READING AND THINKING THROUGH WRITING IN GENERAL EDUCATION

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Not that long ago in the history of American education, students learned to write effectively by reading widely. In fact, it was not unusual to find college composition courses that were in actuality survey classes in literature. The theory was, and still probably could be, that students learned to write almost osmotically through reading voluminously superior examples of writing. Then a vast and complex network of changes in society and education occurred with amply documented and publicized results: standardized test scores dipped dramatically, apparent evidence that students just were not reading, writing, or thinking as proficiently (or somehow in the same ways) as they once had.

Many corrective strategies have been and still are being tried from large-scale remedial programs to wholesale raising of admission and graduation standards. The curricular strategy that seems to hold out the best remedy, however, probably because it most closely parallels the method of our self-professed halycon days when reading and writing were so intricately entwined as to seem inseparable skills, is writing across the curriculum. The key to the success of both our fondly remembered past and the present interdisciplinary approaches to reinstating critical literacy is that writing is a very effective way to learn almost any subject matter. Thus

our learning to write in literature classes labeled "Senior English" or "Freshman Composition" quite probably resulted not only from our exposure to ample models but also from our having to think through our reactions to the literature in writing, challenging ourselves into some fairly sophisticated analyses, which in turn, sparked concepts expressible only through embedded syntax and other earmarks of "high-level" writing. The North Carolina Writing Project in Charlotte has as its logos the words "write to learn to write" repeated in a circle. This infinite circle integrating the concepts of learning and writing is precisely the point, and the message of current writing-across-the curriculum programs.

When we use or hear the term "writing across the curriculum" or any of its variations like "cross-disciplinary" or "interdisciplinary" writing, however, we do not necessarily think of literature classes. In fact, we probably focus on our colleagues in history or biology or business administration or engineering and on ways we can diplomatically demonstrate to them techniques for increasing student learning through writing. But as Walvoord and Smith have noted, a literature teacher is the "original model of the teacher trained in another discipline who has been asked to teach writing" (p. 9). Literature teachers can, therefore, demonstrate through practice to their colleagues in other disciplines how to stimulate learning through integrating writing with another subject. Of course, not every literature teacher is receptive to being described as an interdisciplinary role model; she or he may prefer instead to be a humanist preserving western tradition. And those who are receptive may well need directions to locate the latest in composition research. Nonetheless, just as a psychology professor may assign writing as an aid to student learning, so may a literature professor assign writing as a way to unlock western tradition for students.

In both cases, the students of our post-halycon days will benefit from (and many will *require*) fairly specific guidance in how to write to learn. It is of this guidance that we write, although we confess at the outset that our collaboration grew more out of frustration about the students' difficulty in handling course material than out of an effort to develop a writing-across-the-curriculum model using literature.

DESCRIPTION OF COURSE AND GOALS

During the Fall, 1983, we experimented in a freshman-level

world literature course on ways to approach the materials to enhance critical thinking in reading and writing. We hoped to improve the students' abilities to recognize in their reading, and to use in their writing, concepts, assumptions, premises, conclusions, comparisons, sentences, paragraphs, metaphors. We knew from experience and had read studies showing that perhaps forty percent of Americans cannot understand the basic masterpieces of our civilization — e.g., the readings assigned in world literature at our university. Not simply mechanical but critical literacy was our concern, the ability to deal intelligibly with complex ideas.

We therefore began the semester by establishing the purpose of studying literature as not merely mnemonic but as thoroughly critical and inseparable from writing, a tall order for many of the students who viewed the class as little more than a graduation requirement and who were certainly far more comfortable with multiple choice tests than with essay exams. We decided, therefore, that we needed to be clear and direct about our reasons for approaching the class as "World Discourses," as we termed it. To this end we handed out to the students the first day of class a fairly elaborate statement of the purpose and goals of World Literature 1113. In our overview with the students we examined literature as a communicative discourse:

