OPENING THE DOOR: WRITING AND THE SLOW LEARNER IN HIGH SCHOOL

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You have all met them: high school seniors or college freshmen, fearful of English, unsure of their future goals. They are woefully unskilled and have only rudimentary notions of conventional grammar, spelling, and usage. Sometimes they are the first in their families to graduate from high school. College has only recently entered their plans, and, even now, they are not sure why they are seeking more education nor what programs to take or careers to pursue. In fact, the only thing they *are* certain about is that they cannot write. Having experienced failure at least once in an English class, they expect more of the same. They know they have nothing worthwhile to say, and if they had, they lack the language skills with which to state their ideas. Starting a paper is somewhat analagous to beginning a diet for them. It is easier to postpone, rationalize, even cheat a bit, rather than follow a well organized, carefully thought out plan. Even though the results — a passing paper or five fewer pounds — may be desired ends, the path to that goal contains too many pitfalls and past failures.

Imagine a classroom of students such as the one I have identified. For some of you, the task should be fairly easy. I have just described your last writing class. Now, mix into this group a few students who have some ability but lack motivation. Instead of rising to the best within themselves, they have spent their years in apathy and boredom, doing just enough work to receive a *D*. Add a few students who have drinking, drug, or other emotional problems. Although they may have the potential to become skillful writers, they have never tried to do so.

Now you have an idea of the "slow" composition course taught at many high schools and universities today. While they may be known by different names or course titles, these classes differ little from one another. As stated in the curriculum guides, their purpose is to turn these students into WRITERS! Clearly the English teacher who can accomplish this transformation has to be nothing short of a magician.

But rather than a magician, I believe that English teachers who hope to succeed with the "slow" class need to view themselves as *locksmiths*. Imagine that, as the teacher, you have been given a very large ring on which dangle hundreds of keys. Your task is to find the right key or combination of keys that will unlock the ideas contained within these students. The process is very slow; there are many false attempts; the same key will usually not work in more than one lock; and some may have to be tried over and over before there is any success. Only a great deal of patience, a belief that indeed there is something of worth inside each student, and sufficient strategies for releasing the writer from his closed room are the true magic that any English teacher performs.

The purpose of my paper is to offer some approaches for getting at the ideas within these slow students, thus enabling them to produce clear, well organized prose. I plan to do this by addressing the students' needs on two levels. First, these timid and unskilled writers have to be given the self-confidence to believe that they do have something worthwhile to say on a topic. At the same time, they need to understand the writing process in order to communicate their thoughts to an audience. During the last decade, many teachers have heard or read about some of the research being done in writing; some have tried to transfer these theories to the classroom. I am one of these teachers, and I would like to begin by defining the writing process as I have interpreted it for the "slow" writing class. Writing is an ongoing activity that involves a number of recursive steps. They often can be divided into the following stages: the predrafting period which involves both invention and incubation; the drafting or composition stage which includes redrafting and revisions; and last the editing and publishing stage during which time the manuscript is edited carefully, then written in a final form and given to its intended audience.

There are a few specific techniques that I have used with some success to develop "slow" students' self-confidence while at the same time immerse them in the writing process. First is a group of activities that I use to begin a semester. This initial unit combines self-evaluation and goal setting with some pre-writing. I spend a week to a week and a half covering this material. My objectives are to establish a comfortable atmosphere within the class so that students can begin to think about what they would like to accomplish in the course and have them produce some samples without feeling anxious.

On the first day of class I challenge the students with a question concerning the relevancy of writing in an age of television, telephone, and other sophisticated forms of spoken and visual communication. Some students agree that writing may in fact be moving into obsolescence; perhaps they hope to thereby be spared from having to take this class. As the discussion develops, I encourage students to think about functions that writing does serve and which of these they consider to be important.

Some of the activities my class listed were sequencing of thoughts, preserving ideas, being precise, retaining memories, meeting legal obligations, communicating long distances cheaply, leaving records for those who come after us or learning about those who have lived at an earlier time, and bringing order out of confusion. We then move to a more personal level, all students compiling a list of writing that they have done in the last two days. They note which items were more effective in written form, and we discuss these as a group.

