



WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

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FINDLAY COLLEGE

THAT LIGHT WENT ON: THE FIRST TUTORIAL

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The student's face flushed pink with exhaustion. I saw him sitting in the chair just outside the university's Writing Workshop. His eyes searched around, seeming to stop here and there, not really focusing, but apprehending quickly, then moving on.

A few minutes later, when I was on duty there, I asked the student if I could help. He stepped up to the desk, his face filling with frustration as he explained his impossible Writing Arguments course. As the voice quivered, I thought he'd break into tears any second.

I assured him that I wanted to help. I asked him to please calm down, to relax. Then I looked at the appointment book and realized that this student struggling to keep his composure was my first tutee.

Eventually, we sat down. I began to speak slowly, carefully; when he spoke, I nodded my head, trying to get him to relate his experience so I could get a fix on his problem or problems, so I could then enter those troubled areas with him.

He took out an essay that his class had been assigned and pointed to one isolated instance. It didn't surprise me-- considering his sensitive, even hypersensitive nature-- that he embraced so greatly this one occurrence, elevating it to the status of theme.

This instance was vitally important to him: despite being only a few lines long, it affected every other part of the four-page essay. In a tangled chain of polysyllabic words, he seemed to lose us both as he tried to explain the writer's main arguments.

It was all so clear to him. Why couldn't his teacher understand? He then said that he had this problem with other teachers. All these difficulties, past and present, appeared to compound and start his hands shaking. Pointing to the page, he repeated his interpretation and then waited for my response.

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I told him about a student in an undergraduate drama course I took at SUNY Oswego. This person took one instance in a play-- a player lying on the floor, his legs together, his arms extended at his sides-- and attempted to prove that the whole play was about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The tutee laughed, the head shaking, the smile emerging. I know it's pedagogically dangerous to speak for your students, but that light went on: it was obvious he got something out of the text I had given him.

I continued, saying how the professor, in this case, didn't buy the student's claims. But, on the other hand, I assured the tutee that interpretation was often surprising, even startling. I explained that one of the most magnificent powers a reader or critic has is to perhaps enable a whole new generation to see a writer.

Fine. But now on to the heart of the problem: extracting, seeing, the main arguments, ideas, themes of a written work.

We talked about making connections, about seeing, at different points in a given text, the author talking about similar things in similar ways. Once these sorts of connections are made, I proposed, you might not only see a main thread, but then be able to go to the text and show, in writing, the relationships between these specific instances: this demonstration, then, connects you to the text, your argument, and your reader. And again: that light went on. And that's not my phrase, it belongs to Bill Smith, the Workshop Director; in my mind, I reheard him using it to describe the highpoint of the tutorial process. Seeing the light go on is a visceral matter of reading faces, I think, as they in turn indicate minds that are now reading, seeing. It's also the reward of tutoring, I was told; but I could feel and see it happening, and it was only my first tutorial.

After we spoke a while longer, rounding out the session, I simply suggested that perhaps the main ideas were within the subjects or topics the writer seemed to spend the most time and energy on.

During our summary time, the student calmly recounted what we had talked about. As he spoke, the concepts seemed to become clearer to him; he pointed to the text, and wasn't merely recalling ideas, but seemed to be giving himself direction, resolution, conviction.

I know it's easy to sit here, language at my disposal, and create a story where everything turns out all right; but it's not easy to sit here and let such a story go untold.

This student told me that he was going to drop the course when we sat down; and now, apparently filled with a sense of resolve, he told me he was going to continue. A story where all's well that ends well? I don't know. As I write this I know I'll never know. The following day, I heard the same student had a very hard time in another tutorial, and for all I know, he might ultimately drop the course.

I was finally told not to expect that to happen again for a long, long time; I was told it was rare, sure, but even rarer still to have happened on the first session. And now I must add that nothing quite like it ever did happen again.

But that night, walking back from the Cathedral of Learning, I don't know if my feet touched the ground. I felt so great that I wanted to see a sky writer engrave the wonderful message across the darkening blueness. I wanted to kick the cane away from a blind woman, throw her seeing-eye dog over my shoulder, and say come tango with me down the dusky streets--come dance with me and twirl fettucine!

But as I walked into my apartment, I just sat still, my head starting to ache with that post-teaching come down. In the quietness, my body still rushed with flashes: but they weren't the romantic tinglings of the wonderful day, they were somehow deeper pulsings, a vibrant awakening that I'd just done something special that I should spend the rest of my days looking for again.

