9 Writing at Reading: How a Junior Year in England Changes Student Writers

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When one considers the benefits of a college junior year abroad, the strengthening of academic writing skills is probably not what first comes to mind. Most students and most advisers would think instead about the new perspectives that come with immersion in another culture or about opportunities for travel between terms or about improving foreign-language skills. At Randolph-Macon Woman's College, however, one of the prominent features of a long-established junior year in England is the writing-intensive experience it offers to participants. Because this program is conducted on a pass/fail basis and in a modified tutorial setting, it provides an interesting laboratory for considering the effects on college student writers of a nontraditional system of response and evaluation.

Every year since 1968 about thirty-five students from R-MWC have spent their junior year at the University of Reading. The students live together in college-owned houses near the campus and have their meals in a university dining hall. They enroll in one yearlong common course (a British culture seminar) and in individual programs of study made up of regular university courses and/or tutorials conducted for R-MWC students by British faculty at the University of Reading or, in some subjects, at Oxford University. While they are at Reading, stu-

dents write three seminar papers of fifteen to twenty pages, one in each ten-week term, and about thirty shorter essays for their tutorials and university courses. If a student joins a university course in which tests are given, she must take them; but most students in this program will take no tests or exams in England, and all credits for the year's work are awarded on a pass/fail basis.

Part of the mystique that surrounds the Reading group when they return to the Virginia campus as seniors has to do with their enduring reputation as able student writers. Through many student generations, faculty have characterized Reading students as typically independent and self-directed in their senior studies; and in the formal evaluation of student writing skills that takes place at the end of each semester, names from the Reading group consistently appear in the lists of those whose academic writing has been judged "excellent" by at least two of their instructors. In conferences and in conversations with my own students and advisees, I have found myself enthusiastically echoing the standard advice: "If you want to learn to write, go to Reading."

Although the transforming effect of the Reading program on academic writing skills has long been part of R-MWC's campus lore, there had been no systematic examination of the experience. Perhaps this was so because the consistently pleasing outcome seemed so utterly predictable. Admission to the Reading program is competitive and self-selective; the sophomores who apply are above-average, motivated students who know that the program will be writing-intensive. Those chosen to attend will spend a year in a university system designed for a student elite (the top 6 to 8 percent of their age group in the U.K.), where undergraduate studies are much less highly structured and require more responsibility on the student's part for her own learning. The experience of living in a different culture, far from home and familiar routines, would by itself encourage independent behavior and develop self-confidence. Finally, the year at Reading offers the writer-friendly advantages of very small classes and long blocks of unstructured time.

According to Stephen North in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, one of the sets of conditions under which practice can legitimately become inquiry is when "both the situation and approach are nonstandard" (33); and as I began to think about the Reading program in North's terms, my informal conversations with Reading seniors began to move toward a more systematic examination of their testimony and their texts. Following my practitioner's instinct to learn

more about a program that "works," I concluded that a closer examination of the Reading experience might yield some useful insights about the development of academic writing skills. As I set out to establish with more precision exactly what had changed for these student writers during the course of their experiences abroad, I was particularly interested in two things: whether the writing *process* changes for these students and whether *response* to student writing is significantly different at Reading.

A comprehensive study of writing at Reading would be a long-term project, probably using case studies and a participant-observer approach to follow representative student writers and their texts from the home campus to Reading and back again for at least three years. The present study, limited by my leave time and resources to a single semester on the home campus, is based on the experiences of six volunteer informants, all seniors in their final semester at R-MWC. Five, with majors in English, creative writing, art history, politics, and economics, had been at Reading during 1990–91. A sixth student, another English major, had spent her junior year in Scotland, directly enrolled at St. Andrew's University; I included her because her experience provides an interesting contrast to the year at Reading. After an orientation session with the group of six, I distributed a two-page prompt sheet and scheduled a two-hour taping session with each student. In addition, I asked each participant to assemble a portfolio of representative essays from her sophomore, junior, and senior years, together with any attached evaluation sheets or comments from faculty readers in both settings. I was also able to schedule two two-hour taping sessions with the resident director of the Reading program and his wife during their annual April visit to the home campus.