> A western civilization course offers a rapid survey of what people did and thought and the causes and consequences. World literature arrests that history at important moments, stopping at certain periods of time to examine what individuals thought and felt about their age and about other people and themselves. These thoughts and feelings are expressed through discourses, ways of organizing thoughts and feelings in the attempt to communicate with others, to affect others, to make them perceive another point of view, to laugh, to reflect. Epic, drama, narrative, poem, parable, biography, prophecy, letter — world literature offers most of the ways humans have employed language for communication. We could call this course "World Discourses."
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> A study of discourses, of the ways each discourse shapes language for communication, intensifies our critical abilities, our ability especially to think independently and not slavishly. Discourses are active; they are messages addressed to an active mind from an active mind, and meaning derives from

the transaction or dialectic. Not I-it, but I-you. We assume learning of the kind experienced in the humanities and a liberal arts education to be valuable only when it is active and not passive. Exploration is the essence of these discourses and inquiry the procedure of this class.

A good discourse requires concentration, time, and training to be understood, so we must learn ways to listen and to read more effectively. We grapple with a discourse on many levels — literal, interpretive, evaluative. A writer is trying to create a response, to instill a feeling or idea or action; therefore, the reader must move through what is said to what is meant to whether what was said and meant is worth saying and meaning. Reading through to understanding leads necessarily to writing in this context of active involvement and learning in the human symbol-making of discourses for communication.

That first day we also established some basic rules for the students to follow so that these goals could be achieved. We required regular attendance, for example, and explained that after each block of assigned/discussed reading, we would test the students' understanding on several levels from literal to evaluative. To reinforce this understanding, we asked each student to keep a notebook containing 1) responses to guided reading questions, 2) classroom lecture notes, 3) discourses written in class (letter, proverb, etc.), and 4) newspaper clippings relating to reading accompanied by brief comments. We also asked the students to read a newspaper each day and a magazine each week, and to bring the current text to class each period and be prepared to speak.

With the goal of the course established as the expansion of individual awareness and autonomy through the study of literary discourses and the sharpening of reading, writing, and thinking skills, we were ready to devote the second day to diagnostic testing. This was as important a day as the first, because not only were we seeking to identify immediately students with reading and writing deficiencies, but we also had prepared our material to establish a consistent classroom and testing method upon which the student could build and grow.

The method derived partly from Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* as reported in "A First Step Toward Improved Teaching" by James

E. Stice (394-398). (In addition, Stice sent us his own definitions and examples for Bloom's categories.) Bloom gives six achievement objectives or progressively higher cognitive levels: (1) knowledge: the recall of specifics and universals, involving little more than bringing to mind the appropriate material; (2) comprehension: the ability to process knowledge on a low level such that the knowledge can be reproduced or communicated without a verbatim repetition; (3) application: the use of abstractions in concrete situations; (4) analysis: the breakdown of situations into their component parts; (5) synthesis: the putting together of elements and parts to form a whole; and (6) evaluation: the making of judgments about the value of material methods.

One value of this taxonomy is that it can help teachers perceive the level(s) of a course, potential and actual, and thus how and where writing can intervene to lead students to "higher" levels (in our experience, level three and up). Prior to the beginning of our experimental course, for example, we discussed testing on these six levels, as in this possible test over Book 24 of the *Odyssey*:

(1) Knowledge
Who stopped the civil war at the end of the epic?

(2) Comprehension
How is the death of Achilles contrasted to the death of Agamemnon during their meeting in Hades?

(3) Application
Compare the resolution of the revenge conflict to the rivalry between the United States and Russia.

(4) Analysis
Identify the sequential parts of Book 24 and explain the function of each in the closure of the epic.

(5) Synthesis
Write an epic anecdote about a contemporary person in a contemporary setting using the following devices: 1) extended simile, 2) exaggeration, 3) realistic detail, 4) hero, 5) god.

(6) Evaluation
Assess the effectiveness of Book 24 as the conclusion of the epic. Is anything of great importance omitted? Is anything in Book 24 of minor importance or irrelevant?

