SPEECH: AN APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING

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For five years (1978-83) I was the only Speech Communication professor in an English department, and I taught both public speaking and composition. My experience led me to believe that a coordinated speaking/writing sequence of courses, together with the videotaping and playback of speeches, is a practical and successful method of developing those cognitive skills that enable students to improve as writers.

In this paper I will (1) identify the sources of students' difficulties in academic writing, (2) outline the cognitive skills and writing competencies that students need to develop, (3) explain how a speaking/writing sequence and the videotaping and playback of speeches can help students cultivate these abilities, and (4) demonstrate how this procedure is compatible with our understanding of the principles underlying the composing process.

Sources of Students' Difficulties in Academic Writing

Experts agree about the sources of students' inability to produce oral and written messages that serve their academic needs. According to Basil Bernstein, for underprepared students the difficulty lies in the use of a restricted code which is context bound, concrete, predictable, categorical, and simple in syntax (143). This reflects behavior patterns which value results (Get the job done; don't ask why), skills (This is how to do the job; you don't need to know how the machine works), and positional controls (Do it because you're told to do it). In short, the underprepared student doesn't ask the same questions or think the same thoughts as the academically prepared. This position has been disputed by Labov (201-240) and Ohmann (1-17), among others, who assert that for the underprepared student the characteristics of the code (language) used are a function of the social dynamics of the situation. For example, the characteristics result from the power relations between the interactants: status (expert or not), intimacy (or its lack), the situation (familiar or unfamiliar, prepared or impromptu), and the communication strategies of the other person (judgmental/evaluative, or supportive). Therefore, the use of a restricted code is elicited by a myriad of factors and is not

necessarily characteristic of the individual.

A third explanation for this failure is given by Bradford. She suggests that many students, not only the underprepared, cannot handle adequately the abstractions of freshman composition because the cognitive maturity marked by a shift from concrete/situational thinking to abstract/categorical thinking (as defined by Piaget) may extend into early adulthood before cognitive maturity is fully developed (20-21). A recent report tends to support Bradford's interpretation. The report concluded that fully fifty percent of students entering college cannot cope with abstract propositions and that this percentage is rather constant from college to college (McKinnon 11).

If so, then students initially may not have achieved the level of cognitive maturity needed to confront successfully the academic exercises in college writing. Hays notes that since "We have no paradigm for what constitutes normal development of writing abilities in young adults . . . students who have been performing well on comparatively simple writing tasks suddenly do abysmally on assignments requiring more abstraction, more deductive reasoning or 'analytic competency,' than they have until now attempted" (127-128). Miller analyzed the writing of her Ohio State freshmen, and she also concluded that their limited ability to carry through an argumentative discourse was due to developmental factors. Her students had not yet reached the cognitive maturity where they questioned premises or thought analytically (124).

Student Needs: Cognitive Skills and Writing Competencies

Hjelmervik and Merriman claim that the specific cognitive weaknesses which characterize unskilled writers are omission of explanations, confusion of terms, lack of attention to planning, an inability to "grasp the notion of an idea or thesis," and a failure to "maintain coherence and to infer or explain cause/effect relationships" (Hays, 103-112). Similarly, Hays notes that students "experience great difficulty in negotiating the move from concrete and immediate to more abstract and universal writing, a difficulty suggesting that they may be struggling with a new stage of cognitive development" (128). An example of this concreteness would be students' resorting to plot summary when asked to identify or trace a theme or character (Bradford 21).

In addition, Lunsford found that unskilled writers interpreted a topic (such as capital punishment) in terms of its relationship to themselves and in terms of disparate events (279-283). They did not take multiple perspectives on the topic or deal with abstractions such as "due process." They showed little ability to generalize or to see events as parts of a larger pattern.

Hays concludes that her unskilled writers demonstrated an inability to envision an audience, a failure to recognize multiple perspectives on a problem, and a substitution of assertion for

argument or deduction (stating an opinion without supporting data; making generally unqualified statements) (130-135). In addition, Elaine O. Lees notes that her students at Pittsburgh could compose a narrative detailing when they were creative but were unable to explain what creativity meant, which suggested to Lees that her students were unable "to go beyond a specific incident or experience to conclusions based on them" (Hays 145).

