



WLA Newsletter

. . . writing as a liberating activity. . .

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Co-editors:
Richard C. Gebhardt
Barbara Genelle Smith

WRITING AS A LIBERATING ACTIVITY: A Position Statement

by

Richard C. Gebhardt and Barbara G. Smith

Students too often are asked to write on subjects external to their own needs and experiences as human beings. Students too often are pressured to use composition as a mechanical fill-in-the-blank formula for conveying information. Students too often are persuaded that personalized writing -- in contrast to logical, rational, knowledgeable forms of academic discourse -- is defective or undesirable. As a result, student writers have adopted poses, faked and phony, in their compositions in order to resist and yet comply with these pressures and persuasions, in effect disguising their personal integrity and creativity with hypocrisy. Roger Sale identifies these pressures against creativity and personal response in his book, On Writing. He records, for instance, the shocked response of a student to his suggestion that she write papers the way that she writes letters: "But I can't write that way. Not on an English paper." And Sale goes on to identify the source of the student's consternation as the differences of formality, organization, technical accuracy, and spontaneity that separate genuine student writing from the kind of writing expected in most English classes (New York: Random House, 1970, pp. 3-4). Ken Macrorie, of course, has written about this required, artificial, impersonal, uncreative language, too -- the "Engfish" of Uptought (New York: Hayden, 1970, pp. 3-18).

Writing teachers too often assign subjects external to the needs and experiences of students, pressure students to view composition as a mechanical formula, persuade students that personal writing is undesirable, and otherwise force students to hide their personal integrity and creativity behind faked and phony poses. Many writing teachers do these things as matters of conscience: they believe in the distinctions which Roger Sale outlines so well. These teachers believe so completely in writing that is formal, organized, and accurate that, even when they also value spontaneity and freshness, they throw the weight of their instruction and the authority of their grading behind the kind of composition that Sale's student knew so well.

The average writing teacher, Donald Murray suggests in A Writer Teaches Writing, is as compulsive with red ink as an alcoholic is with whiskey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968, p. 135). Changing the analogy, W. W. Reising confesses his tendency to bleed red-inked comments "upon everything from misplaced commas to undeveloped arguments" over all of the blank spaces on student papers ("Controlling the Bleeding," College Composition and Communication, February 1973, p. 43). If this commitment to the corrected paper is limited to marking only the manner of the student's presentation, then the lessons that instructors teach become those that Fred T. Wilhelms

describes in "English: Liberal Education or Technical Education?" -- that writing is an artificial, antiseptic process in which the way an essay is written far outweighs what the student says and why he/she wants to say it at all. It is Wilhelms' view that such lessons are dehumanizing pressures toward "the rigid and closed personality" of the student (New English, New Imperatives, Henry Maloney, ed., NCTE, 1971, p. 63).

Of course, many teachers see the phony poses and recognize the depersonalization that occurs when students make their writing conform to the artificial conditions that have been imposed on them. They may recognize, as the student may feel, that the act of writing is a personal, creative thing, the source and product of which is the self of the writer. And they, like the student, may be frustrated because the pressures of the composition class too often prevent spontaneousness, creativity, and personal expression. These teachers read books and essays, such as A Writer Teaches Writing, How Porcupines Make Love, "Teaching English Composition as a Creative Act," and "Teaching Without Judging" (see the February 1973 College English for these two articles), and they echo in their own ways the judgment Reising renders on his penchant for marking: "Oh, I realize I should know better." But the necessity of remedying the usage problems of the weaker students, the drive to "finish" the text, the looming presence of the department syllabus, the teacher's own pre-conditioned ideas about the acceptable climate of a classroom and the appropriate behavior of a teacher, and the teacher's legitimate concern for the clarity of student writing -- all these prevent many well-intentioned teachers from actually implementing in their classroom teaching educational principles to which they subscribe intellectually.