The composite experience that emerges here, from the interview transcripts and from the collected texts and comments, reveals two enduring changes in these Reading group writers. While the individual writing process did not change significantly for any of these students, they did become much more comfortable with the process; they all talked about new fluency and confidence as being the products of a year of intensive writing in a pass/fail setting. In addition, these students developed a strong sense of ownership in their writing. Encouraged by a primarily oral system of response at Reading, one that balanced new freedoms with high expectations, these student writers discovered some powerful new roles for themselves. Although it would be difficult in most American classrooms to duplicate either the freeing distance from traditional systems of evaluation found in a jun-

ior year abroad or the kind of commitment that can develop over time in a small residential learning community like the Reading group, there are some elements in the Reading experience that could be adapted to more conventional settings.

When R-MWC students arrive at Reading, they are coming from a small college where writing has long been an important part of the liberal arts curriculum. What is so different about the year in Reading is that for most students, writing now becomes the only basis of formal evaluation; instead of a term paper or two or three shorter papers representing 25 or 40 percent of a course grade, writing at Reading will represent 100 percent of the work most of these students submit to the faculty for course credit. As one student observed:

> The concept of studying here [U.S.], I would think, is going over your notes and wondering what's going to be on the test; instead, in England, you *read.* You get a book and you read it. [It's] all completely reading and writing. And that's it! You just don't *do* anything else.

The result of this approach is, perhaps, writing across the curriculum in its purest form; writing at Reading becomes, to use William Zinsser's phrase, "an organic part of how every subject is taught" (vii). For example, in the required British culture seminar, a student writes brief responses to assigned readings, she submits notes on the presentations by guest lecturers, and she writes a research paper in each term on a topic she chooses, under the supervision of a university faculty reader in her field of interest. In addition, for each of her tutorials and university courses, usually two and sometimes three each term, a student will write about twenty-five pages during the ten weeks, again in a variety of forms. Among the writing assignments undertaken at Reading by the students in this study were a long paper written collaboratively with another student and during two terms for a sociology tutorial; three eight-page essays for a university course in the American novel; a comparison essay on different accounting systems; a series of critical summaries of readings for philosophy tutorials; a long paper on congressional reforms for a university course in American politics; case studies for a business law class; and three short papers in a modern drama tutorial to be read aloud to the class.

In his "Autobiographical Digression," the second chapter in *Writing without Teachers,* Peter Elbow describes a term in his junior year when, by mistake, he signed up for a combination of courses requiring two substantial papers each week: "After the first two weeks' crisis, I found I wrote fluently and with relatively little diffi-

culty for the rest of the term" (17). According to student testimony, the intensive writing experience at Reading can produce the same kind of fluency. One student reported that she finally counted up the pages she had turned out in ten weeks for her four classes "to satisfy my own curiosity" and came out with "about 100": "It never bothered me. I like writing more than I do these tests and quizzes; and I felt like I learned more." She concluded, "You got used to it. That's what I liked about this because you got the writing experience...by doing so many that...it didn't matter...it was not impossible." By the end of the year, she said, "It went faster, and I felt less stressed about it," and now, in her senior year, "It's a lot easier....I know I can get it done." A student who said she finished her last seminar paper three days early explained, almost apologetically, "That was because I thought it would take me longer to do it. It all came out. It was great! It was like being inspired to write poetry. It just came out."

However, student testimony suggests that new fluency and confidence are products not only of intensive writing practice at Reading, but also of a uniquely balanced system of response. It is response to student writing that sets the Reading program apart, both from other writing-across-the-curriculum or writing-intensive experiences at home and from other programs of study abroad. Response, as Sarah Freedman defines it in her study of teaching practices in secondary schools, "includes all reaction to writing, formal or informal, written or oral, from teacher or peer, to a draft or final version....Response can also occur in reaction to talk about an intended piece of writing" (5). At Reading, response comes from both British and American readers, from faculty and from peers, in oral and in written forms, and from outside traditional systems of evaluation but within a kind of community contract. Because the program balances new freedoms in a pass/fail year abroad with new commitments within the Reading group community, it encourages risk taking and experimentation while it builds responsibility and a sense of ownership.

