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A Choice of Roles for Teachers of Writing

It was from British Columbia that the first rumblings of discontent were heard in Canada from university teachers who cared about writing. Given their head start in active inquiry into the state of writing abilities among undergraduates, the university writing courses there command a special interest and attention. Andrea Lunsford discusses with calm lucidity the full implications of the apprentice model of instruction which she practises, deploying both the authenticity of her experience and its authority in well-documented theory. This is a thoroughly teacherly prescription for practices which are less familiar in our universities than they may be in schools, and are all the more welcome for their academic robes.

Like many other prospective Ph. D. candidates in programs scattered across North America, I had the good fortune to study with a number of distinguished professors. In my particular department of English, none was more respected or revered than the scholar whose domain included all things Victorian. Except for those hours during which we wrote examinations, class periods always began the same way: precisely as the hour struck, our professor entered the classroom, greeted us cordially, assumed his position behind the lectern, produced a set of five-by-eight cards (or 'slips' as he called them) covered with meticulous notes, and began his fifty-minute lecture. And those lectures were brilliant. Through them, Victorian philosophical, political, educational, and social systems were woven into intricate cultural patterns; the "common reader" of the period came clearly into focus; the great critics and poets of the age peopled our classroom. And most importantly, as we listened, the poems, novels, and essays spoke to us directly, wholly, in the powerful transforming way that great literature can speak. As a result of those lectures, my education was remarkably enriched; I gained a clear perspective on an entire age; I acquired a great deal of information about individual works of art; and I became a more sensitive and critical reader of texts. I learned virtually nothing, however,

about my own writing or how to improve it. Nor, of course, did I learn anything about how to teach writing to others.

In spite of the fact that most English Ph.D.s have experiences similar to mine, we continue to call up that old veteran, the lecture, term after term, year after year, for active duty in our composition courses. Tried and true as it is in literature courses, however, the lecture model is as inappropriate for a writing course as would be stilts for a salmon. We should note, in the first place, that when we assume the role of lecturer we take for granted that students are capable of what the Russian psychologist Vygotsky calls “true-concept formation,” that they can readily abstract and synthesize, and that they possess a high degree of analytic competence.¹ We assume, in short, that after attending a lecture on coherence or the principle of subordination, the students will not only assimilate the information presented but also abstract a principle from it that can be transferred to their own writing tasks. When they fail to do so, we furrow our brows, give yet *another* lecture on coherence, and rue the day we ever entered the thorny thicket of composition instruction.

The lecture also fails us in composition courses because it ignores a central and fundamental truth: writing is above all else an act, an activity, something that we *do*. As James Britton puts it, “writing may be the *act* of perceiving the shape of experience.”² By its very nature, the lecture model keeps student activity in class to a minimum; the teacher does the acting instead. Partially because of our persistent attachment to the lecture, the view of writing as primarily an act, though astonishingly and obviously simple, has eluded us for years. In the last decade, however, this notion has been cogently presented to students in the work of Susan Miller, and to teachers in the work of Janet Emig, William E. Coles, John Warnock, and other rhetoricians.³

But if the lecture format fails to acknowledge a central truth about how students learn to write, as well as about the nature of writing itself, and is hence inappropriate for writing courses, do we have another model at hand that we can use? I believe the one most readily available to us, the apprentice model, may also be best suited to our needs. I borrow the term “apprentice” in an educational sense most immediately from Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* and Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, though of course the term is a common one.⁴

Implications of apprenticeship

The apprentice system itself is a time-honoured one, at least as old as classical rhetoric. Isocrates and Quintilian, perhaps the greatest teachers of the Greek and Roman worlds, essentially taught apprentices; boys learned to speak well by imitating the “master” and by speaking well themselves. We should note, too, that for Isocrates and Quintilian, imitation was by no means a rote

mechanical activity. Both classical orators would agree with Vygotsky, who argues, "To imitate, it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new. . . . In the child's development. . . imitation and instruction play a major role. They bring out the specifically human qualities of the mind and lead the child to new developmental levels."⁵ In the medieval guilds, apprentices developed competence or capacity by acting and doing, by working at their various crafts, again with the help and guidance of a "master." In our own century, such a system is implied in the theory of Piaget, which suggests that we develop intelligence primarily *by behaving intelligently*, and in the work of Vygotsky, whose studies with children convinced him that the kind of instruction necessary to higher cognitive development is that which moves just slightly ahead of students, providing them with activities they are no longer capable of, but which challenge all their potential.⁶