The frustration which this array of conflicting ideas generates is not alleviated by most of the textbooks that teachers use in writing classes. For, assuming that writing equals exposition and that writing is something a person does for others, too many textbooks focus on external, mechanical, or purely utilitarian concerns and techniques. Handbooks to English provide detailed guides to grammar, usage, organization, research, and letter writing. But they usually assume that the student already has something he/she wants to explain clearly to others; and they usually concentrate on external, academic subjects for writing, paying little attention to the student's feelings toward his/her subject or toward writing itself. Issue-Oriented Anthologies seem to focus on the student's feelings, but they usually are biased in favor of the formal development of opinions, and they run the risk of generating artificial and ungentle essays on the ideas that editors insist that all students consider. Books of Outright Writing Instruction are built on the essentially unliberal and uncreative assumptions that there is a right, or at least a most effective or most efficient way to write, and that this one way applies to all students without exception. And, of course, other than the books intended for creative-writing classes, almost all writing texts assume that writing means essay writing and so limit their instruction to methods and techniques of exposition.

We feel, however, that writing includes many sub-forms, and that the very individual process of writing involves the decision of whether to write an essay, a story, a poem, a journal, a letter. And we believe that writing is an internal activity in which the chief factor is the writer himself rather than external issues (whether current or not), or structures, or methods of composition. Of course, writing is a process that ends in an artifact, in a product that conveys something to others, and so usage, structure, clarity, and the like are important. But these things must be seen in the perspective of the whole process in which individuals work with language to understand their ideas and themselves and to express their insights in ways that reflect their own personalities. Therefore, to make our intentions in editing the WLA NEWSLETTER clearer, we offer these statements:

- Writing is a creative activity which by its very nature explores relationships between disparate materials and uses language to give new forms to the relationships.

- Writing provides a context in which a person can think out and try to express ideas, emotions, and responses to life in forms as diverse as the essay, fiction, and poetry. This context-for-exploration is important because schools and colleges provide little incentive for such introspection.
- Writing is a liberating, liberalizing, humanizing activity which should be made to connect with the student's development as a human being and with the whole process of education, rather than identified with the all-too-often artificial atmosphere of the writing class.
- Writing is a means for one human being to communicate achieved insights to other human beings, and so a writer must be aware of the clarity of his/her writing for others, recognizing that choices in language, structure, and usage will have a direct influence on the effectiveness of his/her writing.

In line with these statements, we feel that the writing class should keep the individual student at its center by focusing, more completely than is typical, on writing as a creative process of self-awareness and self-expression. The writing class should get the student started writing, but it should not dictate a single writing process. Instead it should let the student try different means of written expression. And it should handle the necessary aspects of usage, organization, and language from such a perspective and in such ways that they do not in any way prevent writing from being what it rightfully is -- a creative, liberating, humanizing activity.

WLA NEWSLETTER began in an NCTE College Section workshop on Writing as a Liberating Activity which focused on the freeing of student imagination and creativity and the expanding of student outlook and opinion. These two subjects define the editorial policy of WLA NEWSLETTER, for the newsletter hopes to be a forum where people interested in writing as a liberating activity can share techniques that have worked to make writing classes creative, exciting, liberating places. To this end, we invite your reports, reviews, annotated bibliographies, defenses of (and attacks on) the idea of writing as a liberating activity. And contributions are especially solicited for the three regular features: Course Report, Teaching Plan, and Reading List.

WLA READING LIST -- #2

- Thomas Klein, "Personal Reflections of a College Professor: Some Thoughts on the Human Side of Teaching," New Directions in Teaching, 3 (Summer-Fall, 1972), 37-54.
 ". . . when empathy and feedback and trust-building techniques . . . become the guidelines for establishing real relationships among persons, we can get on with the business of learning and enjoying."
- Marie Jean Lederman, "A Comparison of Student Projections: Magic and Teaching Writing," College English, 34 (Feb. 1973), 674, 683-689.
 "There seems to be a connection between writing and feelings about the self."
- Thomas F. Mader, "On Presence in Rhetoric," College Composition and Communication, 24 (Dec. 1973), 375-381.
 ". . . presence is essential in argumentation not only because it compels one to attend to a problem but also because it compels one to recognize his own significance in relation to reality."
- Deena Metzger, "Silence as Experience," College Composition and Communication, 24 (Oct. 1973), 247-250.
 "For me, silence is always an . . . aesthetic intoxication Though I could not provide that experience for the students, we attempted to achieve the same quality of experience"