Response to student writing takes place in a variety of forms and contexts at Reading, but by far, the largest part of response is oral. With longer papers, response often begins in the prewriting stages. One student's seminar paper supervisor had her come in for fifteen minutes every week with a progress report, and eventually an outline was requested, something that was not normally a part of this student's writing process but which she admits she found to be very helpful. This supervisor never actually read any preliminary drafts: "She would just sit there and listen to me....She let me go my way....She

never actually went through the poems with me and pointed out things at all. I did that all on my own." But the weekly contact was important: "She made it exciting for me. She made me *want* to do it."

In the first stages of the two-term collaborative project in sociology, the co-authors met with their tutor four or five times: "We would meet with him and go have coffee, and he would give us the names of books, tell us about the feminist bookstores in London." Then, as they read and took notes, the two researchers began to respond to each other: "What does this book say? Is there anything in this book?" Finally, after making a rough common outline, they took turns drafting on the computer, each reading and responding to what the other had written.

For many of the shorter papers, the first response comes after a complete draft has been submitted. In an American novel course for third-year university students, the professor invited his one R-MWC student to his office to discuss her papers:

> He would say, "When would you like to talk about it?"...He would talk about...if I'd made my point, what I could have done to make it better, what more detail I could have used...and we would just sit and talk, too. It was really nice! I was in there for about an hour for each paper. It was really helpful.

In tutorials, students often read their papers aloud, with response coming both from the tutor and from other members of the class: "We learned from each other." In the British culture seminar, response to student writing also comes in class discussion, but there the short essays on assigned readings are submitted the day before class, so that they can be used to organize discussion in small groups. Finally, at the end of the term, each student has an individual conference with the Reading program director in which they review her seminar notebook, the comments from her seminar paper supervisor, and the term reports from tutors. Here is another opportunity for oral response to the student's writing: "Dr. Ivy sat down with me [and said], 'You need to do this and this.' It helped me pinpoint [things to work on]."

Written response to student essays at Reading is limited, perhaps because there is so much oral response, but also because British faculty readers are not accustomed to close marking of surface errors or to focusing on problems in student prose. As the Reading program director observes: "Most university tutors presume that their students know how to write or ought to know how to write and mark essays very lightly." In his estimation, R-MWC students are "probably getting

on average less actual advice about their prose than they would had they been on the other campus...not because they are American students...[but because] that is the *norm* at Reading." Students were quick to notice that their British faculty readers were primarily interested in "your ideas," in "*what* you said," in whether you had "a convincing argument," and that they "didn't care about grammar" or, at least, "didn't correct me."

Examination of the collected student texts generally supports this judgment. For example, in one short essay, the tutor did not mark lowercase letters at the beginning of two sentences, or a fragment, or a plural subject with a singular verb. He did place two question marks in the margin to indicate problems with logic, and he made brief comments on matters of content: "*Cf.* Mill's *On Liberty* for similar theme." In a seminar paper, the faculty reader made only eight marks in a text of fifteen and a half pages: one exclamation mark to indicate overstatement; three check marks to indicate important points; two underlinings under Latin phrases; one spelling correction; and one word circled, commenting on word choice. He did not mark misplaced commas, misuse of semicolons, or typographical errors in the works cited list.