Although the apprentice model is solidly based in tradition and theory, we may well ask at this point whether the model is at all practical; will it work in our classes? Let us begin to answer these questions by considering some of the implications an apprentice model would have for our writing courses. Since such implications will touch on what writing teachers must do before class (in terms of preparation), during class (in terms of structure or format), and after class (in terms of evaluation), we may conveniently proceed in that order. To put it baldly, and a bit frighteningly perhaps, teachers using an apprenticeship model must prepare to be "masters" to writing apprentices. We must possess both the "knowing how" and the "knowing that" of writing, and we must be able to distinguish clearly between the two in our teaching.⁷ We must know in what ways writing is "a mode of learning."⁸ In William Powers's words, we must see writing as "an integrative physical manifestation of the theorizing mind. Its chief accomplishment may be synthesis by which the intuitive or creative leap becomes the writer's understanding and is given substantial form. . . ." ⁹ It goes without saying that teachers using the apprentice system will also be writers, deeply involved in the permutations and progressions of their own abilities and styles. (To this point I will return later.)

Teachers who have studied the theoretical connections between writing and learning and who have seen the practical proof of that theory in their own writing will also bring another bonus to the classroom: a reason to write. Once students begin to understand that writing well *enables* them to learn, to articulate and shape what they know and internalize it, they are well on the way to being motivated not by external factors such as grades or marks but by their own developing competence. And the continual writing which alone will build competence becomes not a series of rote, habitual, or mindless exercises, but the conscious building up of "intelligent capacities" in which "one performance is modified by its predecessors" as the writer continues to learn.¹⁰

Writing teachers using the apprentice system, then, must bring to class a belief in the enabling, Protean power of writing to structure and change our

various realities. Furthermore, we will bring an interest in discovering and understanding the writing processes and strategies of each class member, and a willingness to join our apprentices in the creative act of writing. But what are the implications of the apprentice model for the class periods themselves, those hours that seem to stretch endlessly before us in September, but which more often than not disappear as swiftly as does a line of standing cards when we tap down that first quivering Queen of Hearts?

Leading by writing and learning

The first implication for our classes grows out of our altered role as teachers. Unlike the lecture model, in which speech (often in the form of a monologue) is dominant, our apprentice model calls for more writing, less talking. According to William Coles, when it comes to writing, “what teaches finally is style, . . . (and) the performance of style is the offering of a role as an act of self-definition at the moment in time which demands the response of a complementary act of self-definition in the name of their mutual refinement.”¹¹ Composition instructors can only achieve such a style with which to engage students by writing. And when we write, we learn. Jim Corder’s highly entertaining and instructive essay, “What I Learned at School,” records his experiences as he tried to write nine required essays with his students during the course of one rather frantic term. By writing with them, he learned a great deal about how, when, and under what conditions students actually write, about the dichotomy between what he preached and what he practised, and about his own assignments. (“I know *how* to write this thing,” he remembers thinking to himself about one assignment in particular, “but why in hell would anybody *want to?*”)¹²

Martha Battle, who also writes with her students, recommends the “silent treatment,” designated class periods during which all class communication is written:

I simply invoke silence, write a remark or question on the board, hand chalk to three or four people, and let the class develop. There are several points made: 1) First, that no amount of talk teaches writing. Idea exchange is slow, but . . . learning to write is accelerated and made central to the class experience. 2) Second, we become aware that, no matter how many people are present, one is alone when he writes. 3) Third, students rapidly become aware of language in a different way, and the class moves easily to sessions on the visual and sonic pleasures of language, on vocabulary, on the strictures of repetition and variation. . . .¹³

My own experience of writing with students has taught me lessons similar to those learned by Professors Corder and Battle. In addition, I believe my writing activities give students a valuable insight: writing instructors are possessed of neither magic nor peerless ability. Words seldom, if ever, flow pristine,

effortless, from our pens. We do not sit down at typewriters, fifty-thousand-word essays perfectly formulated in a single draft, and produce masterpieces. Far from it. We, in fact, struggle with communication in much the same ways our students do, and it is indeed efficacious for students to perceive this truth at once. While I was working on this essay, I drafted and re-drafted a part of it as my piece of work during an advanced composition seminar. I took my turn at having my work examined by the group, and I profited by the thoughtful and detailed responses given by my "apprentices." On the other hand, they profited by sharing with me, in this particular instance, the solution to one conceptual problem, and by observing and discussing with me my various strategies for revision. As the term progresses, we are *all* profiting by writing and learning together.