Wilkinson and his colleagues at the University of Essex offer a model that describes cognitive levels in this way:

> **Describing**. There is a move away from labelling and naming, via simple statements and incomplete information, to reporting a complete sequence.
> **Interpreting**. The development is from a simple explanation or inference or assessment to a deduction drawing on a series of (e.g., causal) links.
> **Generalizing**. The baseline would be a generalized concrete statement, moving to a summation of a whole section, and thence to the generalizations implied in a classificatory system.
> **Speculating**. The movement here is from inadequate simple hypotheses at the statement level, via exploring and projecting at the discourse level, to controlled and extended theorizing (65).

It is interesting (and probably coincidental) that Wilkinson's measures of cognitive abilities approximate Moffet's four stages of rhetorical progression ("Rationale for a New Curriculum in English" 150-158). In the rhetorical progression, the move is from concrete properties to logical properties, from recording through reporting, generalizing, and theorizing. Therefore, the level of abstraction varies depending upon whether the writer is recording what is happening, is reporting what is happening, is generalizing about what happens, or is theorizing about what will, may, or can happen.

Sternglass adopted Wilkinson's classification of cognitive skills and compared the writing of 100 unskilled student writers with the writing of 100 skilled writers. She concluded that the unskilled writers had difficulty moving from specifics and the inferences drawn from specifics (describing and interpreting) to synthesis (generalizing and speculating). She suggested that unskilled writers should receive instruction in analysis and synthesis (270).

Speaking/Writing/Videotaping Program

In my view, the cognitive skills I have previously explained are cultivated in public speaking and argumentation courses. The objective of these courses is to produce messages that induce a desired effect in an audience. Because such effect is paramount, public speaking and argumentation courses must focus on planning, on

identification of purpose (thesis), and on audience. The concentration on audience is absolutely essential for the speaker and requires him or her to consider multiple perspectives on a problem as a means of envisioning audience response. In addition, definition, specificity, and adequacy of supporting materials regarding a given problem complete the demands imposed upon a speaker who must attempt to ensure audience understanding in a situation where the audience does not have the opportunity to "review" the message. Finally, because speakers come to recognize the interdependent nature of the speaking situation (i.e., listeners evalute the speaker's message and thereby contribute to its effect), speakers cannot resort to assertion. Instead, they must necessarily deal with patterns of reasoning, analysis of issues, the abstractions underlying such issues, and the acceptability of these issues and their development to a given audience, which are the basis for moving an audience to decision and action.

In short, the teaching of speech has relevance to the teaching of writing insofar as speech communication professors focus on definition, analysis, and synthesis in public speaking and argumentation courses. The content of such courses is the formulation of arguments: how to generate ideas, draw implications, explore assumptions, and come to conclusions. All of this is done to teach students to produce an effect on a given audience. Therefore, it would seem that by pairing composition and speech courses, we might coordinate syllabi and assignments that both complement and reinforce each other in a symbiotic relationship. In addition, by videotaping speeches and analyzing the playback of those speeches, we can capitalize on the primary learning mode of contemporary students as described by William V. Costanzo (Hays 181). In this way, we can help students to acquire confidence in their own mental processes. On the whole, the paired composition and speech courses together with the analysis of videotaped speeches should stimulate the cognitive development essential to students' improvement in writing.

The insights and reactions of students in my public speaking classes who were simultaneously taking English composition courses suggested to me the usefulness of analyzing videotaped student speeches. I had given an assignment to develop a single point speech that required the student to state a thesis, use a variety of supporting materials, and draw a conclusion. This particular assignment was videotaped. During the analysis of the video playback of one of the speeches, one student observed that the speaker successfully completed her one point speech and then went on to another point that was left undeveloped. Another student in the class then asked, "Is that what my writing teacher means when she says that the point is irrelevant, that my paragraph isn't united?" What followed was a general buzzing among the class, the result of which was--in my view--that an abstract concept in English composition suddenly became

concrete, visible, and understood.

Subsequently, my students in another class analyzed the video playback of a speech in terms of how concrete and adequate the forms of support were to prove the point the student was making. One student commented that her writing teacher often wrote "vague" on her essays. The student then asked whether "being concrete" is what her teacher meant by "being specific." I indicated that this was probably her writing teacher's point.

In short, I have found the analysis of videotaped speeches helped students to understand the nature of their composing processes. This understanding is essential because people who are effective in composing their thoughts "seem to have greater conscious control over their own processes," according to Flower and Hayes (377). In a broader context, Vygotsky says that "All of the higher functions in the cultural development of the individual have three things in common: awareness, abstraction, and control" (97). When speech compositions are videotaped and played back for students to observe, identify, and evaluate specific elements in the speaking, listening, and composing processes, students can undertake the activities previously impossible that lead to this awareness.

