THE ART OF TEACHING WRITING: A DESCRIPTION OF FOUR APPROACHES

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The burgeoning of the composition field is causing growing pains for many teachers of writing. Feeling the need to be better informed, they read the major composition journals. Questioning their previous assumptions about pedagogy, they examine carefully the multitude of new texts. But for those who are not the specialists—not university rhetoric professors—the arguments of the profession, the distinctions that are asserted, can become opaque or even trivial. The talk in the journals, it often seems, is aimed from one specialist to another.

In this essay I will describe four ways to organize a writing course, attempting to help the writing teacher both make sense of an often-confusing field and shape a course with internal coherence. Using terms familiar to most instructors, I have named the four approaches Traditional Modes, Process, Epistemic, and Stylistic. I do not pretend that these four are all-inclusive or that the groupings could not be made in other ways, as indeed they have been in recent books and articles. But previous groupings have been either too narrow—exploring only the variations of one unified approach—or too theoretical—being several removes from actual classroom practice—for the nonspecialist.[1] My descriptions, however, are wide-ranging and centered on the art of teaching, hence more practical, I believe.

THE TRADITIONAL MODES APPROACH

This approach is firmly rooted in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the tradition that followed from it. The key textbook here is Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. Though Corbett divides his book into three parts—invention, arrangement, and style—"process" is left out in favor of examining the "product." In other words, Corbett gives scant attention to the steps writers take in going about their task, instead giving great weight to such matters as the various appeals one may make to an audience (appeal to reason, emotional appeal, ethical appeal) or the precise form necessary to structure an argument essay (five, prescriptive parts). Discussing the thesis statement, Corbett writes, "The cardinal principle is to state the thesis in a single declarative sentence." If students cannot do so, then they must simply think longer and better: "they do not have a firm grasp on their ideas before they sit down to compose." Writing becomes a two-step process: 1) think of what you have to say; and 2) say it, following these models for arrangement and style.

From Corbett, it is a short step to "the modes approach," which uses a textbook such as *Twenty Questions for the Writer* (Berke) or *Subject and Strategy* (Escholz) to teach students to write "definition," "classification," or "argumentation" essays. The choice here, of course, is whether we teach these modes in direct fashion ("for this week I want you to write a comparison-contrast paper"), or whether we allow the form to grow organically out of the writing situation. Since the modes texts appear to favor the former, they have come under great criticism.

Frank D'Angelo in *A Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric* attempts to fuse classical rhetoric to new developments in composition theory—specifically, to match Aristotle's "topoi" (comparison, cause and effect, classification) to paragraph theories of Christensen, Becker, and Rodgers, to the cumulative sentence of Christensen, to discourse analysis. We might say that D'Angelo has attempted to bring new justification to the modes composition texts by showing that there is a sound theoretical and psychological basis for approaching composition through models.

D'Angelo springboards his argument from a passage out of Kenneth Burke's *Counter-Statement*:

> . . . such ultimate minor forms as contrast, comparison, metaphor, series, bathos, chiasmus, are based upon our

> modes of understanding anything; they are implicit in the processes of abstraction and generalization by which we think. (20)

In other words, D'Angelo is trying to participate in the theories of process by showing that underlying any writing, and participating in it constantly, is thought conceptualized as the Aristotelian topics. As he says, invention continues throughout the composing process and informs every aspect of writing. Whereas the old rhetoricians separated rhetoric into invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery and kept them at separate levels—steps to be done and approached even in that particular order—D'Angelo combines levels by seeing the topics of invention (the modes), the patterns of arrangement, and elements of style as analogous. In these topics one can find the innate organizing principles of the mind, the deeper underlying mental operations, and the abstract structures that determine discourse. D'Angelo incorporates his ideas into a pedagogy in his composition text, *Process and Thought in Composition*.

THE PROCESS APPROACH

Janet Emig's descriptive book *The Composing Processes of 12th Graders* raised such an outcry against the practices and teaching pedagogies then in effect that her study became a major reason why the teaching of composition in the last fifteen years has shifted from the teaching of product (focus on the final-form written result) to the teaching of process (focus on what steps writers take to produce drafts of an essay). Prewriting, Emig discovered, was done by almost no students, in large part because they had not been taught any procedures such as brainstorming and freewriting. And revision was seen merely as a superficial surface realignment, a correcting of the trivial, mechanical mistakes.