Another list that students can make is one that anticipates the type of writing they might have to do as part of their future lives. These are often quite specific and include such things as writing directions to a particular location; drawing up a business contract, lease, or insurance policy; preparing an ad to sell something; writing a letter for information; preparing a resume, etc. The discussions that are generated from these lists convince students of their personal stake in learning to write. The students' acceptance of the premise that writing is a valuable tool is necessary before any change in attitude can occur. Only then will they commit the energy and hard work required to learn this troublesome, even threatening skill.

To make students feel more comfortable, I introduce them to some prewriting activities that contain a light or humorous element while at the same time provide diagnostic information for both of us. One of these, borrowed from a colleague of mine, is to have the student correct a fictitious letter, supposedly written by a former student. The letter contains obvious errors in all areas of grammar and usage. Recognizing the mistakes made by another gives students the feeling they can begin to perform some editing for themselves and improve their own work. Items they fail to notice also help them diagnose weaknesses. Another, a more formal diagnostic tool, is a standardized grammar test, but I generally avoid it since the result of exposing the "slow" student to this type of test is to reinforce his feelings of inadequacy. Instead, I prefer to have my students prepare a few writing samples. I select topics that are guaranteed to bring a response. One of these is to ask students to reply to a short essay on why there is so much failure in schools today. They may agree with the author's premise or offer their own insights. Because many members of the class have experienced failure personally, they are already experts on the topic. A second writing sample takes the form of a letter to me. Students tell something about themselves, their progress in school, or their feelings about taking an English course. There seems to be something about the letter format that unlocks beginning writers' inhibitions, and they like the closer distance that a personal letter creates between teacher and student.

When evaluating these first samples, I respond in letter form as well, telling students something that I like about their writing. At the same time I identify areas that are weak and suggest that some of them might make good six week or semester goals. Teacher criticism seems more palatable when put into a personal letter, laying the foundation of trust between writer and audience.

In addition to diagnostic work, there are three additional topics that I pursue during these early weeks. The first is to assign journals, the second is to develop goal setting techniques, and the last is to hold individual conferences. Each activity continues throughout the semester and is designed to increase the students' comfort, confidence, and self-awareness. First I want to address the use of journals. They are not a new idea. Many teachers have used them with success, and I think there is an important place for the

journal in the "slow" class. I have found that journals are a means for increasing the amount, variety, creativity, and enjoyment of writing.

Once a week I set aside a specific day for journals. During that period I generate two or three "creative" assignments. I try to include an element of surprise or humor. At the same time the assignments are designed to augment the ongoing lesson. For example, to aid the students in their self awareness, a first step to writing a personal narrative, journal assignments might include such items as preparing a resume that identifies the students' qualifications for joining the first space voyage to Mars. In another, writers are asked to select one color, fruit, or song that they would like to be and explain their choice. When the star quarterback of the football team explained why we wanted to be an orange, he understood something new about himself. Coupled with in-class assignments are requirements for weekly entries outside of class. Here students are free to explore their own feelings, complain about a problem, or simply narrate an experience. Students are encouraged to decorate their journals in some way that reflects their personality. These covers become increasingly elaborate as the course progresses.

Sharing the journals with others in the class is another feature that is much enjoyed. Once students recognize the entertainment potential inherent in the assignments, they begin to write with greater audience awareness and confidence in their new found skills. I give a formal evaluation to the journals once a grading period, usually every five to six weeks. While I do not comment on grammar, sentence constructions, or usage, I do expect journals to conform to certain standards of number, form, content, and creativity.

The second topic that I cover during this first unit is goal setting. Once having completed their writing samples, students can begin, with the help of my comments, to diagnose some of their strengths and weaknesses. They can then establish a priority list of what they would like to accomplish and prepare a set of specific goals for the first grading period. At a later time, they are encouraged to develop goals for the entire semester as well. To help in this process, I give them some information about how to set realistic goals and suggest the types of goals they might want to consider. Eventually I meet with each student, holding the first of what becomes a series of individual conferences conducted regu-

larly. I have found that slow students respond favorably to a one-on-one approach. They like asking questions and discussing specific writing problems privately rather than in front of an entire class. I consider the time allotted for individual conferencing extremely important and worthwhile.

Having outlined some of the techniques that I have used to initiate "slow" students to a writing class, I would now like to cover an abbreviated unit similar to one that I teach in the first third of the course. I introduce this unit inductively with a pre-writing assignment involving collaborative writing. It usually takes one or more class periods to accomplish all parts of the exercise and share the results.