Ong claims that the analytically organized treatise is impossible without the examination and reflection that writing makes possible. He says, "With writing one can put something down, move on, return to what was written, re-arrange, and ultimately develop an elaborately logical, causal, analytically sequential explanation" (186). This means that writing reorganizes noetic structures (perception and cognitive style) because the writer is able to reflect on his/her own thinking. However, when the writing itself is difficult and students cannot write coherently and constructively, we need to search for an alternative. Through the playback of videotaped speeches, we allow students to reflect upon their oral utterance, an access previously reserved for what they put down in writing. Indeed, this is particularly significant because the students' primary learning mode is electronic.

Equally significant, a program that analyzes videotaped student speeches to help students become aware of their thought processes is psychologically sound. As Ong observes, "The psychodynamics of primary oral thought processes form the historical and phenomenological base of all subsequent developments, including writing and print, because they lie at the root of thinking itself, even now" (193). Finally, analyzing videotaped speeches satisfies the following features of Maxine Hairston's paradigm for teaching writing (read: composing): 1) the analysis focuses on the process, and instructors can intervene during the process; 2) the analysis teaches strategies for invention and discovery; in this way, instructors help students to generate content and determine why they say what they say; 3) the analysis is rhetorically based: audience,

purpose, and occasion figure prominantly in the completion of the composing assignment (377).

For each speaking assignment, five students were videotaped each class period. The speeches were played back at the end of the five performances, and after each speech, the class discussed what the speaker's message was (what she or he meant, what she or he intended to get across) and analyzed the effectiveness of the speaker's performance. The class was encouraged to ask questions that would make the message clearer, and these questions provided feedback to the speaker as to how his/her data, organization, transitions, support for claims, and reasoning created meaning for the receivers. In addition, student listeners were asked, "What would it take to get you to understand or agree with the speaker?" This led the listeners to ask the speaker, "Do I understand correctly that the point you were making was . . . ?" In this way, student speakers were encouraged to develop retrospective maps of their thinking processes. Following this analysis of the videotaped speeches, speakers were permitted to revise their speeches and present them at a later date.

By videotaping and playing back student speeches, the instructor can promote active, immediate, on-the-spot analysis that will lead to concrete and constructive revision. Listener analysis of video playbacks allows speakers to appreciate where there are points in need of elaboration, where relationships among points are not clear, where the steps in the pattern of development do not follow, where there seems to be no point, where the speaker becomes sidetracked by an irrelevant or subsidiary point, where the evidence offered is inadequate, or where their reasoning is either invalid or unconvincing.

Therefore, what I am suggesting is that assignments in public speaking focus on a goal or purpose that allows students to experiment in creating messages simply because they are given the kind of feedback that will determine whether their experimentation resulted in success or whether their experimentation demands a new approach to the shaping of their message. What I propose is consistent with Moffet's prescription that for students to speak and write in great detail, there is required "the interplay of inner voices out into the social world, where the give-and-take of minds and voices can lift each member beyond where he or she started. This requires enormously more small-group interaction than classrooms now foster--task talk, improvisations, and topic discussions" ("Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation" 234).

In addition, the videotaping and playback of student speeches has these advantages: 1) it helps to give students confidence when they discover competencies they were not aware of; 2) it maintains class interest at a high level, whether one is a speaker or a listener; 3) it provides approximately fifteen samples of messages that can be analyzed and evaluated in a class period; 4) it allows oscillation

among the various sub-processes involved in composing.

The playback and analysis of videotaped speeches requires time. Therefore, this limits the number of presentations that can be made in one semester. My feeling is that unless class size is restricted to fifteen students, two semesters would be needed to provide the time for videotaping and feedback. Perhaps this is not a weakness, given that students usually must take two semesters of freshman composition, and they master the complexities of the sustained essay-exposition-argument with only a tenuous grasp of the competencies they are acquiring. The reinforcement of a coordinated speaking/writing sequence should give students greater control.