The six levels helped us discern aspects of the chapter we had been unaware of before, but for testing they would be too time-

consuming. We concluded that a simpler method would be more practical for our purposes. We finally decided upon a three-level method of 1) fact, 2) interpretation, and 3) application (see Herber for a similar approach), which we kept in mind as a guide for classroom procedure and applied in our tests, including the diagnostic test during the second class period.

DESCRIPTION OF PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

Because the students would be reading, writing, and thinking about literary classics in the course, it seemed to us more pertinent to pre-test them with a piece of literature drawn from the curriculum than to give them a standardized reading test, such as the Nelson-Denny. We chose "The Story of Daedalus and Icarus" from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Humphries trans.) because it is a fairly short, self-contained narrative easily read and interpreted within a 50-minute class period. The six questions the students had to answer not only addressed the three reading/thinking levels of fact, interpretation, and application but also gave us a short writing sample for each student.

The results of the assessment did not surprise us. None of the 74 students missed either of the factual questions; 55 of the 74 students, however, missed the question on the main point of the narrative. On the mid-level interpretive questions (about the cause of a character's reaction and about the author's selection of certain details), eight of the students exhibited difficulties. To adapt the convenience of Piagetian terms, only about 25% of the students appeared to have reached a formal level of cognitive operation in relation to a literary text; the rest seemed to function either on a concrete level or in a transitional stage between the concrete and the critical.

The writing sample amplified these results. The topic, involving a comparison/contrast of Ovid's account of the Greek myth with William Carlos Williams' account in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," made considerable demands on the students. Because it was an application question, the students not only had to interpret the material but also had to draw parallels between the new and the old and to express their findings in writing, a further abstraction for them. Only 14 of the 74 students handled the short essay well, i.e., wrote a focused, organized, clear analysis with adequate

supporting detail in sentences generally devoid of lapses in usage. The other 60 students wrote answers that were variously vague, surface, disconnected, incomplete. The following is a response typical of the not-so-successful essays:

> The first story is similar to the second one because both stories tell of the downfall of Icarus. Both stories described the day as being warm and sunny.
>
> The differences in the stories was (sic) that the first story explained how Icarus was warned not to fly too high or too low. The first story shows fault with Icarus for not obeying his fathers (sic) warnings. The poem made the death of Icarus seem sad. The first story also told more of the feelings of the father.

When we discussed these assessments with the students the following class period, we used our analysis of the results to reinforce both our goals for the course and the students' means of achieving them. After pointing out to the students, for example, that the pretest required increasingly analytical skills, we stressed that an effective sequence for students of literature is: read for the facts, interpret the facts, abstract from the interpreted facts to the significance, and apply this knowledge to a new piece of information. We stressed that because writing is an indispensable aid in moving along this continuum from fact to application, we would often give them guided reading questions to answer in their notebooks and would stop class discussion to ask them to reflect about the discussion in writing.

To reinforce this analytical process of reading through writing, the dialectic of critical literacy, we modelled for the students using a passage from the *Odyssey*. We read the passage together, raised and answered questions illustrating the levels that work from fact to significance, predicted a possible essay question on the passage and brainstormed the organization and details of the response. To guide the students further, we also handed out a model response to the essay topic on the pretest.

DESCRIPTION OF DAY-TO-DAY CLASS ACTIVITIES

During the following class meetings, we used activities designed to tap into the variety of discourses and higher levels of cognitive skills potentially within each student's power. Periodically, for example, we began the class with an examination of the discourses

constituting an ordinary daily newspaper — a news account (narrative), an editorial (essay), an obituary (biography), and a satire (Buchwald, for example). We also asked the students questions or gave them topics to write about in their class notebooks, which were also to contain original discourses (such as fables, poems, parables), newspaper clippings on topics that broadened the meanings of the assigned readings, and the more standard notebook fare of class notes and study questions.