HUMANIZING ENGLISH: Exercises for the Classroom

Thomas Klein
Bowling Green University

CONTINUED from the first issue:

"Where teachers may have little control over the individual lives--the family, social and cultural life of the student outside the classroom--they can affect the quality of group life in the classroom. The exercises which follow--exercises for Getting Acquainted, Deepening Acquaintance, and Increasing the Flow of Interaction--are meant to help teachers in English to provide an environment that is both safe and person-centered; that gives rise to an interconnected world, one in which there is rarely the feeling that 'My class has nothing to do with me.'"

I. Getting Acquainted

D. Interview--. Tell the group that we will begin by choosing a member of the group we do not know, but whom we would like to know better. It would help to mix people up if the class milled around the room for a short while, making visual contact with a variety of persons. Each person is to choose one other person and sit down to talk for five or ten minutes. If the group needs a little push to get the questions going, the teacher could ask each person to write down three questions he/she could ask another. Some of these could be read aloud in order to differentiate effective and ineffective questions.

Application to English: After the interview, the teacher can ask each person to write a short sketch of the interviewee. The writer might be asked to focus on values, dislikes, probable occupation, eventual spouse, a day in the interviewee's life 20 years from now, where the interviewee would like to travel, etcetera. After the papers are written, two groups of two could combine to hear all four papers read. Or, each paper could be read to the entire group. If the latter proves too time-consuming, it could be sufficient to ask each interviewer to introduce his partner to the class. The activity could easily be extended into a talking and listening exercise by encouraging the students to question interviewers and interviewees further. A follow-up to this exercise might involve the teacher's anonymous reading of a paper and the class' attempt to guess to whom the paper referred.

E. Value Ranking--. Each student is given a list like either one of the following:

A Comfortable Life	Ambitious
An Exciting Life	Capable
A Sense of Accomplishment	Cheerful
A World at Peace	Clean
A World of Beauty	Courageous
Equality	Forgiving
Family Security	Helpful
Freedom	Honest
Happiness	Imaginative
Inner Harmony	Independent
Mature Love	Intellectual
National Security	Logical
Pleasure	Loving
Wisdom	Powerful
Self-Respect	Self-Controlled

Students are then asked to reorder the items on the list, putting those most important to themselves first. Students are then asked to assemble in a small group, are given a blank sheet of paper, and are asked to compile a group list, reaching voluntary consensus before any value is recorded.

Application to English: Involved in any choice like those above are concepts such as connotation, inference and value judgment. Does "power" connote only tyranny and coercion to young people? Is "wealth" necessarily bad? What inferences and hidden assumptions mask our choices of values and careers? These issues can lead into discussion and/or writing.

II. Deepening Acquaintance

A. "I am, you are"---. Requiring a little more self-disclosure and offering slightly more self-discovery, this exercise begins with two students who are relatively unacquainted chatting for 5-10 minutes. They can be given an arbitrary topic, such as "things that annoy me" or "my pet peeves," if that would help them get going. After ten minutes, each student writes the following about what has just transpired: 10 statements, each beginning "I am _____" and 10 statements, each beginning "You are _____." Students reveal who they have revealed themselves to be and what they have discovered about their interviewees. The two get together again to read their respective lists and discuss any surprising or unclear or inaccurate perceptions. What did I notice about myself which you didn't? And what did I see of you which you were unaware of?

B. Internal Dialogue---. When we make decisions about ourselves (Am I being forceful enough?) or about our behaviors (Should I call him up?), we usually engage in more or less conscious internal dialogues. In this exercise students are asked to find one internal dialogue that they have had recently which they would be willing to share with others in the class. They are given at least 15 minutes to write out both sides of this dialogue and then read them in small groups.