Pedagogical Justification

This procedure is compatible with our knowledge of the principles underlying the composing process. Larson identified Linda Flower as the researcher who has completed the most comprehensive and influential studies of the composing process (239). In analyzing the audio-tape recordings of skilled student writers in the act of composing, Flower and Hayes identified four activities that occurred: planning, translating, reviewing, and monitoring (369-84). Specifically, this meant that a writer generated ideas in terms of a defined goal or redefined rhetorical problem (purpose), set goals and sub-goals, organized and structured these ideas in terms of content and strategy, and translated them into a text with an eye to revision or to proceeding to the next part of the message. All of this was constantly monitored so that the entire process was recurrent and recursive; that is, there was continuous planning, translating, and reviewing; each activity recurred, and any part of the process might be embedded in another. Elaborating on Flower and Hayes's explanation, Perl describes this recursiveness as a retrospective structuring in which writers reread little bits of discourse to verify what they've already said, assess their progress, and plan how to proceed (44-48). Through the analysis of the video-playback, we are able to produce real examples of the composing activities and intervene, explore, and monitor the decisions being made.

There is an additional benefit to having to keep a real audience in mind. Moffet believes that even mechanical difficulties may occur in writing because the writer has forgotten the audience (*Teaching the Universe of Discourse* 202).

A final question is whether the sequence and playback analysis will help students to acquire the cognitive skills that were originally suggested as the *raison d'etre* for the proposal. Rohman states, "Students must learn the structure of thinking that leads to writing since there is no other 'content' to writing apart from the dynamic of conceptualizing" (87). However, this "pre-writing" process in which students discover what it is they "know" about their subject and their position with respect to it may not be sufficient. Arguing that the

"think-write" metaphor for the writing process is incomplete, Zoellner proposes that the speech channel be utilized to circumvent students' inability to transcribe inner meanings (122-28). Relating repeated experiences in which he told students that he couldn't understand their writing and in which he asked what they were trying to say, Zoellner observed, "They open their mouths, and *they say the thing they were trying to write* . . . All I had to do to elicit this fascinating bit of behavior was to ask them to *shift from the scribal modality to the vocal modality* . . . when we strip these vocal characteristics away we are frequently if not always left with a word-pattern substrate which is (a) *proscribal* and (b) *rhetorically viable.* It won't do as writing, but it may furnish us with a behaviorally derived datum which we can use to teach writing" (127-8).

Videotaping and playback of speeches allows students to use this mode in which they have relative facility. With the addition of class questions and feedback, we approximate the Socratic method of leading the student to his/her own discovery and understanding. We inquire, decompose, and make explicit and intelligible the patterns of reasoning with their supporting details--or the lack of these patterns and details.

Moreover, Bruffee argues that writing is inherently a collaborative or social act because "language is a social instrument used instrumentally to get something done" (161). This leads him to conclude that the "necessity to talk-through the task of writing means that collaborative learning . . . is not merely a helpful pedagogical technique incidental to writing. It is essential" (165).

Although a writer may achieve coorientation through imagination, this is unlikely for the student who has difficulty taking multiple perspectives. In addition, a single person imagining is not as likely to achieve the accuracy and variety of perspectives as is possible in a group. Moffet proposes the oral critique as a natural communication model because instruction occurs when the student needs it and at a time when the feedback is readily assimilated and retained (157).

Conclusion

The coordinated speaking/writing/videotaping sequence, with its emphasis on audience feedback, promises to give students a greatly enhanced ability to self-correct their compositions so that they perceive themselves as composers-in-process. Likely additional benefits for students include increased confidence as composers and a more sophisticated sense of and new respect for the relationship between the written and spoken word.

Focusing on audience as is done in speech courses also leads students to organize their messages around specific communication purposes for specific audiences. Many of the problems encountered in student composers--writers and speakers--reflect a tendency to

transcribe inner speech. To counter this, the student must adopt a difficult perspective; he/she must move from "writer-based" prose to "reader-based" prose, and one means of achieving this is by concentrating on the audience, a natural focus of speech. This is also provoked when the questions from a live audience elicit the explanation, reasoning, and transition absent in the composer's inner musings and initiate him/her into the elaborated and explicit detail required by academic writing.

Finally, students are able to use the mode of communication in which they have relative facility, the oral, put their messages on tape, and have the advantage of combining primary orality with the permanence of print so that they can return to the message, examine it, re-arrange it, and develop a consciousness of their thinking and logic. Perhaps Ong best summarized this advance when he said, "Locked in primary oral culture, consciousness has not the kind of self-knowledge and hence not the freedom that only technology can confer when consciousness makes technology its own" (199).

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