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From the Desk of Sheridan Blau

THE DISCIPLINE OF COMPOSITION: MAKING STUDENTS SMARTER

I've been thinking about how difficult it is to write effectively—even competently. It occurs to me, in fact, that writing is so difficult that it may be ludicrous for us to expect that most people—kids or adults—are going to actually do it with any degree of proficiency. There is nothing else that we ask all our students to do in school that even approaches writing in the intellectual and psychological demands that it makes on students. That alone is sufficient reason for us to keep on insisting on the importance of writing to a school curriculum. It may represent the only remaining claim schools can make for themselves as places where serious intellectual activity is fostered and even demanded of all students.

Charles Cooper recently pointed out in a talk to the leaders of the California Writing Project how writing makes unique intellectual demands on the writer by requiring him to engage in a number of conflicting and complicated psychological tasks at one time. A writer must attend to his present thought at the same time that he projects his thinking forward to what he is about to say and backward to what he has already said. He must maintain a sense of the goal and main point of his discourse, yet discover and keep in mind as he goes along the hierarchical structure of his thinking. To master the complex of intellectual processes required for writing is to learn a discipline that permanently changes the learner in ways that can only be described as making him smarter.

This is a powerful claim for the importance of learning to write and one that we feel intuitively to be correct. But how can it be that learning to write can make the learner smarter? It seems clear that writing can give the writer more intimate access to his thinking, that it can make his thinking more responsible, in the sense that it forces him to be more precise in his language and more attentive to the relationships between his thoughts. But this is only to say that writing allows and calls for the best thinking and the best uses of thought.

Yet the quality of the writer's thinking would seem ultimately to be a function of his intelligence—of how smart he is in the first place. And that, many composition teachers would insist, is something that can't be altered by instruction. Similarly many of the most influential current theoreticians about writing instruction argue that it should focus largely or exclusively on style. By such reasoning, attempts to criticize or evaluate the quality of the underlying thought

represented by a particular style must be regarded as inappropriate attempts to alter the unalterable intelligence of the student—to ask him to be other than the person he is.

Such a limited view of intelligence ignores the remarkable range of possibilities that we all experience in our own lives in the degrees to which we exercise our intelligence. There are times when each of us has behaved more stupidly than our friends might have imagined us capable and other times when we have been surprised by our own brilliance. No account of our true intelligence can be valid unless it rises as far above the line representing our ordinary behavior as the reckoning of our capacity for stupidity falls below it. The difference between most ordinary people and those whom we ordinarily regard as brilliant may be defined as a difference in memory or faith. Those who are brilliant remember and keep their faith in their capacity for brilliance no matter how difficult the task before them. The rest of us accept our mediocre performances or worse, because we fail to keep a similar faith. Nor is there any excuse to be found in our different capacities for faith. The seat of the faith is, as Milton reminds us, in the will.

Faith in one's capacity for brilliance is finally no act of pride but of humility. Such a faith rests ultimately not in one's own brilliance but in the source of all brilliance. Nearly all accomplished writers, artists, or scientists will acknowledge that they usually experience the insights, breakthroughs, and discoveries that are the marks of brilliance as something like miracles—not as the products of their own genius, but as gifts which they deserve only by virtue of their faith and discipline.

And this brings us back to discipline. What is the discipline that one learns by learning to write and that may be said to make the learner smarter? And what can we do as composition teachers to help our students learn such a discipline? The answer to the first question is that it is the same discipline that all the arts and every high human experience requires—the discipline of intensive and extended concentration—the focused application of one's fullest attention to a particular problem. If that seems a given, something one need not specify as a goal of instruction since it is a prerequisite for effective instruction and competent achievement of any kind, I would argue that school ordinarily demands only a perfunctory kind of attention and that it is the difference between perfunctory attention and genuine concentration that marks the difference between the way most of us learn to do things in school and the way we discover to do them to our own satisfaction in our own lives. That seems to me as true for physical exercise as for reading literature. Certainly it defines the differences that Janet Emig observed between the perfunctory way students engage in what she calls “school-sponsored” writing as opposed to “self-sponsored” writing. As James Britton and his colleagues at the London Institute of Education have shown, the difference between mechanically correct and error-filled writing often tells us more about the degree of student involvement in the writing task than anything about the writer's knowledge of mechanics.

