawn design that copies his imaginative model; and its final cause, or function, is to provide a protective covering for the foot. Of all the things that might be said about this scheme of analysis — and many things have been said, of course, by commentators on Aristotle — I need say only three things here before suggesting how it can be adapted for use in composition classes. First, this mode of analysis always operates *a posteriori;* second, it always operates on particulars; and third, it enables one to define in an extremely precise way an object's *necessary* causes of existence as opposed to its merely accidental or peripheral causes. Writing an essay on writing, for example, is an accidental cause — an accident of my biography — and the kind of paper I wrote my first draft on is a peripheral cause, but neither of these causes is capable of explaining why my essay says the particular things it says or why, in short, it is this way and not some other way.

The obvious question at this point is, how may this scheme be used in teaching composition? Clearly it must be adapted, not transplanted. Teaching Aristotle's theory of causes simply as a mode of thinking might be intellectually enriching, or intellectually terrifying, depending on your taste for adventure, but is not going to teach a freshman to write better compositions without being given some special kind of application, or context. The potential adaptation to essay writing, however, is not difficult. The material cause of an essay is the words out of which it is made; the efficient cause is the narrative tone; the formal cause is the governing scheme of organization, or pattern of development; and the final cause is the specific set of responses aimed at being elicited from the reader.

Properly adapted, this model of analysis translates into four strategies for writing any given essay. The material

cause, or words, encompasses all the strategies of style: the effective and appropriate use of images, descriptions, metaphors, similes, symbols, and other general figures of speech as well as such features of sentence structure as rhythms, antithesis, kinds of verbs, and the quality of adjectives. The efficient cause, or technical manner, encompasses all the strategies of tone: those devices that establish the writer's relationship to his or her topic; the devices that allow the writer to speak clinically, objectively, moralistically, ironically, earnestly, or comically; the devices that allow the writer to appear as the reader's friend, teacher, fellow-learner, or authority; and the devices that allow the writer to be aggressive, incisive, tentative, indirect, inquiring, serious, or nonchalant. The formal cause, or blueprint, encompasses all the strategies of organization: cause and effect, particular to general, climactic order, anti-climactic order, or comparison and contrast. The final cause, or purpose, encompasses all the strategies of intention (the specific kind of effect the writer intends his or her piece to achieve): a satiric effect if one is ridiculing something, or persuasive effect if one is aiming to shape the reader's opinions, an emotional effect if one is aiming at the passions, an ethical effect if one is attempting to form the reader's moral judgment, or a comic effect if one is trying to be funny. In all of these causes the lists are intended to be merely descriptive, not exhaustive.

While this adaptation of Aristotle's scheme, skimpy as it is, probably suggests clearly enough how it can be used for *analyzing* essays, two questions emerge: first, how can it be used in teaching the *writing* of essays, and, second, what are its special virtues or advantages as a pedagogical method? The great advantage of this method is that it rationalizes a process heretofore invested with a terrifying mysteriousness. The writing process is rationalized, moreover, never in terms of abstractions, but always in terms of particulars. Aristotle's method of analysis, in other words, offers the student a way of criticizing his or her successive drafts according to a set of criteria not located obscurely in the teacher's mind, but in the governing intention of the essay itself. The method, in other words, provides students with a logical procedure that runs as follows. First, the writer must decide about his or her intentionality (Aristotle's final cause): What effect do I want to have on my audience? Second, the writer must decide about tone (efficient cause):

What pose, or tone, is going to be appropriate to my overall purpose? Third, the writer must decide about organization (formal cause): What ordering of reasons, evidence, and rhetoric is going to be most effective for my overall aim? And, finally, the writer must decide about style (material cause): What choice of words, similes, metaphors, symbols, allusions, and so forth, are appropriate to the intention, tone, and design of my argument?

Rationalizing the process this way does not mean that students will always answer these questions in the most effective manner, but it does have the virtue of focusing attention on the qualitative, not quantitative, principles of construction. The convention of beginning a writing class by focusing on the necessity of, and search for, a thesis, for example, forces students to begin considering *how* they are to say a thing, but such considering — or so it has always seemed to me — occurs in a vacuum if the more fundamental consideration is not actively considered first, namely, the question of what *kind* of effect — ethical, intellectual, emotional, or whatever — the writer aims to create in the understanding and feelings of his or her reader.

The method also rationalizes the process of teacher review and criticism. Both the teacher and the student of composition are freed by this method from the vagueness of such revision suggestions as "use lively language" or "make sure you have a thesis," for the Aristotelian model transforms every such general consideration into a set of specific questions: "Are these images appropriate to your governing intention?" or "Is this kind of design consistent with your tone in this particular essay?" The standards of good writing implied by this model suggest to the beginning writer that all the strategies in a given essay must somehow cohere, must not only be consistent with each other but consistent also with the governing intention of the piece as a whole. But it does more than just suggest that wholeness is a virtue: it orients the writer toward an entire range of concrete concerns that actually make for wholeness.

In response to the second question — what are the particular advantages of this model for teaching? — I would like to suggest, first, that this model provides the beginning writer with a way of thinking about the activity of writing as a kind of craft. When the beginning writer is forced — as he or she is by this model — to go beyond the simple question "What do I want to say?" to the more objective and, as it

were, external set of questions such as "How do these particular stylistic devices, this particular tone, and this particular design advance my governing intention?" then he or she is learning something about the objective requirements of form and coherence, requirements which can only be learned by experience, never by abstract precept.

The second main advantage of this model based on Aristotle is the way it goes beyond the confusingly simple distinction — common to all rhetorical theory since Quintillian, Horace, and Cicero — between *res* and *verba,* things and words. When beginning writers are taught to think of writing as balancing some kind of equation in which the right words on one side of the formula are matched with a given set of ideas on the other side, then what they are *not* learning is to see how intentionality — Aristotle's final cause — governs both the words and the ideas. Aristotle's is the only scheme of rhetoric that is based on a four-fold distinction among the qualitative elements. All the others are based on two-fold distinctions. Clearly the two-fold distinction works. Writers have been thinking of their activity as explainable in terms of words and ideas for centuries, but the beginning writer — our typical freshman of the 1980's — is going to be much better served, I think, by a composition methodology that forces him or her to see that writing is not merely achieved by matching up words and ideas, but by creating a coherent wholeness among words used in a particular way (material cause), that strike a particular tonal relationship between the writer and his subject (efficient cause), according to a governing design (formal cause), employed to achieve a specific, not merely a general, intention (final cause).

In conclusion, I should make it clear that using this model does not require one to teach Aristotle. One may go through a whole course without ever mentioning his name or reading his works. (It isn't necessary, and he wouldn't mind.) One would do better, in fact, to introduce his scheme of causal analysis independently of his writings, as a part of class discussion. This model may be employed, moreover, in conjunction with conventional texts and readers. The strategies of rhetoric presented in most texts may be easily ordered under Aristotle's four-part, causal scheme of analysis allowing students, I think, to see more logical credibility in the conventionally arranged strategies than they usually do. This model, moreover, provides both students

and teachers a way of deriving standards for good writing that are ultimately grounded in the needs of particular arguments and the necessity for wholeness, not in what students often perceive, I fear, as the arbitrary and capricious affectations of us, their teachers, whose only claim to a paycheck, from their point of view, is that we sit, like judges in the underworld, determining who shall successfully navigate that mysterious and cabalistic rite of passage called English 101. A methodology that takes us even a small distance beyond the nerve-fraying, adversary relationship we too often endure would be very welcome. A methodology that actually works in making students better writers would be even more welcome yet.