THE WRITE RIGHT IMAGE

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No one has to tell us that we as teachers are under fire. President Reagan said in a recent speech about teachers, "Hard-earned tax dollars should encourage the best. They have no business rewarding incompetence and mediocrity." Parents blame teachers for everything from low SAT's to broken windows in the cafeteria. The public thinks we are illiterate. The view of the teacher as mentor, sage, respected professional is gone. Our image is tarnished.

We are both teachers; each of us represents only a part of the community of professional teachers. If only one of us were to write about teacher image, we might present a distorted view. Together we can bring a more honest perspective on who we are both corporately and individually. We spent many hours this summer debating, discussing, and reflecting on our profession, talking about writing teachers in particular and the image or images we project. We came to a common understanding that as teachers of writing we are much more alike than we are different; we share similar problems and have similar goals. It might be worth our while to think of ourselves as one — elementary, middle school, high school and college teachers — as we investigate the image problems we have.

Image is quite a buzz word today. It is certainly a public relations word. There is a sense in which the word *image* has come to mean a false front, a public facade rather than a true reflection of a person or group. The recent case of newscaster Christine Craft and the image consultants who were more concerned with her visual style than her journalistic ability illustrates our fascination with image making. But Webster tells us that *image* means not only something seen in the mind but also "to reflect, to mirror as water does." In other words, a true reflection. Getting at the core of our im-

age problems as teachers means being willing to take a close look at ourselves, an honest look at ourselves in the mirror — warts and all. We need to look honestly at not only what the public thinks of us but what we think of each other, what we think of our students and what we think of ourselves.

It's not too hard to figure out what the public thinks of us. It began with the maxim — "If you can, do — if you can't, teach," and it's been going downhill since. We must be the only profession in the world that has outsiders ready and willing to tell us how to do our jobs. Every critic from Phyllis Shafley to James Kilpatrick has the answer to reading and writing problems. The public sees us as too arbitrary — the keepers of the flame — the police of the language. You have probably had the experience we have had many times. "Oh, you are a writing teacher or an English teacher. I'd better watch what I say." Most of us do see ourselves as knowledgeable about language skills, but we don't spend our time going around listening for and correcting everyone's grammar errors. Perhaps we haven't done a very good job of letting outsiders in on what we really do, what we really concern ourselves with.

Administrators are part of that outside public too, and they certainly have a distorted image of us. Many equate teaching writing with teaching spelling. They are used to seeing the product as the justification for used time, so they think three days of writing should result in three finished themes. An administrator we know well equated the teaching of basic writing skills to the teaching of creative writing. After several hours of discussion with him on process-based writing curriculum, he said, "Well I'm not sure all these kids need to know how to write poetry."

Not only does the public see us as the "graders" of the world, they see us as, "user perfect." We are always expected to be above error. And to top it off, the public wants to measure our effectiveness by their children's success. How easy our jobs would be if it were only a matter of plugging students in, turning on the teaching machine, and spitting them out all finished and smart.

In spite of the fact that the public expects the impossible from us and has been so vehement in its recent criticisms, we can see some hope behind the wall of rancor and ignorance.

People are saying to writing teachers, "Shape up; do

your job," but they are also saying, "Tell us what to do; tell us what is right and wrong." As we gain expertise ourselves in the discipline of teaching writing, as we develop strategies for teaching writing, based not only on just correcting grammar errors, but based on a thorough understanding of the knowledge on which our discipline is structured, we will begin to have some answers for those critics. The most recent Carnegie report, which supports so strongly the need for teaching writing and language skills, provides us with the perfect opportunity to clarify images for the public in terms of what we do and the complexities involved in how we do it. We have a real opportunity to make the teaching of writing a corporate act, joining teachers with parents and administrators and gaining public support for our efforts to improve the literacy of our students.