A typical class would proceed as follows in its discussion/interpretation/application of a literary piece. We would first raise factual questions about the assigned reading and define pertinent terms, such as the types of discourse within a passage (dialogue, speech, proverb, etc.). In examining authorial strategies in plot or character development, we would move toward evaluative analysis by comparing the text under scrutiny to another passage past or present, also drawing parallels to the students' lives whenever possible. Often we asked the students to write discourse imitating that under discussion in class or followed some of David Bleich's suggestions to get the writing started. He suggests asking the students to read a short passage in class a second time, write what the text says in their own words, and give the restatements to other class members for comments. Or he asks the class to respond in writing to such questions as "What is the most important word (or passage, or aspect) in the text?" Any method which combines frequent reading and writing about a discourse provides the integration of reading, writing, and critical thinking essential to critical literacy.

Here are examples of questions we asked during classes, a format certainly adaptable to any literature class.

The Odyssey, Book II

Fact

What kind of discourse is Book II primarily?

What do the gods do before, during, and after the debate?

Interpretation

Is there pattern in the debate, a symmetry?

Does Telemachus develop as a person during his speeches?

What is the most important ethical issue suggested in Book II?

Application

How could you make Telemachus stronger and more heroic?

Reorganize the sequence of the speeches in accordance with a principle different from the one operating in Book II.

To Explore in Writing

What is the most important argument Telemachus makes against the suitors?

Sketch a burlesque of Book II.

Turn Telemachus into a speaker of parables.

Metamorphoses, "Apollo and Daphne"

Fact

How does Apollo anger Cupid?

What does Cupid do in revenge?

Interpretation

What is the logical structure of the narrative?

Analyze the persuasive methods Apollo employs in his speech to persuade Daphne to cease her flight and be his love.

Application

Rape crisis centers now exist in the United States to help victims. What does the story of Daphne and Medusa and Io and Dryope suggest about the attitude toward rape victims in past times?

To Explore in Writing

Turn the incident into a dialogue between Apollo and Daphne's father.

Write a proverb or a maxim which epitomizes the story.

Write or construct a concrete poem about the story.

As the following quiz on the *Odyssey* illustrates, tests followed the classroom procedure closely:

Fact

1. What is the relationship in time between the action of Book VIII "The Phaeacian Games" and the recounted actions in Books IX-XII?
2. Who gave the mariners a "powerful drug, to make them lose all memory of their native land"? What then immediately happened to them?
3. What tragic thing happened to Elpenor, the youngest of Odysseus' men (Book X)? What does he beg Odysseus to do for him in Book XI?

4. What happened to Odysseus' last ship? What happened to the Phaeacian ship which brought Odysseus home?
5. Eurymachus argues with Penelope over whether the beggar (Odysseus in disguise) should be allowed to try the great bow. Penelope orders the bow given to the beggar. What is Telemachus' reaction?

Interpretation

6. Why doesn't the epic end with Book XXII?
7. Why doesn't the epic end with Book XXIII?

Application

8. What is the relationship between the ending of the *Odyssey* and the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union?

INTERVENTION: NOTE-WRITING AS DISCOURSE

As part of our initial monitoring of the students' acclimation to a course that uses writing to integrate the teaching of higher-level thinking skills with the discussion of classics of western culture, we tabulated the results of the first quiz on Books 1-8 of the *Odyssey*. Three of the five questions were factual, drawing on information from both class lecture and assigned reading: define *epic* and *structure*; outline the structure of Books 1-8; how is Odysseus entertained in Book 8, and how does he respond? The fourth question was interpretive, asking students to interpret the meaning of Calypso's cave and to comment on how the values represented by the cave conflict with heroic ideals. The fifth question required application. Students read a quotation from Jesus in which he admonishes people to give up everything to become a disciple and were asked to comment on how and why Odysseus would react to such a statement.