A second implication for our classes to be drawn from the apprentice system is foreshadowed in the first. In a class for which writing is more dominant than lecturing, at least some group and one-to-one work seems necessary. Although space does not permit a detailed exposition, I can at least give a brief description of one general format. Class time is divided about equally: one-third devoted to discussing and preparing for writing exercises and assignments; one-third to in-class writing in groups, always with an eye to getting the response of group members to what we have written; and one-third to critical analysis of members' work in progress. For this analytical session, students come prepared with copies of the essay which they have read, studied, annotated, and responded to in at least two full paragraphs of advice for revision.

Cohesiveness and respect

In order for group work which involves critical assessment of writing to be effective, class members must *belong* to the group, share a sense of community and common purpose. I have already discussed the motivational connection between writing and learning which can help build common purpose. The sense of community, or what psychologists refer to as "cohesiveness," is sometimes harder to achieve. Nevertheless, group dynamics researchers point out that "members of a highly cohesive group . . . are more strongly motivated to contribute to the group's welfare, to advance its objectives, and to participate in its activities."¹⁴ Professor Jack Welch argues that cohesiveness is a crucial factor in writing classes and reports that in his own experience as a student of writing, "grades and threats from the teacher are not nearly as compelling or as pleasant as the responsibility which one unconsciously assumes by working with a group of his own peers."¹⁵ Certainly the apprentice model implies the need for such a sense of community, the kind that obviously existed, for example, in Quintilian's school, where every young apprentice was well known to the master and where the by-word seems to have been mutual respect among all.

Indeed, respect is the key word, I think, in achieving unity of purpose in a

writing class. Teachers who genuinely respect their students generally get respect in return, and as students gain respect for themselves and each other they begin to set increasingly higher standards of achievement for themselves. In group work, this mutual respect paves the way for the trust that is necessary if critical sessions are to be stimulating rather than tense. A growing sense of community also provides one very welcome element to the rhetorical structure of any writing course — an audience. Although my students often begin a term by hypothesizing an audience for their papers (for example, the readers of the student newspaper, the Board of Governors, a history professor), as the term progresses most students begin addressing essays to group members. Hence, we are seldom caught having to say “your technique here seems ineffective, but I’m not certain because I don’t know your audience.”

How can writing teachers foster such a sense of community in their classes? Only, I think, with respect, trust, confidence in our ability to guide apprentice writers, and profound attention to and interest in what the students have written and why they have written it the way they have. Discovering what Mina Shaughnessy calls the “logic of error” or the logic of an “awkward sentence” or a mixed metaphor brings the whole group closer to seeing such features of writing as *attempts at success* rather than as failures. Such a shift in perspective will help build what Jerome Bruner describes as “competence motivation,” the sense that successes and failures alike provide invaluable information necessary to achieving competence. Of course, not all classes develop “cohesiveness” or achieve “competence motivation”; like most teachers, I have had my share of abysmal failures. But much more often than not I am happily surprised, in the way I was several weeks ago toward the end of a particularly dispiriting day. In an attempt to avoid a stack of unanswered correspondence on my desk, I dashed over to the student cafeteria to grab a sandwich and tea, and I ran right into a large table around which perched seven or eight students from one of my writing classes. They were continuing their analysis of an essay, they reported, with specific attention to sentence length. They had found that every sentence contained between twenty-six and thirty-six words; they thought they might have discovered one of the reasons the essay seemed boring. When I left a few minutes later, they were combining and restructuring sentences, flexing their newly-discovered writing muscles. And I, of course, began to see my day as much less bleak.

