

TEACHING WRITING IN THE 80'S

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Like teachers of most subjects, teachers of writing believe their subject is the most important. Thus it is not surprizing that when they speak of changes that have occurred in their field they use fairly lofty language to describe them. Taking a term from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, they describe their profession as being in the beginning stages of a "paradigm shift," a change in the conceptual model that governs how parctitioners of a discipline regard their field. This talk of paradigm shift may sound like a harmless bit of academic jargon, not self-aggrandizing at all, until one realizes that Kuhn used the term to refer to intellectual revolutions like the change from a Ptolemaic to a

Copernican model of the universe and the development of Newtonian physics.

As a teacher of writing I find the application of Kuhn's terminology to my field flattering, but in most objective moods I must admit that the changes that have occurred in the teaching of writing in the past ten to fifteen years are not quite as important as the revolutions Kuhn has in mind. They are, however, significant and they have created confidence and excitement in the hoary old disciplines of rhetoric and composition, fields that have not, alas, always excited students or their teachers.

The best way to understand new approaches is to compare them to some features of the old paradigm, usually called current-traditional rhetoric. The term is a little confusing and seems opposed to traditional. It's used to suggest that the old rhetoric hasn't by any means died out; it still has its defenders though their backs are against the wall and each issue of the professional journals provides their attackers with more ammunition.

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Product vs. Process

Current-traditional rhetoric focus on the product, not the process, of writing; it was a "rhetoric of the finished word," as one researcher has described it. Teachers assigned papers, collected them, wrote comments on errors and infelicities of styles, attached a grade, and returned them to students. Then they assigned another paper. Often essays by literary masters were discussed to help students understand the qualities of good writing, but teachers did not acquaint them with the process that professional writers went through to achieve the finished product. As a result, most students exposed to current-traditional rhetoric picked up an idealized view of the composing process. To suggest one image students received of it, Nancy Sommers, a leading researcher, asks us to imagine Lord Byron in undress pouring out verses as a fountain spews forth water. Another view encouraged by teachers and textbooks was that composing was a completely rational and very tidy process. According to this view, writers moved doggedly and mechanically from formal outline to finished draft with no false starts, backtracking, or deviating from the original plan.

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Teachers are now convinced that before students can write better they need a more realistic view of the composing process. They need to understand that composing for most people is not as effortless as the image of Byron suggests or as tidy and mechanical as the old rhetorics would have us believe. For most people it is a pretty messy process. Most professional writers and successful students, a study has shown, do not work from a formal outline. A formal outline suggests that one's ideas are already formed before one starts to write, but this isn't the case for most writers, who discover ideas and clarify their thinking as they write. "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" asks E.M. Forster. Experienced writers also continually cut and paste as they discover better ways to organize their information. Some write introductions last, not first. In short, writing is not a completely rational process, a fact acknowledged by many professional writers who have developed habits bordering on fetishes. Schiller, for example, had so smell rotten apples as he wrote; other writers have to smoke, or be in particular place, or use some special kind of paper.

When the process approach was first becoming popular teachers and researchers had in mind a simple linear model with three stages: prewriting (all the things one did before the writing of the rough draft), writing, and rewriting. This model has been rejected as simplistic and misleading, an accurate description of the stages in

the evolution of the written product but an inaccurate representation of the mental operations that a writer uses in composing. Researchers have shown that experienced writers do not move from prewriting to writing to rewriting in Sherman-through-Georgia fashion. They revise continually, for example, not just at the end of the process. They embed little cycles of plan-write-rewrite within the total process so that each of these operations recurs often, hence the term recursive for this model of composing. Teachers may not use the terms linear and recursive when they talk to students, but using whatever language is appropriate, they try to give students a more realistic view of composing. The idea is to help students who feel blocked and inadequate because they can't compose the way textbooks say they are supposed to.

Besides telling them about the process of writing teachers try to plan assignments so students experience it. One way to do this is to teach some techniques for prewriting or invention. Current-traditional rhetoric was not concerned with how one discovered things to say; it took over after the writer, by whatever means, had come up with his arguments and material. Then it taught him how to arrange and edit. (Invention, however, was an important part of classical rhetoric—the first of five canons which included arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—and in reviving it rhetoric is returning to its historical origins.) New rhetoric books offer a variety

of invention approaches—ancient ones based on the topics or lines of argument discussed by Aristotle and Cicero, simple devices such as brainstorming and the journalist's five questions (Who? What? Where? Why? When?), and complex devices such as a nine cell matrix of questions based on a linguistic theory called tagmemics. These devices don't work for all students, but at least we now have something to offer those who are blocked and terrified by the blank page.

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Encouraging revision is another way to teach writing as a process. Students, as all teachers know, are very reluctant revisers. They tend to confuse revision with tidying up—dotting i's and changing a word or two. They don't understand that for experienced writers it often involves, as the etymology of the work suggests, a re-seeing of the total paper. There are various ways of getting students to practice revision, a popular one being the use of student response groups. Students bring rough drafts to class and share them with a group of their classmates who critique them and offer suggestions. Then they revise their papers and turn them into the teacher for final comment and evaluation. Because they know

their classmates will read their work, they develop a sensitivity to audience, a quality that probably more than any other separates weak from accomplished writers. Acting as editor of their classmates' work makes them more aware of critical standards and increases the likelihood that they will apply these standards to their own writing. The conference or tutorial approach is another way to encourage revision. In this approach students show preliminary drafts to teachers who first act as a friendly editor and only later, when the paper has been revised and edited, do they assume the role of critical evaluator.