While the results of our analysis continued to verify some students' difficulties with addressing higher-level questions in complete, well-organized analytical terms, problems with the first three factual questions brought home to us the enormous challenge inherent in promoting student learning in a general undergraduate humanities class. Only 28% of the students wrote a correct, complete definition of *epic*, for example, and only 40% could outline the first 8 books of the *Odyssey*. Both of these questions stemmed entirely from class lecture, a fact giving rise to four possible causes

for the poor showing: absence from class, poor notetaking skills, insufficient study for the quiz, not knowing what or how to study for the quiz. An instructor, obviously, cannot directly teach attitudes to students that bring them to class and that motivate them to study sufficiently out of class. An instructor, however, can teach notetaking appropriate for his/her class and formatted to aid learning.

After the results of this first quiz, we devoted a class period, therefore, to addressing the skills of notetaking and test preparation, emphasizing again that writing is a major key to learning. With a handout to reinforce our points, we taught a modified version of the Cornell System of notetaking. This method seemed especially appropriate for our world literature classes because its question/answer format paralleled the way the class was being conducted. Students could easily note in the left-hand margins of their notebooks questions raised in class, using the right portion of their pages for the main points of the ensuing discussion. For the less frequent background lectures, we taught students to reverse the process: to take down the main points in class and for review before the next class to predict test questions from these points. We emphasized to the students that this format would yield a fairly substantial data bank of possible test items, thus focusing their preparation. A portion of the notetaking sample that we gave the students is based on actual class discussion/lecture and is as follows:

What are the important ethical issues of Book IV?	1. Putting off old king 2. Responsibility for a crime 3. Responsibilities of son and mother
What is the structure of Book IV?	30-50 events grouped into two parts structured on basis of localities: a. Menelaus' palace b. Odysseus' palace Linkage between the two provided by fact that people in both places are reacting to the same things — Odysseus' whereabouts and Telemachus' search.

What are two types of discourse in Book IV?	1. Conversation, important in oral culture 2. Narrative a. Stories about Odysseus b. Menelaus' background

EVALUATION: FORMAL

The final examination (one question on Chaucer, one on *Hamlet*, one cumulative question — all three essay) helped us to answer our "final exam" question: was the extra effort worth it? Forty-one students in the two classes who took the final had also taken the pre-course assessment (eight other students had not been tested initially, eighteen had dropped their respective classes, nine students were excused from the final with *A's*). For these forty-one students, we carefully compared their entry-level skills with those they exhibited on the exam. In our comparison we were cognizant that the final test was far more demanding than the pre-course assessment in terms of the amount of material covered and the consistently analytical, as opposed to factual, nature of the questions. The following will serve as an example:

> List the readings which deal with hatred toward an enemy, dividing them between those which advocate reconciliation and forgiveness and those which advocate revenge and killing. Write an essay in which you attempt to explain the main rationalizations or explanations for each side.

As with the pre-test essay, we looked for evidence of whether or not students could write fully developed, well-organized, clear, accurate essays focusing on the questions asked and exhibiting analytical skill.

The following was the result of our comparison of pre-course with post-course essays:

- 2 students sustained the good quality of the pre-course screening (recall that the 9 top students had already been excused from the final)
- 13 students improved dramatically over the initial assessment
- 14 students improved somewhat (generally their writing was quite good in spots, but uneven or unsustained in quality)

Totals, then, were: 29 of 41 students improved for 71%; 12 students showed no improvement for 29%. When we recalled that initially only 25% of the students had exhibited a "high" level of cognitive development in/through their writing, we realized that our hard work had certainly brought some dividends. Twenty-seven improved students plus the top eleven consistently good students netted over 50% of the classes attaining some measure of the very high standards we had set for them in the beginning.

EVALUATION: PERSONAL

What was the course like for the students? The following comments quoted directly from the course evaluations point up the facts that the class demands a great deal from sometimes reluctant students (which we knew) but that our methods can not only help in developing crucial higher-level skills but can at the same time contribute to a fairly enjoyable class, a happy bonus.

"Very interesting course. We got involved and had fun."

"Too much material to grasp totally."

"The course made me think."