While we are about adjusting our image for the public, perhaps we should also consider the image we convey to our students. If they, in fact, acquire many of their perceptions from the adults with whom they live and interact, we might reasonably expect the views of the writing teacher held by students to be nothing more than imprecise, nothing less than confused. Small wonder, since in their eyes our most recognizable trait is our chameleon-like character: from course to course, year to year, semester to semester — alas, from week to week, they see in us a bit of everyone from Miss Fidditch, Martin Joos' militant guardian of the English Department Standard Clock, to Macrorie's laid-back, idea-seeking, interaction-promoting coach on the other. Regardless the disposition they perceive, however, or the credibility they attach to our approach to teaching writing, they are likely to see all of us as people of power. For not only do we continually engineer, examine, and assess their thoughts, but also we judge their ability to articulate them. Thus, on their private act of thinking we impose professional standards; on their public act of writing, we expose language vulnerability. That is power, power of a frightening magnitude. Thus, what we intend as noble deeds — coaxing, enlarging, expanding, and refining the language repertoire to higher and clearer levels of thought — may be easily interpreted as pejorative, capricious, even diabolical.

For example, one may at first feel indignant, but subsequently not too surprised, to read in the school newspaper a student letter to the editor which says in part, "When we are taught one thing one year and expected to forget it and learn

another the next, we are hindered both in the development of our writing and in our freedom of style . . . And when teachers mark down those papers which don't reflect their own thoughts or fail to conform to the Holy Law of the Period and the Comma, they are displaying a closed-mindedness which is an insult to the liberal arts." One of Ron Strahl's students puts it more succinctly: "You never really knew what you were eating in lunch or learning in English."

Such perceptions of teachers may seem localized and arbitrary, but they are not far removed from Janet Emig's finding that when students discover the discrepancy between how they are told to write and what happens when they do write, they consistently reveal outward conformity but inward cynicism and hostility.

This is not to say, of course, that students carry only negative images of writing teachers. Each of us has our private treasure of testimonials from grateful students who have assured us we've done something right, at least for them. The danger in trusting such testimonials too far, however, is that they can beguile us into believing that if our teaching worked for that student, it most surely worked for all the others.

There are those also who say how students perceive us is of little consequence since students tend to be fickle in their judgments, too limited in knowledge or experience to offer anything of a constructive nature. Yet when forced to admit it, most of us really do want the approval of our students, most of us are willing to take seriously their remarks about our teaching, and most of us are occasionally haunted by their sometimes startling insights.

As we consider how our students perceive us, perhaps we should entertain some notions about our own behaviors which are directly related to student perceptions:

1. that because language is a fluid medium, we must resist imposing on the student controls which are little more than vehicles of classroom management; the rule which seems to facilitate more than liberate perhaps bears another look;
2. that we must strive to discover the psychological nature of the writing process instead of merely demanding a logical product;
3. that the longer we teach, the more we must work to maintain our enthusiasm for teaching writing — those writing habits we observe for the 10th, 20th, or

100th time are, amazingly, still new to students;

4. that the surest way to keep in touch with the student experience is to be practicing writers ourselves. We especially like the way Donald Graves puts it: "We should push ourselves — and our students — to write what they do not expect to say, for the excitement of writing is the surprise of hearing what you did not expect to hear."

In the faculty lounge recently, a teacher said, "Oh all of this theory is a good idea, but my students are so unmotivated and, well I hate to say dumb — but, they just couldn't handle this material." No one questions the fact that there are "unmotivated" students out there in our classes and that not all students are gifted. But perhaps because we do have negative experiences with students, we can tend to generally underrate them *and* make them carry the whole burden of motivation. If we are intent on understanding ourselves, we must be willing to admit that imbedded in our image problem are the perceptions we have of the students we teach.

For instance, we set ourselves up for negative responses from students and criticism from parents because we almost always define our students in terms of what they don't know. We build courses and curricula around their weaknesses and point those weaknesses out both to them and to ourselves with the best device we have for illustrating inadequacies — the diagnostic test. We have a tendency to see ourselves as the givers and the students as the takers. We can so easily assume that they don't bring any knowledge to us.

Not only can we fall into the trap of seeing students as unlearned, we can also fall in the trap of closing them out by closing ourselves in our special world with its own rules and language. In our need to organize our discipline, to formulate and manage our subject matter, we create our own rules and language and assume students need to work with our organizational framework to learn. Of course it is much easier to manage rules of punctuation than to manage thoughts, so we find ourselves evaluating the quantifiable data instead of levels of learning. We must not forget that students don't need to know how to identify an adjective to use one effectively.