To put the problem of focused attention at the center of the discipline of composition might at first seem to make little pedagogical sense. After all, the quality of the attention a student gives to the writing of an essay can hardly matter if the student hasn't already mastered a long list of other competencies that are necessary for effective written communication. These would include, for example, knowing how to accommodate discourse to a situational context that is different

from conversation, knowing how to achieve cohesion in a text, knowing how to proceed logically in discourse, knowing the grammar and lexicon of the written language, knowing how to adjust discourse for different audiences and rhetorical effects, and so on. John C. Mellon has recently attempted to draw up a “taxonomy of compositional competencies” (*Perspectives in Literacy*, University of Minnesota, 1978) and managed to identify twenty-four separate categories of competence under five general headings such as “logical and sentential competencies” and “discourse competencies.”

The point I would make about most of these competencies is that for the most part they are not the kind that can be taught through direct instruction in a composition class. Most of the competencies that account for a student’s ability to engage in extended written discourse are part of the larger competency that she acquires in the course of growing up in a community of speakers. Those that are special to written language are acquired as a consequence of growing up in a literate speech community. A third grade student who is asked to write a report on a national holiday and is then given sensible feedback from her readers is going to learn how to accommodate her discourse to the needs of her readers and the occasion, even if the teacher and the other students responding aren’t thinking about teaching composition—especially if they are not thinking about composition.

My point is not a new one. It is at the heart of the instructional pattern desiderated by Britton and Moffett, and implied by the emphasis throughout the National Writing Project on “writing across the curriculum”: writing is best learned as an authentic instrument of communication in circumstances where it serves authentic communicative purposes.

The principal counterargument to this position is advanced by E. D. Hirsch (*Philosophy of Composition*, University of Chicago, 1977). Competence in composition cannot be acquired without direct classroom instruction, Hirsch insists, because “written speech” calls for the exercise of skills that are not part of any native speaker’s acquired repertoire. The most distinctive feature of written speech, says Hirsch, is its “privative” character whereby the contexts and persons actually present in ordinary oral speech transactions are in written speech absent. The writer must compensate for their absence by creating implied contexts and implied persons. “This eccentricity of written speech,” Hirsch claims, “creates problems which cannot be solved by the ablest of native-speakers without practice and instruction. That is why one needs to be *taught* composition in one’s native language” (p. 31).

Yet nothing that Hirsch says about the distinctive features of written speech requires us to think that competence in writing is acquired any less intuitively or indirectly than oral language skill. To say that written speech requires practice and the use of conventions that are different from those used in oral speech is to say no more about written speech than one might say about any particular speech act or skill that a native speaker acquires without direct instruction.

All speech acts are conventional and must be learned, and none are different in kind from the ones necessitated by the special constraints of written speech. Any child who has learned to read (and many do so without direct instruction) has thereby demonstrated his mastery of the conventions that inform written speech in the same way that a child who understands oral speech may be said to possess the linguistic competence necessary for producing speech. As a general

rule in language acquisition, receptive or passive competence precedes productive or active competence, with occasions for practice leading from the former to the latter. I see no reason why the same learning sequence would not apply to reading and writing for every child in a literate society.

It would seem, in fact, that every movement from stage to stage in the process of a child's acquisition of language is analogous to the problem of learning to use written speech. All children move from the context-rich utterances of holophrastic speech where single-word utterances stand for various complex relational statements whose meaning is apparent through the situation and the baby's actions, to a more context-free telegraphic speech, to even more complex patterns of speech that are less and less dependent on visual and situational contexts for their meaning. Even the problem of learning to speak on the telephone, which nearly all children manage without much explicit instruction, involves learning to employ language cues and special telephone conventions to compensate for missing visual cues.