Even if we structure our courses to allow for plenty of writing by both students and teacher, and even if we are fortunate enough to develop groups within the class whose members work well together and hence begin to motivate themselves more efficiently, what are we going to write about? What, in short, are the implications of the apprentice model for our writing assignments? I have already argued that we should write essays in response to our own assignments, and I agree with Jim Corder that doing so “is a marvelous corrective to any tendency one might have for using merely habitual assignments or for witlessly making thoughtless or stupid assignments.” As we fashion our writing assignments and activities, we should also see that they are well-grounded in a

rhetorical context in which writer, audience, text, and situation are fully delineated. No more “Write 1,000 words on ‘Bluebells in Aunt Jane’s Hair’” — an actual topic, by the way, on which I was required to write one of my Freshman English essays. No attempt was made, of course, to provide a context, an audience, or even an artificial reason for writing such an essay. Our assignments, furthermore, should be open-ended, so that rather than inviting set responses they allow students a chance to become engaged in the writing task. The work of Donald Graves and James Britton has shown us that students involved in their subjects or in the choice of those subjects produce better writing than they do with closed or forced topics. The lesson for writing teachers is clear to the point of translucency, and we should learn it at once.

A recursive spiral

Assignments, then, should not be closed. Even more important, we should never use isolated drill as a substitute for the complex web of processes involved in writing. We must learn to distinguish the difference between learning skills (such as spelling) and developing competences or capacities (such as writing). Skills can be reinforced by the use of drill; *the development of writing competence cannot be*. Gilbert Ryle uses the example of the recruit who “learns to slope arms by repeatedly going through just the same motions by numbers,” and notes that children learn letters of the alphabet in the same way. The development of competence or what Ryle calls “intelligent capacities,” on the other hand, involves not drill but “the stimulation by criticism and example of the pupil’s own judgment. He learns how to do things thinking what he is doing, so that every operation performed is itself a new lesson to him how to perform better.”¹⁶ How many of us have tried to teach subordination by distributing detailed explanations attached to lists of subordinating conjunctions, or tried to teach transitioning in connection with a list of “recommended” transition words and phrases? Ryle’s examples tell us exactly why such efforts on our part are bound to fail.

Ryle’s examples also point toward another hallmark of assignments based on the apprentice model: they must be structured recursively, not linearly, their pattern a spiral, not a vertical line. Each activity leads in new rhetorical directions while retracing earlier steps. Most teachers of writing are agreed that we should try to create assignments that will foster cognitive development in our students; we aim to help them reach Vygotsky’s “true-concept formation” stage.¹⁷ Unfortunately, as John Warnock points out, we know relatively little in concrete terms about how to achieve this aim. That is to say, we are only beginning to relate levels of writing ability with levels of cognition in ways that will allow us to generate exercises and assignments appropriate to those levels. Because of this limitation, and because I believe that the best writing assignments grow out of groups rather than being imposed on them, I would be remiss in recommending a series of specific assignments. But I should provide at least one example of the kind of exercise I have in mind.

Assuming that a teacher wishes to provide incremental practice in inference-making (a process necessary to conceptualization), he or she may produce several sets of data for group study and discussion. Following discussion, members write short interpretive (or inferential) statements based on the data. These are in turn analyzed by the group, and the process is then repeated, using more abstract or complex data. Such short in-class projects could lead naturally, for example, to an assignment for which students study some social phenomenon of interest to them, gather data concerning the phenomenon, draw inferences from their own data, and then begin to draft, write, and revise essays. And this assignment, in turn, prepares the way for ones which focus on more complex synthetic thought processes. Most importantly, each set of exercises and assignments takes students through the entire writing process, from what Janice Lauer calls “finding the starting point” and audience and context analysis, to the final stylistic revision. In this way, each swirl of the spiral combines recursiveness with progression through developmental levels.

Adjusting your work load

The apprentice system would seem to imply changes in teacherly attitude and role as well as changes in the writing course format and in the nature of assignments. I believe that the system also holds implications for the work we do in evaluating student writing, the most important of which I have already briefly noted. In short, we must begin by altering our students’ as well as our own attitudes toward evaluation. We can begin to do so by articulating course goals clearly, setting standards toward which we all will strive, and exemplifying those standards thoroughly. Within this framework, students and teacher alike must view errors, miscues, skewed syntax, or unattained goals not as failures to be scorned and judged punitively, but as what Ryle calls “exercises in competence.”¹⁹ To do so means that we must emphasize critical analysis of essays more than the final grading of them. Since the critical response comes from all members of the group, and the goal is always to discover how we can understand the writer’s aims and enact those aims in powerful, effective prose, the teacher’s comments and mark can be seen in the total context and hence be partially defused. Used in such ways, evaluation can become a blueprint for construction rather than a notice that “this property has been condemned.”