Collaborative Writing: The Game

Step 1: Creating the Game
Using the deck of cards that you have been given, your group is to create a simple card game that can be played by two to four people. After the game has been created, you are to try to play it.

Step 2: Writing the Instructions
Once satisfied with the game, your group is to title it, then write instructions for playing that include: a) procedure, b) rules, c) criteria for determining winners and losers.

Step 3: Playing
While other groups in the class try to follow your instructions, you are to play the games developed by them.

Step 4: Evaluating
During this trial playing period, your group will evaluate the directions for each game and rate it on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best). It will be judged on: a) clarity, b) organization, c) thoroughness.

Step 5: Discussing and Sharing
After all of the games have been played and evaluated, you will vote on the best game. This result will be compared to the scores the directions for the games received. Evaluations will be distributed and groups will discuss how to give good directions.

Step 6: Recording
You will summarize what you have learned about how to write clear directions and record these results.

After completing this assignment, students have a better appreciation of what is necessary to write clear directions. They are then ready for a formal introduction to their expository writing assignment. First I define the purpose of the theme, telling the class to inform someone about how to do a certain process. The audience is identified as a person who has never done this particular action, and the objectives are to provide clearly written directions.

Finding a topic about which to write is frequently difficult for "slow" students, and I encourage them to select something familiar whenever possible. In this case, we spend time in class brainstorming in small groups, searching for an appropriate subject. On journal day, I also provide other pre-writing activities related to this assignment. For example, I ask students to think of a habitual task done daily, such as tying a shoe, brushing teeth, or unlocking a door, then write very complex directions. Often satire is one of the byproducts of this exercise. Another activity in a similar vein asks students to write highly elaborate directions for a meaningless task such as peeling a grape, grooming a pet rock, or washing a flea. When the results are shared, they produce smiles of pleasure in the class. Students learn that they have the power to write entertaining prose. They also begin to recognize the need for concrete language, clear sequencing, and a sharply defined focus.

By the second or third day of pre-writing and incubating, students are ready to try a first draft. They work on their drafts in class, and once written, these are shared with me for comments, questions, and encouragement. Second and sometimes third drafts are produced before the student is ready for the next stage in the writing process — peer evaluations. Time is provided in class for this activity, too. Students work in small groups of three or four, read and comment upon other papers. They write their responses first, including not only spelling, grammar, and usage, but also conceptual, structural, and stylistic concerns as well. Then, each group discusses the papers, noting how closely the theme corresponds to the original assignment. My "slow" composition students take their peer evaluations seriously, and the drafts that emerge from this stage of the writing process indicate considerable improvement.

The next stage involves submitting the paper to an audience for formal evaluation. Preparation for this final draft of the manuscript involves careful attention to editing

skills and close proofreading for careless errors. By the time I receive the finished paper, I have a fairly polished work to grade, allowing me more opportunity to comment upon matters of structure, style, and content. Papers receive a double grade: half for content and half for grammar, organization, and unity.

When papers are returned, the final stage in the writing process is reached. At this time I share finished themes and discuss the results of the assignment either by typing a few samples of the best papers, or by selecting four or five papers of differing quality for the students to rank. If the second procedure is followed, the class develops its own rubric, describing the characteristics of an *A, B, C, D,* and *F* paper. Once students understand why and how their own paper has been graded, I ask them to complete a correction sheet, which is then checked by me and attached to the top of their final draft. Credit is given for removing errors and recasting sentences. If the paper is unsatisfactory, students have the option of writing the assignment over, although they cannot receive higher than a *C* for the revised paper. All papers are then placed in folders and kept for the rest of the semester. Students can see if there is a pattern to the errors they are making as well as the progress they are achieving.

Thus, the writing process moves full circle. Each stage in a paper's preparation evolves naturally from the preceeding stage. In the same way, each succeeding paper reflects students' experiences with previous assignments. They learn from both their mistakes and their successes. Confidence builds. They become more receptive to the challenges of new assignments, knowing that the writing process can provide a context within which they feel comfortable to express their ideas. By the end of the semester, students discover that they no longer are turning to the teacher for the keys to unlock their thoughts. Instead, students find that they have gained the power to do this for themselves — the first and most important step for any writer.

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