Teachers who teach process step in with exercises at each stage of the writing process. Poor writers, they believe, are not that way because they cannot manipulate the language competently. More important, they have underdeveloped composing processes. Additionally, the students believe that what is important, in courses stressing the product, is meeting the requirements of an assignment, rather than fully exploring a topic for their own gratification and sense of accomplishment. Janice Lauer has a four-part approach to teach the process of writing: 1) introducing

students to each stage and strategy, using student examples; 2) holding practice sessions in class so students can try the strategies on sample subjects; 3) engaging the students outside of class in the actual process leading to their own finished essays; and 4) responding to students' work at each stage as they progress. Lauer has her students write their first essay very slowly, with the instructor providing exercises to stimulate and explain each step of the writing process, with the instructor and class together discussing each student's work.

Other rhetoricians, teaching process but not in as detailed a way as Lauer, stress how the writing situation affects the writer. Each aim of discourse has its own logic, its own kind of references, its own communication framework, its own patterns of organization, and its own stylistic norms. James Kinneavy in *A Theory of Discourse* uses a metaphor to describe these aims. Language, he says, is like a window pane. One may throw bricks at it to vent feelings; or use a chunk of it to chase away an intruder; or use it to a mirror or explore reality; or to call attention to itself (stained glass) as an object of beauty. Windows, like language, may be used expressively, persuasively, referentially, and aesthetically. Students need, then, to practice in all of these aims, to feel comfortable in and to internalize what is usual for that aim. These rhetoricians recognize that writing is composing, both language and oneself; that there are techniques suitable to learning the craft; that writing is, as William Irmscher says in *Teaching Expository Writing*, "a way of learning and developing." Correlative to these beliefs, and prominent in the process approach, is that the structure of the writing—and any measure of correctness—must arise out of the emerging meaning and purpose of the work.

A major division among practitioners of this approach, however, is a division concerning whether or not an instructor should use a classroom text. Lauer, Kinneavy, and Irmscher, to name only a few of the "process" rhetoricians, favor a text-centered approach. But others, most notably Peter Elbow and Donald Murray, do not. Elbow and Murray believe that the teaching of writing is best done without any text—reader or rhetoric. Writing is best learned by having students write and then talk about their writing. The teacher's role is to be a "superior reader," an experienced guide. Classes are turned into workshops, with students working either individually on their writing or working in groups with peers.

Elbow and Murray are concerned with teaching students in

a general way what it means to be a writer. Elbow believes that a major problem in writing is that we edit too much, and at the wrong time—that what we write is edited at the same time it is produced. While conceding that it is impossible to separate the two functions entirely, Elbow wants to push apart creativity and criticism more than they are. So he advocates freewriting and keeping a journal: writing without restraints or restrictions, conquering the fear of a blank piece of paper, not trying to "get it right the first time." Elbow says that words are cheap and that much has to be written and thrown away to find good words, which are not cheap. He wants students to be convinced that one draft of a paper is not enough, that one continually discovers as one writes.

Murray stresses much of what Elbow does: brainstorming, multiple drafts, and revision (above all else). Murray was a journalist and still is a professional writer, and at times—when he is discussing the "hook," leads, titles—he sounds very much a part of the product school. But with a difference. For what he wants students to learn, in addition to techniques for prewriting and rewriting, is what it means to care enough about a piece of writing to make it the best it can be. Murray discusses writing as a continual process of "rehearsing," "drafting," "re-seeing," with exploration paramount in earlier drafts and clarification paramount in later drafts. Writing is not, he proclaims, the two-step process of thinking-then-writing that it is often said to be.