UP FROM APATHY: GETTING FRESHMEN TO CARE

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I teach freshmen at a small professional college. Pharmacy majors compose over half the student population, with the remaining majors in chemistry, biology, medical technology--more recently, toxicology and physical therapy. During my twelve years there I have noted one undeviating pattern in regard to my students. They invariably feel the same way about writing: Blah! Apathy and disinterest reign. They write what Ken Macrorie called "Engfish" in his text, Telling Writing. Many of these students--especially in pharmacy--openly admit that English class has never appealed to them, that they feel much more at home in math and the sciences. I have spent hours with my colleagues commiserating about our students' writing, its utter banality, its dullness, as well as the overall apathy of the students themselves toward English. Part of me has watched as one or another of us searched at the last minute for a theme or a writing exercise that "might work." I have seen my fellow teachers go into class depressed and fatalistic about the batch of papers they would be collecting to bloody with read over the weekend.

At the same time none of us seemed to notice that we were asking for Engfish, that teaching freshman writing had become an assembly-line process of collecting, slashing, and returning essays, composed in the usual assignment sequence found in any plethora of texts (Patterns of Exposition!)--a ritual in which students grudgingly participate. Thus, our students' apathy toward writing was reinforced by their teachers. For six years I taught Freshman Composition in exactly the same manner until one day I realized that I was an integral part of the problem, that I was doing nothing creative to get my students to care about language or writing from the inside. I know I had to change things. Attempting to move students like mine into a position of caring about what they write takes a tremendous amount of energy. But I chose to use my time this way rather than endure the enervating stress that came from boring both students and myself year after year.

I begin the semester now by asking from my students a traditional writing sample (what they did in high school English, what they did last summer). What I get is apathetic, tired writing which I proceed to bloody with red marks. Students are not surprised to see these on their essays--they've been through it all before. What does bring them up short is the distribution and discussion of Ken Macrorie's opening chapter on "Engfish." Though few of my students have ever seen the chapter they know right away what Macorie means--they've been writing Engfish for years. It is then that I introduce the new rules--revolutionary for most of my students:

KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

- * The fundamental compatibility of craft and creativity in good writing and in effective writing instruction.
- * The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- * Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

- No major writing assignment will be required until after mid-semester.
- We will concentrate on writing what we really feel and think.
- No red marks will ever be used on exercises or papers. Comments will be made in either blue, black or green.
- Mechanics will be ignored for the time being.
- Dullness will not be tolerated. It is the one great sin.

Our working principle is that words can be fun. I spend the first nine classes on words of all kinds. Mostly we dwell on the impact of words, their almost magical power. We delve into action words, sensory words, words containing imagery. I stress the importance of choosing the concrete word and the use of vivid example. We do ten to fifteen minute vocabulary exercises where action words must be used in context. We go back and forth with wisecracks, brickbats, punning--anything to get words spinning in their heads. Spontaneous improvisation plays a large part here.

The originality of the teacher is the most vital ingredient in the process of persuading students that using words well is worthwhile. Personal experience has taught me that, in my situation at least, the more offbeat and unconventional the instructor is the more effective he can be. For example, I often have trouble writing a word on the board and ask their help. I hear comments: "He can't spell. An English teacher who can't spell!" I will occasionally make errors in speech--often students will pick them up and correct me, thus reversing the roles. I thank them in my best Colombo style. All of this makes the students more relaxed and at ease. Yet I keep the energy level high so that no possibility exists for them to lose the thread of what is going on. What is achieved is a lack of stodginess, an informal atmosphere where the element of play can be introduced. Most of them have never looked at English class this way before.

We continue the play element by moving into free writing which for many of my students is an entirely new experience. The realization that they can ignore "correctness" for the present has a liberating effect. After a few preliminary "gunshot" exercises we write to music, to meditation; we do quick intuitive character sketches of one another, imaginative projections, some outright lying. Though my students still aren't sure where this is leading, the tables have been turned; they are not sleeping and are happy at last to be able to put their thoughts and feelings on paper, some for the first time. I am beginning to find humor, honesty and freshness. At this point they are beginning, only just beginning, to trust me: "Maybe I can write more than English; maybe he really doesn't want it."

ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA welcomes brief articles that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. Some suggestions:

- Teaching Tips*--2-3 page outlines of a unit or an approach to a specific teaching task.
- Interconnections*--Examinations of approaches or materials of one level of writing class (e.g., college, high school, middle grade) from the perspective of a different level.
- Reading Lists*--Recommendations, preferably annotated, of useful or stimulating reading.
- Student Perspectives*

In the final phase of free writing we move on to observation and memory exercises. The writing is now rewritten and focused. I am particularly impressed with their work here. By this stage many of the students are amazed that the short pieces I am reading to them are the work of their classmates (we are still ignoring mechanics). A few individuals are incredulous that what I am reading is their own, hardly recognizable by previous standards. With their emphasis on science they never realized before the potential for language that lay inside them. I now explain the place of free writing in the composing process, the dangers of "editing" before we really have something to say; we discuss the inhibitions caused by having to write "correctly" right away.

By mid-semester the students are ready to undertake their first major piece of writing: A personal experience of someone else (based on an interview) which they will transform into a first person narrative account. I call this unit "Remembering"--designed to impart a personal, humanistic dimension to their activities. I want the student to interview someone older who has an interesting true story to tell. The movement here is from direct observation and personal memory (focused free writing) to a more extended piece in which the students are asked to project themselves into someone else's experience. This allows for distance and a perspective the students may not have if the experience were really their own. It also serves to begin the movement from subjectivity to more objective concerns. The students are allowed to "embellish" somewhat in order to make the account more vivid and dramatic.

Now that they have been the difference between dull and fresh writing in their own work the atmosphere of the class is more charged. They see that words used well have forcefulness and they see the process now from the inside. A number of them express doubts about being able to go from writing small paragraphs to more extended pieces. Obviously, this anxiety is valid, since what they are undertaking is more complex. But it is an anxiety connected with caring about what they do. For my students this represents a major step forward in their attitude toward writing. I reassure them by pointing out that it's the wrestling that counts, the possibilities of making words live so that someone's personal experience comes alive for them on paper. Here the notion of good writing as hard work begins to emerge. But they don't seem as resistant to it now.

In the seven classes before the assignment is due, we discuss qualities of brief, personal narratives, including models from anthologized writers and students in previous years. We now get into arrangement; I introduce exercises in paragraphing and sentence combining. Finally, mechanics are broached: basic grammar and punctuation problems that keep writing from having more consistency and maximum effect. My students are not thrilled with this but seem more open to instruction when mechanics are treated in the context of writing that is coming alive in them.

On the day their assignments are due students are handed an questionnaire containing five questions designed to have them evaluate and grade their own piece of work. After this I collect and redistribute the papers and ask students to do the same thing for the work of a peer. For the next few days, while I am going over all the papers on my own, I put a number of their narratives up on the overhead projector. We discuss them together, looking mostly for liveliness, vitality and the rendering of a personal experience in a way that is interesting and readable. We look at how writers achieved this effect, and discuss what he or she could have done to make the peice more effective. The atmosphere is critical, but in a positive way. By being exposed to their classmates' papers students get an idea of the writing level of the class. And they learn to be more open and spontaneous with each other.

The students now receive their first grade which is actually a composite of three grades: their own, their peer's and mine (no red marks). My own critique is a running commentary that discusses both good points and areas needing work. I find it interesting how often students and their peers give lower grades than I give. And how they invariably know what their weaknesses are. (What they often don't know are their strengths.) They now have in front of them three critiques--I give them time to sit and assimilate the information.

All of this has taken us nine weeks into a fourteen week semester. An instructor dedicated to traditional norms of teaching composition might be unimpressed or even appalled when this far into the year he sees student papers with mechanical deficiencies or sentence structures still needing more work. (My students still need to learn to cut and revise.) And I would have to agree--many of their pieces are still roughhewn by traditional college standards even by the end of the course. However, judging from the atmosphere in the class, as well as students' evaluations over the last five years, I can honestly say that quite a number of them care about writing in a way they did not at the beginning of the term. Apathy has disappeared. The increased level of interest is sustained now in the final five weeks of the semester which deal with writing modes the students will undertake in other courses, in their professions and in their personal lives. Though again their work is imperfect they have begun to realize that effective writing for whatever purpose is a humanizing activity and that they have resources inside them to make language meaningful and alive.

All of this, in turn, has led me to the following conclusion: Teachers dealing with unmotivated students fool themselves if they think they can achieve much more in the space of one semester than changing basic attitudes. To expect one Freshman Composition course to turn them into coherent, competent, as well as interesting writers is a pipe dream. At most, if handled correctly, Freshman Composition can lay a foundation of caring about language and writing, and this foundation can then be built upon in subsequent courses as the student moves toward competency. Of course, most of our curricula are not set up in this manner.

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