In contrast, reflecting a different tradition of faculty response to student writing, one of two American faculty readers at Reading made twelve marginal comments in a seven-page paper, including: "This is a run-on sentence," "Avoid contractions in a formal essay," and "Make sure subject and verb agree." In addition, she wrote a full-page comment at the end, analyzing the essay's organization in detail. "I worked harder on her papers," the student writer said, because she realized this reader would be paying much closer attention to surface features than the British readers did. While some students found less attention to surface errors liberating, this student was grateful for help with usage and sentence structure: "I feel like I lost or have forgotten so much. You're thinking you're doing okay, even if you're not [when errors are not marked]."

Written responses from the tutors on the collected student essays often included letter grades, but students quickly recognized that such marks did not necessarily correspond to those on the home campus or to marks awarded to the British students. As one student put it: "Sometimes professors would think that they understood the American grading system and gave a student a B or a B+." The program director acknowledges that there is a kind of grade inflation for junior-year-abroad students, who are at the university for one year

and who are not going to take final examinations for the degree: "It probably is the case that our students receive A's for work that would not be graded as A if a University of Reading student produced it." At the same time, any letter grade is going to be awarded outside the American system as well, because R-MWC transfers all credits for the year at Reading on a pass/fail basis.

This yearlong suspension of traditional grading, combined with the emphasis on oral response and the shift away from close marking of surface features, allows the Reading program students to think more about writing as a learning process and less about writing as a finished product. By the time she was writing tutorial essays in the third term, one student said, "I would just pick out something I thought was interesting and write about it. My first draft was it. They were all handwritten." Still, she was careful to assemble evidence to support her ideas, in case someone challenged her in discussion: "I knew I would have to back myself up." In her freshman and sophomore years, she had had a whole different set of concerns in her writing assignments: "I was worried about saying the right things, answering the question, coming up with what the professor wanted you to do, and making it long enough."

The liberating effect of a pass/fail year is an important component of the writing-intensive experience at Reading; nevertheless, as the program director points out, "It isn't a total suspension of the rules; they do care about the response they get." Because the students live together in very close quarters, they get to know each other very well, and this bond of close community extends to the resident director and his wife, Americans who live nearby and who interact daily with the students, not only as lecturers, tutors, administrators, and academic advisers, but also as personal counselors, mentors, honorary house parents, and friends. Randolph Ivy, who has been director of the Reading program since 1978 and is associate professor of English at R-MWC, teaches a Dickens course at the university. Judy Ivy, an art historian, is a John Constable specialist. They bring to the Reading program an American perspective on the varied backgrounds and needs of American student writers, and their response to student essays reflects their graduate study and university teaching experiences at Chicago and Pennsylvania. "I get to know them very well," Randolph Ivy says:

> Though they don't know their seminar paper supervisor well, they know *me* well. I mean, *we're* friends...and we're going to look at the report together. My regard for them becomes part of

> their self-estimation...so that disappointing me would be disappointing themselves....That becomes a certain spur to them, not to drop below a certain level.

Even though they wrote for a full year without the pressure of traditional grades, as one student put it, "We still felt like we had to do the best we could do."

This commitment to a kind of unwritten community contract was not part of the experience of the sixth student writer in this study, who spent her junior year in Scotland studying independently at St. Andrew's. Directly enrolled with third- and fourth-year English literature students in a junior honors program, this student attended three lectures and one or two tutorials each week for three courses each term. She wrote six papers each term for her tutors, two in each course. She "never understood the grading system" at St. Andrew's, except that no one got A's and "over 60% was really good"; so she, like her classmates at Reading, soon stopped worrying about grades and found that "really freeing." Also, like the Reading group, she concluded that her university faculty readers were "not concerned about stylistics" but primarily "wanted to see your ideas." With only four or five hours a week in class, she had time to read widely, and as a writer, she "never felt rushed." But her writing "didn't get any better":

> You had these tutors—you didn't know them very well—you didn't see them very often...and for some reason a lot of my writing is wrapped in with what I think the other person thinks, whether they think I've done a good job. And because I didn't care that much about these people in terms of their opinion of me, I got kind of lazy. My process didn't change in my writing, but I got lazy about it.