Application: If students have recently studied drama or short story, this is an easy transition into a discussion of conflict and the ways we deal with it. Each student becomes one of the characters and writes a page or so of the character's internal conversation. In a story like Richard Thurman's "Not Another Word," the resolution of his dilemma is incomplete and unstated. Students could write out his thoughts at the end. Finally, a variation on this exercise would have students in small groups selecting the best internal dialogue in their group (unrelated to fiction) and converting it into a short story or play, where the internal dialogue represents the central conflict of the main character.

C. Personality grids---. Study about language, rather than study of the use of language, has been one of the most corrosive forces wearing away at the potential value of an English class. Students have been put through hundreds of senseless grammatical drills and, more recently, through generative derivations of English sentences that most do not and will never need. So here are some activities through which the ways we use language can be illuminated, while at the same time serving the interpersonal needs of students. The purpose of Personality Grids is to help students observe and react to other students, while receiving personal reactions about themselves from others and while discovering the power of precise language. Enlarge the following grids on two separate sheets of paper and give a copy of each to every student:

How I See Others

Name of Person #1	#2	#3	#4	#5
3 words (nouns or adj.)				
Musical Instrument				
A Dessert				
Animal				

How Others (and I) See Me

ME	Name #2	#3	#4	#5	#6
3 words (nouns or adj.)					
Musical Instrument					
A Dessert					
Animal					

Group students so that they are in groups of no more than six persons and so that most of the group members are not acquainted. Each person then fills in the names of the persons in his/her group in the spaces under "Others". They proceed to complete each column by writing what three words the first person brings to mind, what musical instrument, dessert, and animal. Each also completes his/her own list of words in the first column of the "Me" sheet.

When each person has completed his cells, members take turns receiving the responses other chose for them. If someone wants to explain why he/she gave a certain response, he/she can explain briefly, but all extended discussion, clarification, and comparison should be held until after all have had the chance to get the group's responses. The person receiving the feedback records the words in the additional columns on the "Me" sheet. After each person has finished this, discussion can then proceed.

If handled properly, this can be the most natural kind of language exercise. Students generally crave the personal exchange that "Personality Grids" sets up, and they are examining language concepts naturally, as these arise out of their own speech and needs to communicate precisely. Bob calls Sandi "Heavy" and interrupts the laughter to explain the connotation. Karen offers Sue "French Horn" for musical instrument and explains how it is a central, earthy part of an orchestra, a better lesson in use of metaphor than we could expect. Jo is also in music and acts out what a cello is to her, with sound and body gestures. Frank gives Judy "Tin Roof" for dessert, and, when Judy looks totally puzzled, he explains that's what folks in Cincinnati and other parts of Ohio call a chocolate sundae with lots of nuts. "Nice" makes Randy unhappy: it's too vague, can apply to too many things. At the end of a quarter of advanced composition in which "Personality Grids" were used, one girl commented that the exercise was the most valuable one for her and possibly the most valuable classroom activity she had ever engaged in.

III. Increasing the Flow of Interaction

As persons interact in groups, they naturally fall into roles depending on factors, such as personality, mood, the group membership, and the task at hand. When a group functions smoothly, with members free to contribute as they would choose, these roles are selected naturally by each participant. At one time I may feel that it is the most profitable to remain silent, while at other times I disagree, or clarify, or ask another for his or her opinion. Unfortunately, this is not the case with most members in most groups. They feel afraid; they feel uncertain of just what is acceptable; they feel apathetic or bored and hesitant to say so. Groups bog down--only three of eight talk. Five minds, in effect, withhold their resources.

Taking on Roles--. The exercise which follows poses less of a threat than most of the others here because it requires relatively little self-disclosure. It focuses on subjects outside the immediate, here-and-now personal lives of students and constitutes a vehicle through which group interaction can be increased without increasing the stresses resulting from teacher coercion. It is an exercise meant to oil the rusty group gears and is designed as a preparation and training device for serious discussion, instead of an activity gauged to get students into the substance of literature or honest talk. The exercise is best done in small groups of 6 to 10 students and is excellent for training student leaders for such small groups.