"I think the instructor is under the impression that the only thing we have to do in life is literature."

"The class taught me to teach myself. I am now motivated to study independently."

"Too much reading."

"This class gave me a chance to learn that reading is necessary for my education and also is very enjoyable."

What was the course like for the instructor? (Bennett taught the course; Hodges, a staff member of the Development Center then and the Writing Center now, shared in establishing procedures, teaching study strategies, and evaluating the students.)

Gratifying, from a sense of improving the usefulness of the course for students. In the past, few students seemed improved or improving, but just the opposite. That many students could not understand the readings or respond to them intelligibly in writing was obvious, but in spite of my steady optimism in humans as discourse creators, I felt dispirited by the personal encounter with the seventeen-year

drop in verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (from 478 out of a possible 800 in 1963 to 424 in 1980) and by evidence that up to 30% of students aged 17 have "extremely serious" problems with writing (according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1969-1979). Until that is, I undertook a course of self-education on literacy and began to talk with my colleague in the Development Center about a joint undertaking. Not all the answers are in, but my experience in this course suggests (and ample studies corroborate) that theories and methods, practices and techniques if applied systematically and rigorously can be effective.

CONCLUSION

In his introduction to "The Politics of Literacy," Donald Lazere observes:

> These widespread problems in cognition at the lower levels of learning . . . pose a threat to the very survival of humanistic values and scholarship at the upper levels. It seems reasonable to conclude that humanists in higher education should be directing a major part of their energies to exploring causes and possible cures for illiteracy. As a subject for advanced humanistic study, however, literacy has low priority and prestige. Like most other professions and industries in advanced capitalistic society, the profession of academic humanism can be very effective in dealing with the most sophisticated subjects and methodologies but seems congenitally unable and unwilling to apply its best talents and resources to more elementary, though more urgent, problems.

Many of the cultural obstacles to critical literacy impede the proper allocation of resources for the improvement of reading, writing, and thinking. The illiteracy or aliteracy of parents, television, video games, the ascendancy of sports in schools, band trips, pressures for passing unprepared students, teacher fatigue and fear, overloaded classes especially in reading and writing, university obsession with graduate education, these are the manifestations of structural causes: poverty, class, racism, and the demands of state capitalism. Unless we acknowledge the complexities of surface and system (Bennett), we will not understand why, in 1977, only from one-third to one-half of our teenagers could grasp the main idea of passages from freshman-level texts, and only about

ten percent could respond to a situation in a picture in a carefully developed essay free of serious compositional errors, and the average essay was only 157 words long (Pattison 176), or why in our class the attrition rate was so high, or why there was no improvement for one-third of the class.

The solution as far as the schools can contribute[1] seems known to those who examine the situation. That we must place the highest priority on development of the ability to use language was affirmed by both the National Commission on Excellence in Education (*A Nation At Risk*) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (*High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*). We believe, and many studies bear out our conviction, that we must write in all courses in order to be able to read, write, and think — to use language — critically. But such a program requires significant institutional support, not lip-service, for an authentic effort to restore, maintain, and improve these skills. The bottom line, for example, in our high schools should be a writing class size of no more than twenty students (NCTE recommends fifteen). For ourselves, concerned with writing in all classes, we are investigating funding for a model to increase the emphasis on learning through writing in world literature. This model will link five faculty members with five teaching assistants in ten sections of world literature, reaching some 350 students. Each of the five assistants, trained in higher-level skill development, will attend all classes of one section of the collaborating instructor's world literature assignments. Every two weeks, one session of each class conducted by the assistant will be a skill-building session addressing critical thinking, reading, and writing strategies within the context of the course materials. Expensive? Certainly, but we think attention of this quality is essential if the present failure in support and its crippling of our youth are to be corrected.

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NOTES

[1]Colin Greer, for example, perceives the public school "as a terribly limited, reflexive institution. slavishly serving society rather than leading it." Significant

change in the schools awaits social and economic changes in society. *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education*. (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 153.

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