Compared with the Reading experience, writing at St. Andrew's was more specialized but less intensive; there was not as much response, and the response was more impersonal. There was the same liberation from concern about grades, with the same pass/fail transfer of credits. But without the balance of response from committed American faculty readers within a close residential community, it was reading, not writing, that was at the center of this student's experience abroad.

In his book *Writing and Sense of Self*, Robert Brooke applies theories of identity formation and negotiation, borrowed from social psychology, anthropology, and political theory, to his experiences in traditional writing courses and in writing workshop classes. He argues that learning to write depends on "the identification and exploration of writers' roles for the self, roles which need to be broader than the lim-

ited examinee-to-examiner traditional school roles" (140). He concludes that workshop classes teach writing more effectively than traditional courses do because they more effectively promote an understanding of the self as writer. In a workshop course, Brooke believes, the focus shifts "from grasping the concepts underlying teachers' assignments to deciding through practice how certain activities help or hinder one's own development of texts" (84). Brooke also presents testimony from students that workshop courses "affect students at an emotional and personal level—they feel changed by their experience" (112).

Certainly, every student writer in the Reading program feels changed by her experience there; and in several respects, the Reading group resembles the writing workshops that Brooke describes. At Reading, almost everyone is writing something every week, for the most part on topics of her own choice; there is a lot of mostly oral response; there are no tests; and credit is awarded on the basis of what ultimately amounts to a pass/fail contract to complete a certain number of pieces of writing. Brooke's observations about the workshop students could also describe members of the Reading group:

> Instead of having to demonstrate that they knew what the teacher knows through tests, essay exams, or a sequence of work to master...skills, students merely had to do a certain amount of writing per week, take part in class and small-group discussion, and finish a number of pieces they had started during the course of the semester. Once they caught on...students recognized that it was a simple contract, one which they controlled and were responsible for. (146–47)

Thus, like the writing workshop courses in Brooke's study, the program at Reading provides "cues" that shift learning "from a teacher-student examination context to a cooperative community context" (147).

As I reviewed the transcripts of the interview tapes, I began to notice what Brooke would call "patterns of identity transformation ...whereby individuals change their behaviors and their understanding of themselves" (26):

> There was so much more of me in a paper in England....I was doing it for myself, and I was doing it by myself. It was my own little project and I had to do it, and if I didn't do it, it wasn't going to get done....It's like a piece of you, and you're so much more proud of what you produce because you motivated yourself to do it.

> I had more time to do research, so I did it. I felt like I was doing it for me because it was pass/fail. The professor wasn't going to *grade* me...so I was learning something and it wasn't for anybody but me. It made it more interesting.
>
> [The modern drama tutorial] was really five or six different equals, sitting around and talking about a play.

"When students and teacher can move outside the limitations of traditional examinee-examiner roles," Brooke concludes, "then kinds of learning become possible that were not possible before" (82).

At Reading, shifts in conventional roles allow changes in self-concept, and the growing sense of ownership in student writers can produce changes in behavior. The student who learned "you can't cram papers" when she came up short on time, sources, and text in her first seminar paper submitted an outline to her supervisor before she started writing the next one. The champion procrastinator in the group, who knew that others had been asking Professor Ivy to look at their rough drafts, completed a full draft of her third seminar paper in time to do the same. A student who began on her own to bring papers into Randolph Ivy's office did so, he said, "not because anyone had said her prose was bad, but because *she* wasn't happy [with her essay], so she came to me." During the course of the year, he observed that

> Simply the process of sitting with students and spending time with them on their essays makes them better self-editors. After we've been doing this for awhile, the rough drafts that are coming to me are already much cleaned up. The punctuation is more frequently in the right places; the typos are gone; a lot of the spellings have been corrected; [and] sentences have already been combined.

For a significant number of students every year, there is what Professor Ivy calls a "real sea change" in their prose when they learn how to coordinate and subordinate ideas:

> They come writing simple-level sentences....They can't make the shape of the sentence reflect the shape of the idea....A number of them are just at that point in their lives that if you show them how to coordinate and subordinate, they can begin to do it.