THE EPISTEMIC APPROACH

The "epistemic" writing teachers have been heavily influenced by Piaget, Vygotsky, and Chomsky, theorists who have shown the relationship between language and thinking to be extremely complex. Thinking is not logical but symbolic, with muddles and inaccuracies. There is a constantly changing triangle among thinking, experiencing, and using language. An experience, for example, is only understood by the language with which we describe it. For these teachers, what students must learn from a composition course is that writing, above all, is a means of knowing and a means of coming-to-know. Kenneth Dowst effectively states the core ideas of this approach:

> Central to the epistemic approach are three closely related propositions: (1) we do not know the world immediately; rather, we *compose* our knowledge by composing language;

> (2) how we can act depends on what we know, hence on the language with which we make sense of the world; (3) serious experimenting in composing with words is experimenting in knowing in new ways, perhaps better ways. (70)

To convey that writing is a means of coming-to-know, epistemic writing instructors develop sequences whose assignments, focusing on a central idea or topic ("home," "the self"), progress from relative simplicity to great complexity of thought and expression.[2] The papers that students write for the sequence and the discussions on those papers teach students that writing is a way of knowing and that each writer has multiple selves that are capable of being explored and then controlled.

The main principle of a sequence, as exemplified by Walker Gibson in *Seeing and Writing* and William Coles in *The Plural I*, is that a coordinated, interrelated set of writing assignments enables students to learn on their own, increasing their self-sufficiency for situations outside a writing class. Among the epistemic guidelines are the following: one, students have to write often, at least two essays a week; two, a certain amount of redundancy or repetition occurs, but each new paper either shifts a rhetorical element or causes deeper exploration; and three, to encourage self-thinking and risk-taking, the instructor does not correct or grade student essays — the instructor instead responds to the essay and helps the student see what she has done, or failed to do. Class sessions, if one follows this model, are simply discussions of the previous assignment. Or, more particularly, the instructor duplicates two or so papers which she has just received and the class talks about them. Students do not learn about writing from the teacher's lectures or a book's exercises; rather, students write and talk about their writing.

THE STYLISTIC APPROACH

Adherents of this approach view writing as a matter of choosing: choosing between this word or that, between this sentence structure or other possible ones, between various techniques and openings and forms. *The Writer's Options* (Daiker), a popular textbook, sums up in its title perhaps the main assumption—that student writers have options which they need first to know and second to use intelligently and carefully. By explicitly focusing on

style and therefore making students acutely self-conscious about it, instructors show that writing is an art that can be learned through careful attention to how the writer says something.[3]

Discussions of how to teach style often become bogged down in what we might call "mere impressionism," meaning one person's view (usually the instructor's) of what is a "good style." To counter impressionism, linguists have tried to set the study of style on a firm, "objective" base by seeing style as a linguistic concept. Richard Ohmann, for example, in his article "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," outlines twelve non-linguistic kinds of stylistic studies, concluding that none of them can yield "a full and convincing explanation of the notion of style," because they all lack an appropriate underlying linguistic and semantic theory. He says that the most promising linguistic theory for stylistic study is transformational grammar; reducing passages of prose to kernel sentences (deep structures), he can discuss the differences between a Hemingway and Faulkner. But his approach only has implications for the teaching of style and does not address the matter directly.

Attempting to classify theories of style for their pedagogical uses, Louis Milic, in his article "Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition," posits three basic theories of style: 1) the theory of ornate form or rhetorical dualism—ideas exist wordlessly and can be dressed in a variety of outfits; 2) the individualist theory or psychological monism—style is the man; and 3) the organic theory, Crocean aesthetic monism, which denies the possibility of any separation of content and form. Milic contends that an instructor has to assume the first of these (ideas can be dressed in a variety of outfits) or she has nothing to do. In a later article, Milic bridges the linguistic and rhetorical uses of style when he separates first-draft writing, when writers only make non-intentional choices (what he calls stylistic options), from rewriting, a chance to make intentional changes (what he calls rhetorical choice). With his separation of stylistic options and rhetorical choices—first-draft writing in which the writer is placing a premium on meaning and rewriting in which he can make conscious rhetorical choices—Milic compromises between dualism and monism.