With groups of six students each, one of the following cards is handed to each student:

1 Role: Leader Try to keep discussion going by asking others' opinions. Stand: Neutral

2 Role: Devil's Advocate Question everything; let no half-truth or vague comment pass Stand: For

3 Role: Conformist Agree with and reinforce most points. Stand: Wishy-Washy

4 Role: True Believer Express vehement anger and conviction; don't be too concerned with logic. Stand: Against

5 Role: Clarifier Make sure that what is said is always crystal clear; demand definition, evidence and logic. Stand: For

6 Role: Trouble-maker Interrupt, confuse, be incoherent. Stand: Against

Make sure that those who receive the cards can handle the role, although don't necessarily avoid the challenge of a difficult role (eg., one who has been a conformist in a group should not be reinforced in that role and might be able to handle "clarifier" or "devil's advocate.") It would be well to ask one person to observe each group to see which behaviors helped in the discussion.

Now, hand the group a topic or a list of topics from which a topic is chosen for a ten-minute discussion. Topics should be stated in the form of a proposition, such as "The Supreme Court Ruling on Abortion should be upheld" or "The A - F Grading System should be modified to an A - B - C - No Record System."

After the discussions are over, the teacher should lead a discussion on what makes groups function effectively, asking first for the observers' comments. Besides the skills of the leaders as gatekeepers and thought-stimulators, and the efforts of the clarifier and the devil's advocate, the issue of the group climate needs attention. Was the group tense? Were diverse opinions accepted? Did the leader force answers or show genuine interest?

Of course, "Taking on Roles" represents the merest beginning of leadership training and group development, but it provides a first step toward further training of student leaders. As they grow in skill and confidence, and as the group develops the trust that honest (more than right) answers are respected, the group life in the classroom will improve.

READING LIST #2
(Continued)

- Beatrice K. Morton, "Creative Drama--A Visit to a Class," English Journal, 62 (April, 1973), 622-627.
- Betty Shiflett, "Story Workshop as a Method of Teaching Writing," College English, 35 (Nov. 1973), 141-160.
"Story workshop redirects the writer to telling in his own voice as one of the main sources of talent and ability"
- Jack R. Sublette, "The Dartmouth Conference: Its Reports and Results," College English, 35 (Dec. 1973), 348-357.
"The one question no one, during the Dartmouth Conference or since, seems willing to ask . . . is . . . what is the end of education? Very simply . . . the end of education should be to develop the humanness and humaneness of the learner."
- Jack Welch, "On the Importance of Cohesiveness in Writing Classes," College Composition and Communication, 24 (Oct. 1973), 291-294.
"If we as teachers can develop cohesiveness in our classes, we'll be unleashing a demonstrably powerful motivating force that seems to be inherent in the human being"
- Smokey Wilson, Struggles with Bears: Experience in Writing (San Francisco: Ganfield Press, 1973).
"Each of us [in a class at Laney College] had struggled with the bear of trying to communicate with others It had been often enjoyable, sometimes difficult. But it had never been dull."



TEACHING PLAN #1: Establishing a Climate for Open, Creative Learning

CONTRIBUTOR: Richard C. Gebhardt, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840

ORIENTATION: Here is the sequence of activities I used during the first seven days of my most successful section of Findlay College's required freshman course, Self Awareness through Writing--a sequence of activities that established an open, creative atmosphere in which writing seemed to work as a liberating activity. My dissatisfaction with my writing classes, and the recommendations of two teachers I respected, had led me earlier to begin experimenting with isolated techniques for establishing more open, sensitive classrooms. But it was only when I conceived of the techniques as inter-connected and clearly related to the subject matter of the entire course (eg. self-understanding, autobiography, associational keys to creative writing) that this sort of activity really worked. Maybe it will work again. Maybe it won't. And maybe you or I will find a dozen more effective ways to establish writing classes as dynamic, personal places for writing and learning.