Grades will always present problems in writing courses because they are extremely crude instruments of evaluation and because development in writing is rarely if ever characterized by smooth progression. Rather, the writer may proceed in jumps and starts, regress, and then, after an indeterminant length of time, leap forward to a new plateau. The best we can do, as teachers of writing apprentices, is to keep all eyes focused on the potentiality of those leaps rather than on the apparent finality of marks. Using evaluation as an invitation and guide to revision also helps, but, as usual, practical difficulties arise. Teachers with large numbers of writing students strain under the burden of essay reading;

if students are continually revising, the workload soon becomes unbearable. For this reason, a writing class based on the apprentice model should *never* enrol more than fifteen or twenty students. While the lower figure is my ideal, even the higher is not my lot; most teachers probably face similarly large classes. I use the following compromise: each term, every group member presents at least one essay to the group for discussion and analysis. Although I analyze the essay along with the group members, I do not mark it until it has been fully revised. On other essays, students strive to give me papers “ready for publication”; I urge them to get friends and classmates to read and respond to these essays and to revise in accordance with the criticism they receive. Each student, then, gets at least one opportunity to revise an essay every term before I award it a grade. This system is far from perfect, but it is practical and efficient. Furthermore, each student looks forward to the week in which he or she will be the author under discussion, because the group invariably offers many valuable suggestions for “how you might have done it more effectively.”

By elaborating the implications of an apprentice system for teacher role, class and assignment format, and evaluation, I have attempted to support my contention that this model is much more appropriate for writing courses than is the more familiar lecture model. I do not wish in any way to suggest that the lecture model is inferior or unuseful; as I pointed out in the anecdote with which this essay began, I owe a good deal of my own education to the successful use of that model. I am convinced, however, that the teacher who assumes the basic role of lecturer in a composition class will do very little to improve student writing.

Professor Albert Kitzhaber was certainly correct in warning us that “there can be no quick and painless way to develop . . . a disciplined intelligence, a discriminating taste in language and fluency in its use.”²⁰ Learning to write well never has been and never will be easy, but we make it all the harder for our students by *talking about* the abilities Kitzhaber describes rather than *acting them out*. Over three hundred years ago, Ben Jonson gave his views on the master teacher/apprentice writer relationship, and argued that “rules are ever of less force and value than experiments.”²¹ The lecture model focuses on “knowing that” or rules, on knowledge of a subject; the apprentice model focuses on “knowing how” or experiments, on activity. As teachers of writing courses, let us embrace Jonson’s advice. Let us begin to experiment.

NOTES

1. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1962), pp. 59-61; 98-99.
2. James Britton, quoted by John Dixon in *Growth Through English* (London: Oxford, 1967), p. 45.
3. See especially Miller's *Writing: Process and Product* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, 1976); Emig's "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *CCC* 28 (May, 1977); Coles's *The Plural I* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977); and Warnock's "New Rhetoric and the Grammar of Pedagogy," *Freshman English News* 5 (Fall, 1976).
4. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 55; Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford, 1977), p. 6.
5. Vygotsky, pp. 103-04.
6. Vygotsky, p. 104.
7. On the distinction between "knowing that" and "knowing how," see Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), Chapter 2.
8. Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *College Composition and Communication* 28 (May, 1977).
9. William Powers, "Notes Toward a Theory to Underlie the Teaching of Writing," *Freshman English News* 6 (Fall, 1977), p.20.
10. Ryle, p. 42.
11. Coles, "Teaching Composition: Evolving a Style," *Freshman English News* 5 (Spring, 1976), p. 1; but this notion is elaborated much more completely in Coles's book *The Plural I*.
12. Jim Corder, "What I Learned at School," *College Composition and Communication* 26 (December, 1975), p. 331.
13. Martha Battle, "The Monday Morning Student," *College English* 38 (March, 1977), pp. 674-75.
14. Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, eds., *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 91.
15. Jack Welch, "On the Importance of Cohesiveness in Writing Classes," *College Composition and Communication* 24 (Oct., 1973), p. 292.
16. Ryle, pp. 42-43.
17. I have argued this point extensively in "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," forthcoming in *College English*.
18. Warnock, p. 18.
19. Ryle, p. 60.
20. Albert Kitzhaber, *Themes, Theories, and Therapy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 7.
21. Ben Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries* (1640), p. 277.