This is not, he points out, just a surface-feature change, because as they learn to coordinate and subordinate, the nature of their ideas begins to change as well: "Papers become more analytic. The thesis paragraphs really become thesis paragraphs." One student said, "I feel like I can say things in more understandable terms." Another reported, "I

learned to make my topics more specific." "The ideas...were always there," Professor Ivy concludes; "I think they'd not been able to express them because they didn't have access to them."

For a senior returning to conventional studies after a year abroad, there is always tension between her newly developed sense of independence and that traditional college student/examinee role. The senior who had been at St. Andrew's described herself as overwhelmed by "way too many classes." In Scotland there had been "no syllabi telling me exactly what to do...I miss the freedom." A schedule suddenly crowded with classes and daily assignments for five courses also represents a major adjustment for the returning Reading students. One senior complained: "One of the problems I'm running into is that [since Reading] I *want* to do the reading [but] there's so much pressure to meet all the deadlines that I'm not getting the reading done. I'm doing surface work [because there is] not enough time to absorb it." Reflecting on her Reading experience, another senior confessed: "I was allowed to introduce my own ideas—I felt comfortable with that. I really developed that way. [Now] I'm worried about what grades I get. I wish *that* had been my senior year. I feel like I'm going back to my old ways."

Still, in senior-year writing assignments, the confidence, the fluency, and the strong sense of ownership that develop at Reading do remain. "Only twenty pages!" said the economics major:

> I felt confident in my writing. I felt like, yeah, I could write! I started early on my [senior] seminar paper....I just wrote twenty-two pages all in one weekend. I didn't have any problems with getting it done, and he seemed to like what I wrote.

When a visiting professor announced that she wanted a paper of ten to fifteen pages in a Thai culture and society course, another senior reported: "Everyone panicked. And I thought, 'Well, I can do that.'" After writing at Reading:

> Here...it's like, you know, "Oh, I have to do a five- to seven-page paper on Gandhi." So, I'll read, and, you know, look things up and find the most important things and write a paper.

The R-MWC junior year in England was not conceived as a yearlong writing-across-the-curriculum workshop; it developed naturally out of a particular set of circumstances into its present form, guided by Randolph Ivy and his predecessors, who, he says, "must have unconsciously seen that it was working." Combining intensive writing practice with primarily oral response, and balancing a suspen-

sion of traditional evaluation with a high level of expectation within a close community, the year at Reading allows student writers to develop new confidence, independence, access to ideas, and sense of ownership. In Brooke's terms, it is identity transformation, a new "sense of self," that is at the heart of the Reading experience and that ultimately generates the changes in writing performance so long associated with this program.

Those practices, Brooke concludes, which "promote an understanding of self as writer are likely to 'teach' writing more effectively than practices which focus only on expanding writing processes or on internalizing formal rules" (5). Changing the test-and-grade-dominated culture on most American campuses to something like the Reading pass/fail tutorial model is clearly unrealistic; nevertheless, there are some alternative strategies and modifications of writing activities that might be successfully adapted from the Reading experience: more conferencing and oral response throughout the composing process, and less marking of drafts; more informal writing assignments, presented as a way of learning, as a starting point for discussion or for further reading; a shift in focus from mastery of forms to development of confidence and fluency through intensive writing practice; and development of close, supportive relationships among students and teachers as the basis for more shared assessment of drafts. It may be that for college juniors especially, student writers who have just declared majors and who are often just beginning to mature intellectually, such strategies are likely to be transforming ones, at home or abroad.

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Interlude

What is "cutting edge" in grading alternatives? I've only been teaching for twenty-two years, but in that time, most of these methods have come around at least two or three times. "Cutting edge," for me, will be the day there are not grades at all, at least in teaching writing. On that day, the only thing students will have to go by will be conferences with me or in the college writing center and comments written to them as well as peer comments. On that day, we will act like writers rather than "students" and "teachers."

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