None of these techniques is new, but now many teachers are using them, not just a few lonely pioneers. Teachers are realizing that before, under the sway of the current-traditional paradigm, they taught only one aspect of composing: editing. Now they have decided that other aspects of the process—invention and revision, for example—deserve equal attention. This shift in attitude toward editing does not mean that advocates of the process approach have a permissive attitude toward error, a charge sometimes leveled at the new rhetoric. Errors are not tolerated but it is believed that some problems—errors in diction and sentence structure, for example—are best handled during the final stages of the composing process.

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Writing Across the Curriculum

This change from a product to a process approach is clearly the most prominent aspect of the new rhetoric, but other trends bear mentioning. There is, for example, a growing feeling that if writing is to be taught successfully it must be taught across the curriculum—in all subjects, not just in English.

Sometimes teachers in other disciplines only partially understand what advocates of writing across the curriculum have in mind. “I already grade for grammar and punctuation, as well as content,” they say. “So what’s new?”

English teachers who advocate writing across the curriculum appreciate this concern for correct grammar and usage. If only English teachers are interested in preserving the apostrophe and the distinction between *effect* and *affect*—two very endangered species in student writing—then these and other features of carefully crafted prose will go the way of the dodo bird. But the desire for more allies in the battle for correct grammar and punctuation is not the only reason why people are pushing for writing across the curriculum. They are doing so also because they feel writing is a valuable mode of learning. By engaging the eye, the hand, and the brain it disrupts passivity and actively involves students in the task of learning. Talkers can rely on gestures and speak in hints and elliptical phrases, occasionally checking the faces of their listeners to see if they have gotten their meaning across. Writers are denied

all these props; they must anticipate trouble spots and choose and arrange their words to head them off. The careful structuring of meaning that writing demands trains the mind and drives learning to depths listening, reading, and discussion can't reach. This belief in the power of writing lies at the heart of the writing across the curriculum movement.

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Remedial Writing

Another noteworthy change is the attitude toward the writing of remedial students, or basic writers. More than any other event, the admission to college in the 1960's of a large number of students from different socio-economic backgrounds broke the back of the current-traditional rhetorical paradigm. Many of these students came from homes where English was not spoken or where only a non-dominant dialect of English was spoken. Their papers were so riddled with errors that even the most diehard advocate of current-traditional rhetoric realized that marking them with a red pen and returning the papers was a hopelessly inadequate response. Eventually people like Mina Shaughnessy, a writing teacher and researcher at the City University of New York,

adopted a process approach and began classifying errors and searching for the causes that led students to commit the different categories of error. Her book, *Errors and Expectations*, arguably the most influential book about writing to appear in the past fifteen years, has changed our attitude toward basic writers. Before, we regarded the errors they made as random perversities, the result of ignorance or apathy. Shaughnessy argued convincingly that they are systematic and result from strategies students use in trying to make sense of standard written English, a dialect that in most cases contrasts sharply with the one they use at home and with their peers. Ten years ago we didn't know where to start in instructing basic writers. Shaughnessy and her followers have changed this mood of despair to cautious optimism.

The Role of Grammar

Another trend has to do with grammar and the teaching of writing. Until recently it was assumed that teaching students formal grammar improved the quality of their writing. Now most writing teachers are skeptical of this claim and some are downright hostile to it. One researcher claims that the study of formal grammar will help students write about as much as studying hydrodynamic theory will help a person swim.

All the research I know suggests that if students only study grammar theory and terminology—if they aren't encouraged to see connections between structures studied

and writing problems—then their grammar study won't help them write better. One approach that makes these connections is sentence combining, a new kind of exercise that many teachers are using. In a sentence combining exercise students are given short sentences and told to combine them. In cued sentence combining students must combine them using a particular structure—a participial phrase, for example. In uncued exercises students combine them in whatever way they think is most effective. Because research suggests that sentence combining does improve syntactic dexterity, the ability to write sentences that have other structures besides the simple Subject-Verb-Object pattern, many teachers are enthusiastic about it. Others reject it, arguing that it encourages the idea that long and complex is always better than short and simple and because it interferes with the development of a personal style. Although it has limitations, sentence combining is another approach that is now available to teachers.

Ten years ago, when I started teaching writing as a teacher assistant, there was a feeling—seldom verbalized—that the whole enterprise was doomed to failure. Most of us were convinced that writing

could not be taught, but we still went through the motions, dutifully assigning papers and correcting them. It was a pretty dreary business. Now as Director of Composition I supervise graduate students, all of them trained in Humboldt's Master's Program in the Teaching of Writing, who teach English 1, HSU's introductory composition course. These teachers view things differently than I did a decade ago. They still find the teaching of writing to be a difficult job, but they are convinced that writing can be taught. Research has provided some answers to questions that perplexed us a decade ago. New approaches have been tested and made available. The National Writing Project, ably led in Humboldt County by HSU professor Tom Gage, has allowed institutions like Humboldt State University to cooperate with local school districts and establish summer training programs for teachers of writing at all levels, first grade through college. Certainly college students still do not write as well as they should, but that problem is being tackled with more hope and enthusiasm than ever before. These changes certainly do not add up to a paradigm shift as significant as the one provoked by Copernicus, but—within their sphere—they have had an effect.