UNIT SCHEDULE:

Day One

Sound Filmstrip on Identity (Man's Search for Identity, Part I)

The class then discussed a few points in the filmstrip, points that connected clearly with the course. I used this as a transition to a very brief statement about the course's approach and atmosphere: writing as a means of self-discovery, writing as a creative activity, the class as a resource to be used rather than a requirement to be met.

Day Two

De-inhibitors and Climate Setters:

Escape from the Plastic Bag (Eyes shut. Flex muscles as if trying to break through an envelope of plastic wrap.)

The Airport Game (Do to fast music. Students move around in a confined area but try not to touch others. Penalty for bumping: both people freeze, adding to the congestion.)

Handshaking (Introductions--self to another person, then that person to a third person.)

Sound Filmstrip on Identity (Man's Search for Identity, Part II)

Informal group discussion on the topic, What Questions Would be Good to Ask to Really Get to Know Somebody Else? I played the role of a person being interviewed. I replied candidly and fully to each question put to me by the class, and then added a word or two on how that specific question might be altered to interview people other than a college teacher. (Clearly, the class learned more about me than it did about interviewing; but within the context of establishing class rapport, this is exactly what I had in mind.)

Day Three

Airport Game

Handshaking

Mirror Game (Partners--ie. the last people introducing themselves in the handshaking sequence--face each other, one pretending to be a full-length mirror reflecting the movements of the other. One moves, and is mirrored, in time to music, and then the roles are switched.)

Interviewing: The mirror partners worked out an "interview schedule" of questions intended to get at a person's real identity. Then the partners used the questions to interview each other, keeping notes on their answers.

Day Four

No class. Each student was working on two related assignments: a two-page biography of himself (in third person), and a two-page description of the mirror partner (based on the interview and his observations of the partner during the mirror game and the interview).

Day Five

The mirror teams trade papers so that student A reads the paper that student B wrote about student A and the one that student B wrote about student B. Then the teams react, as the partners discuss how their perceptions of each other differed.

Day Six

Free Association Exercise. As I indicated a category (eg. a kind of car), the students jotted down the specific item in that category (eg. a rusted-out Volkswagen) with a "personality" most like theirs.

Then the mirror teams interviewed each other to find out the why of each answer. And they worked together to find common principles or similar traits running through the answers. (As answers on one student's list, a rusted VW, a condemned garbage scow, and an ugly old gymnasium might well suggest an interesting trend.)

Day Seven

Open Writing Workshop. Students came to work individually and with each other rather than to have me perform; students requested my reactions and suggestions and otherwise took the initiative for the direction of the class. Assignment: Write a description of yourself using as many details as possible from the list of associations you created yesterday.

ANNOUNCEMENTS



Submissions Welcome Especially in these categories:
Teaching Plans--One or two page outlines of how a teacher handled a teaching problem or part of a course.
Course Reports--Reports, under 600 words, of activities or distinctive approaches in writing courses or programs.
Reading Lists--Short, annotated bibliographies. A teacher's suggestion of interesting, informative reading.

Two Special Issues Material Invited

Issue Three: Fostering Imagination and Creativity in Writing
 Issue Four: Expanding Student Viewpoints in Writing

Finances The WLA Newsletter is sent to you by the co-editors who hope that you will find it interesting and that you will share your ideas in a future issue. We do not plan for this to be a profit-making publication, other than that we all profit from its exchange of ideas. But if you would like to help with the expenses of the newsletter, we would not resent the offer of a handfull of stamps or similar assistance for future mailings.

Job Opening Findlay College will have, beginning next Fall, an opening for an experienced writing teacher who enjoys students and active teaching, who has training and/or experience in secondary teaching, and whose attitude toward composition instruction is generally congenial to the spirit of the WLA Newsletter. Contact Richard Gebhardt at the address to the left.

<u>WLA NEWSLETTER</u>
Richard C. Gebhardt Humanities Division Findlay College Findlay, OH 45840
Barbara G. Smith 111-A Dickey Hall College of Education University of Kentucky Lexington, KY 40506