What is unlikely to be acquired by many students in the course of their growing up and proceeding through school—what, in fact, most of our cultural experience conspires to erode—are those competencies for composition that Mellon labels, almost as an afterthought, under the two headings “psychological competencies” and “habit structures and self-governance.” The first category includes “the ability to prevent, control or overcome writing apprehension and to forestall or master ‘blank-page’ aphasia.” The second includes with such dimensions as “prewriting,” “decenteredness,” and “reflectiveness,” other aspects—“staying power” and “risk-taking.” These are, of course, components of the single overarching competence I have been calling the essential discipline of writing, the self-discipline required for faithful, sustained, and intensive concentration on a task that continually invites self-defeating and escapist strategies.

How then are students to be taught and to learn the discipline that would enable them to resist the temptations to failure and stupidity that the task of composition will pose? The best way is probably for composition teachers to use small writing-response groups in their classes and to make sure that they themselves write as much as possible with their students. These two practices—writing groups in particular—are characteristic features of seminars and workshops conducted for teachers at every National Writing Project site, and must be acknowledged to be part of an implicit Writing Project model for an instructional program in composition in schools.

Writing groups have been advocated and explained by James Moffett and Peter Elbow and others so authoritatively that they need no further defense. For the best practical guide to their use in the classroom see Mary K. Healy, *Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom*, BAWP Curriculum Publication No. 12. What I wish to add to our concept of the function of such groups, however, is the thought that aside from the help they offer a writer by providing a real audience and feedback, they invariably constitute supportive—even therapeutic—communities which can help writers to resist the temptations to incompetence that the difficulties of the writing process invariably present. They do this by providing students with the opportunity to see how demanding the writing task is for all writers and to recognize how much the experience of difficulty is not evidence of some disability in the writer but a working condition for every author—something that comes with the territory.

Nothing is more likely to render a student writer incompetent than his belief that the difficulties he encounters in the process of composing are not part of the process he is engaged in but some evidence of insufficiency in himself or in his training which renders him incompetent for the task. In our South Coast Writing Project we have begun a study of half a dozen college students who have identified themselves as incompetent writers. Our early findings suggest that the principal obstacle encountered by these students as they write is their conviction of their own insufficiency. I do not think it a coincidence, either, that two of them reported being told at some time in their schooling that they may be minimally brain damaged. Neither had any other reason to suspect such a defect except that they had been told it (one by a teacher, the other by a parent who was a professional editor) and that they had often had severe difficulties in writing.

Brain damaged! What an excuse for giving up! If they were middle aged like most of us who direct Writing Projects they would know what it is to be disabled by a loss of brain cells! No excuse seems too far-fetched for us to reach for when faced with the frustrations of composing. Yet no excuse can finally excuse us from our responsibility.

As Dick Friss has shown in *Writing Class: Teacher and Students Writing Together* (BAWP Curriculum Publication No. 11), teachers can enhance the supportive power of writing response groups by committing themselves to take on the same writing tasks they assign to their students. By joining the classroom community of writers in this way a teacher will not only become more sensitive to the difficulties posed by particular assignments but will make himself vulnerable to all the same temptations that his students experience while engaged in the various stages of the composing process. By writing with their teachers students may come to realize that the most accomplished writers are frequently not those who write most easily. Paradoxically, writing can get harder rather than easier as you get better at it. The competence a good writer acquires is not so much facility as it is staying power. And courage or perhaps faith—the courage and faith to stick with the challenge he has undertaken even though it constantly appears to be beyond his competence and too elusive for his limited intelligence. Those who exercise such faith will experience the miracle of becoming smarter than they ever realized they could be. In such trials of faith writers are born. To those who repeatedly experience such miracles, we attribute brilliance.

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