An approach which foregrounds those rhetorical choices in an attempt to have students internalize the principles for first-draft

writing is sentence combining, one of the most influential and popular developments in the teaching of writing in the last decade. Students perform exercises in which they take a number of kernel sentences and combine them, using more sophisticated structures such as participial phrases, relative clauses, and absolutes. Instructor and class then discuss how different choices create both a different style and meaning. Manipulation of phrases and clauses seems at first glance to concern only rewriting, but the exercises, to have a lasting effect, must help students internalize these principles. A similar stylistic approach is Francis Christensen's, as he outlines in *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*. Christensen advises the teaching of the "cumulative sentence," one with a short base clause of subject and verb, followed by free modifiers at varying levels of generality and specificity. Such a sentence represents the mind thinking, is dynamic rather than static, ebbing and flowing, generating ideas and adding detail. Therefore, the ability to write a sophisticated cumulative sentence, Christensen believed, marks a good student writer, and this not only can be taught but is transferable to writing situations in which the writer is not consciously trying for style, such as first-draft writing.

That the principles of grammar and structure are not internalized and subsequently are of little use to students until a rewrite stage is the charge that critics make about approaches such as sentence combining and Christensen's. And teaching writing through style, they argue, leaves out important matters such as invention and form. In his book *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, Richard Lanham, one of the foremost proponents for making style the subject of a writing course, counters such arguments with a simple declaration, one which makes meaningless such charges. Because the teaching of writing is bad and the writing itself mindless, Lanham says, and because there is the deep-running current in America which praises a simple style, a style for utilitarian purposes such as advertising, words being valued for their use and not for their enjoyment, style must be taught for and as what it is—grace, joy, beauty. Only if students develop joy by playing with language and delighting in its use can they become good writers. And once students take joy in writing, they will be able to see that style might be called a way of behaving and a way of seeing.

CONCLUSION

None of the approaches I have described stands alone, independent and self-sufficient. Instead, they partake of the same elements in ways varying enough to make each distinct, much like the major sects of a religion. One could extend, in Miltonic fashion, an analogy between the pedagogical approaches of composition and the churches of Protestantism—all allege to achieve the same laudable end, but there is disagreement on the means. But since such an analogy would sooner or later arrive at the comparison between minister and writing teacher, perhaps it should not be detailed, even though as teachers of writing we need to feel that strong sense of vocation.

To feel that teaching writing is a vocation—and not to feel the hopelessness that often occurs when our writing classes go badly—we must not only see improvement in our students, but also believe that what we do makes a difference. It often does not, if class time is used haphazardly: today's lesson put together the night before, tomorrow's something thrown together from files of old dittoes. Even if we plan ahead, what we often do, unknowingly perhaps, is to contradict ourselves—the lesson presented in week four doesn't mesh with what we said and our students did in week two. Those who faithfully follow a "recommended" textbook are certainly not exempt from giving conflicting messages to their students; publishers demand that writing texts discuss the efficacies of outlining, and so you have the situation, amusing if not so damaging, of a "process" author—preaching intuition and the discovery of form—discussing the need to outline.

You cannot slavishly follow another's system, just as surely as you need to have some system, some foundation which allows you to be reasonably confident that what your class does in week three builds toward week six which builds toward making better student writers. Perhaps, for your foundation, you want to use a sequence as the "epistemic" writing teachers do, but you also want to emphasize freewriting, brainstorming, and keeping a journal, ideas from Peter Elbow. And when discussing student papers, maybe you will talk, even at great length, about style, not as a "lesson," the way Christensen or Lanham intend, but organically from the context. Ideally, every writing teacher should have and be able to describe his or her "approach": both the classroom practices that one uses and the theory of writing behind those practices.

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NOTES

[1]For example, the collection of articles, *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, edited by Donovan and McClelland, becomes eight variations on a single theme—all eight are united in their underlying theory that writing must be taught as process, not product. And so Paul Escholz's "Prose Models Approach" is not really the "old" prose models approach, but is like most of the others in this book; he teaches process and introduces students to models when he believes it helpful, on an individual basis at a conference. While the book is excellent and centered on pedagogy, it does not attempt to give even a brief survey of the field. James Berlin, in his article "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories," does cover the field (though in an idiosyncratic and problematic way); but interested in theory, he does not describe what goes on in a classroom.

[2]For a related use of a sequence in a different context—writing about literary texts—see my article in *The Writing Instructor*.

[3]My discussion of the Stylistic Approach is indebted to Charles Schuster, assistant professor of English at the University of Washington.

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