Because we are experienced professionals, we assume we know what students want and what is best for them. But recent research on college students and teachers by Barbara Jones indicates that students and teachers don't share

common goals at all for classrooms. In a 1978 dissertation written at Ball State University, Jones states that teachers misjudged the maturity level of their students and assumed that students wanted far more freedom in the classroom than the students actually thought they could handle.

We can also find ourselves falling into the trap of equating writing with literature and therefore assuming that if students can't or don't read, they can't write because they don't have anything to say or because they don't understand the conventions of the discipline.

In reality, we have solid gold in what students bring us in raw data — new experiences unencumbered with rules, or literacy devices. Their freshness *is* their image. And we know that. Every one of us is a teacher because of that fact. Perhaps Dorothy Heathcote describes best the powerful position teachers are in when they stand in front of their students when she says, "The teacher is in a pivotal position in relation to time — somewhere between all that has happened up to a given moment and all that may happen after that moment in relation to the group. From such a position, the teacher is responsible for feeding stimulating information to the students and simultaneously eliciting all past experiences available to the group at the present moment. By so doing, and by relying on whatever conjecture of the imagination the group is capable of, the teacher enables the students to create a living, moving picture of life, which aims at surprise and discovery for the participants rather than for any onlookers." As long as we remind ourselves that teaching and learning go hand in hand, and that teacher *and* student bring valuable information to the class, students will like what they see in us.

In subsequent remarks on the role of the teacher, Heathcote reveals not only the importance of the self-image the teacher possesses, but also the tentative nature of that image in the language arts. She reminds us that the images we have of ourselves as teachers of writing are inevitably reflected in how our students feel about and choose to use language. Her notion of the teacher as a pivot also suggests an interesting dimension to the problem of our self-concept — the idea of tension, perpetual tension, in fact. For the burden of responsibility informs one part of the vision we hold of ourselves, the promise of opportunity another; the specter of accountability tugs at one side of our psyche, the urge to experiment and initiate change at the other; our sense of lan-

guage as a social instrument leads us toward the transactional with our students, our fascination with the intimacy of language toward the expressive. The tension is polar, Medieval, and from it emerge a variety of images we hold of ourselves:

1. The Devout, who teaches the book, whatever the adopted text happens to be, from cover to cover;
2. The Heretic, who pays homage both to the book and the curriculum guide, but teaches what he knows or likes;
3. The Indifferent, who swears that it doesn't matter what is taught, for writers are born not cultivated;
4. The Penitent, who dreads having to apologize once again for not getting around to writing until just before vacation;
5. The Resolute, who means to take a good look at writing this year but frequently, in the press of time, resurrects old lessons, some of which work reasonably well;
6. The Crusader, who has a gimmick and would love to market it;
7. The Damned, who takes so strong a position on language that she loses credibility among both her students and her colleagues;
8. The Contemplative, who is surprised and encouraged by even the smallest progress and, in turn, re-evaluates as he teaches;
9. The Faithful, who gets results because she believes she will get results and works to make her belief a reality.

The whole of what was just said is, of course, but a half-truth. Most of us do not see ourselves completely as any such type. Yet we do probably see vestiges of ourselves in a given image or in the range of images enumerated. Isn't that perhaps as it should be? Don't most of us aspire to being teachers who are creative, sensitive, and open to change while maintaining our sense of self-assurance and reliability? Surely becoming such a teacher depends on our ability to integrate our many selves into a teaching personality that works. One that works is one that changes. And change requires, of all things, tension — the strongest agent for clarifying our teaching personalities as we teach, the strongest guarantee that we are likely to remain positive influences on our students as they write. We become, then,

more Existential than Medieval, more descriptive than prescriptive, more formative than formulaic, more willing to deal with open decisions than closed issues.

One of the issues we need to keep open is how we view each other. We're very polite about it with each other, but the tensions are real. Probably no stronger biases or stereotypes exist than those we hold within the discipline — of each other. We are often guilty of assuming we have to start over every fall undoing what other teachers have done to our students. "Well, I just had to go back and start all over with the sentence," we say. We even pride ourselves in showing how ill-prepared our students were when we got them so we can illustrate all we have taught them in a year. All right, as Joan Rivers says, "Can we talk?" Let's begin with the elementary teachers. They're the ones at the bottom of the ladder, right? They can't hold a candle to the rest of us in terms of theoretical background and knowledge; they're too much the generalists. And the secondary teachers? The ones who had our students before we got them and never taught them a thing? They spend all of their time either coaching or getting ready to go on strike, right? All they want is a fast assignment, an easier way to get it done. And those college teachers — they are the snobs of education who think they have the corner on knowledge but couldn't survive a day in the public school classroom. College teachers are the ones who didn't train us very well to face the public schools in the first place and the ones who are so hardnosed that we spend all our time training our students to survive their ultimate test of writing — freshman composition — right? We even use college teachers to scare our students into doing what we want by saying, "You'll need this in college." Right? Wrong, of course, on all counts.

Why do we do this to each other? Some of these stereotypes can be traced back decades. Some are based on our own schooling experience. How many of those stereotypes describe your own attitudes? No wonder the public doesn't respect us. We don't respect each other very much. Isn't it about time to take a new look at our own house, to let go a little of our own turf and our own defensiveness? ITW has certainly afforded us the opportunity to do that these past two years.

We have learned that we share far more in common than we have differences. We all face public criticism, we all face students in a classroom every day, we all face almost

overwhelming administrative barriers, we all face low pay and low esteem, we all face few immediate rewards, but we all do it anyway. We all have a desire to be with the young — to teach, to make a difference.

We have also learned that intelligence, creativeness, theoretical knowledge aren't the exclusive territory of one group. Each group of teachers brings a needed perspective to the development of writing skills in students. We have heard elementary teachers speak with authority about research they have conducted on the writing process of young learners; we have seen middle school and high school teachers spend hours developing carefully designed curricular plans for implementing writing theory; and we have seen college teachers working with public school teachers and learning from them about the patterns of learning of young students.

We are all aware that real learning is not closeted in one classroom in one school, nor does it begin and end in the September to May cycle. If we are really going to make a difference, we will need to learn to trust and respect each other a little more, depend on each other a little more, and learn from each other a little more as we begin to move to an integrated writing curriculum — one that really does begin with K and move through to C.

Where better to begin than with the fresh image offered by an organization such as our own. As we both reflected this summer on the purpose and the progress of ITW, we read with some care the constitution, which states in a formal way what we are all about. It reiterates the need to deal directly and honestly with our public, our students, ourselves, and each other. Especially each other. Wherever teachers of English gather, there will be talk of writing and of teaching writing, but nowhere else can we gather to speak only of writing, which we consider significant — significant because, though we know of no one here who wishes to emphasize writing to the exclusion of any other of the language arts, we know of several who believe that the teaching of writing holds the greatest potential for truly integrating growth in thinking, speaking, and reading. We know of several who agree that historically we have both hidden our inadequacies as teachers of writing behind the curriculum in literature and, in turn, forced the curriculum in literature to bear excessive freight in the public school and university classroom. Indeed, it's a natural thing to do, since, although

most of us were not trained to teach either writing or literature, we spent the bulk of our time in literature classes and subsequently sought to translate our experience as students into the experience of teaching. Thus we have spent astronomical sums of money trying to cultivate literary tastes and inadvertently ignored cultivating literacy itself. It is sobering to think that Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, or even Judy Blume often fail us when we confront the potentially interesting but garbled messages we find scribbled through the student's own text. At the same time, it is stimulating to think that as the students gain control over the language of their own texts, they may learn to value even more the messages Judy Blume, Thomas Hardy, and Shakespeare are sending them.

Here, then, is a forum where we can concentrate on the ways that writing can improve the personal and academic growth of our students as we expose student-teacher stereotypes, debate issues on which we hold strong points of view, ask without apology or embarrassment the obvious question and expect an honest response; bring from the classroom whatever insights we gain from time to time and return to the classroom with our sites raised, our curiosity piqued, our self-esteem restored; show up and show off what we are learning and what we are writing; and, above all, reaffirm the recursive nature of what we teach by placing ourselves on a learning continuum right along with our students. Cloistering and martyrdom are out; collaboration and self-respect are in.

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