Basic Writers
Basic Assumptions

by

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Often when composition teachers meet in hallways, burdened with sets of papers, frustrated by the repetition of errors in their students' writing, they unload their latest problem to each other and fatalistically shrug their shoulders on their way to their next encounters. On other occasions, they have upbeat stories of terrific things, of successful classes that responded to an activity. Such successes never cease to induce requests for material that worked and solicitation of the techniques used to produce such a response. Disappointments and amazements seem to punctuate our hallway encounters and our pre and post semester meetings. The disppointments are sometimes severe, and so are the amazements. But we, writing teachers, yearn to have more control over the results of our teaching.

Our students come to us with varying degrees of preparedness and widely different expectations, yet they share a common desire for success. To give them, that success, we ask them to write. We discuss with them the importance of their audience. We examine with them examples of good witing. But while telling and showing them how concerned we are with their success, through investing time, energy and soul with it, we point out all their errors and mark their papers with grades. We ask them to write, revise, edit-- to present the best possible piece of writing they can. Writing, we tell students, is an extension of a student's personality. When the student's writing is successful, we both feel successful. When the writing is not, we fail.

When we fail, we repeat our action-- we assume that maybe if we practice, the results will be different. The students write, rewrite, edit; some fail–some succeed. Why do they fail? Why do we?

The answer is not immediately obvious. We know that doing exercises and practicing paradigms should improve and strengthen our abilities in that area. But some writing exercises seem to produce the opposite result – errors multiply. Are our exercises at fault? The natural response would be to say that different exercises will produce differing results. But often these exercises do not help. The problems we are faced with must stem from something other than the exercises. What are other sources of the problem? We can speculate that the failures are generated by the students, the teacher, or the course.

When investigating reasons for failure or success that are student based, Don Eulert's three year long study concluded that, "Learning depends on the student's ego, his personal attitudes, and his motivation; and that learning takes place when these are engaged in active encounters."[1] Thus to enhance a student's learning, we must make students "open to new ways of thinking, even change their system of values." There is a great correlation between students' chance for success and their concern with issues and people outside themselves. On the other hand, there are factors that were determined to be insignificant in their influence on students' learning. These include: starting attitudes toward a course, parental attitude toward success, students' rating of their effort to excel, and entering quartile ranking.[2] Being cognizant of these factors while we are structuring the course, selecting activities, and giving assignments, will enhance the success odds of our classes.

A knowledge of students must be added to several attitudes that we must possess as teachers. We expect students to take the course seriously– so must we. The students have success expectations and so do we but we should know "the difference between expectation and intimidation". The student comes to class expecting to learn how to write; to be good teachers we must begin with the "belief that writing can be taught and that it is worth teaching".[3] This belief must be matched with a projection of confidence in

ourselves and our students.[4] Students' and teachers' attitudes account for a portion of the failures and successes. Whether that portion is larger or smaller depends to a great deal on the student–teacher relationship. That relationship can be strengthened through the attitudes both develop toward each other and toward the course.

A close examination of the structure of the course that revolves around writing, revising, and judging, provides two observations. First, the course isolates errors and drills the students on removing them. Second, the course emphasizes the finished essay. Thus, the course can be described as product-oriented. Any improvement of composition courses must come through a revision of some of our assumptions and strategies.

A major assumption of a composition course must be that students in the course are there to master "formal, written discourse, a discourse whose lexicon, grammar, and rhetoric are learned not through speaking and listening but through reading and writing."[5] The distinction between speaking and writing must be clarified so that techniques that are suitable for one are not used with the other. The distinction is also helpful in making two points. One, writing is a mode of learning. Two, many errors are made because of the influence of speech on writing. Writing and speaking are dissimilar in their development, functions, and structures. In Thought and Language, Lev S. Vygotsky demonstrates that writing, even when rudimentary, utilizes abstraction at a complex level. In the act of writing, Vygotsky demonstrates, we must dissociate ourselves "from the sensory aspect of speech and replace words by images of words."[6] Hence he finds that abstraction is the main problem that faces writers. Vygotsky points out that writing is different from speech in the absence of an interlocutor. The demands of a listener usually prompt new sentences, but writing "must explain the situation fully in order to be intelligible."[7] This difference, according to E. D. Hirsch, accounts for the major difficulty students have in learning how to write well since to beginning writers, writing is language used in an unaccustomed way. Hirsch then uses the term "grapholect" to indicate "that standard written languages are different in kind from oral dialects."[8] The conclusion he makes is inevitable: the issue of bi–dialectism is removed from the arena of the teaching of literacy.

Janet Emig details the differences between speaking and writing. She adds to the differences mentioned above the following:

1. Writing is learned behavior; talking is natural, even irrepressible behavior.
2. Writing then is an artificial process; talking is not.
3. Writing is a technological device – not the wheel, but early enough to qualify as primary technology; talking is organic, natural, earlier.
4. Most writing is slower than most talking.
5. Writing is stark, barren, even naked as a medium; talking is rich, luxuriant, inherently redundant.
6. Writing usually results in a visible graphic product, talking usually does not.
7. Perhaps because there is a product involved, writing tends to be a more responsible and committed act than talking.
8. Because writing is often our representation of the world made visible, embodying both processed product, writing is more readily a form and source of learning then talking.[9]

Emig's last distinction is developed further when she points out the correspondences between learning strategies and writing attributes. The cluster of correspondences between the two presents a powerful argument to view "Writing as a mode of Learning," as she titles her article.

William F. Irmscher carries Emig's point further, "Writing, by its very nature, encourages abstraction, and in the shuttling process from the past to the present, from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the abstract, we seek relationships and find meaning.[10]" Thus, when learning to write well a student is learning to shape a conception of the world and of the self.[11] This invests writing with a great deal of seriousness that speaking often lacks. Such a concept of writing suggests to James E. Miller Jr. that "all writing assignments in composition classes be grounded in this basic condition, engaging the individual student in penetrating, perceiving, structuring, creating, or re-creating the reality he knows - or all the reality he can come to know".[12]

Another very important fact becomes clear through the distinctions between speaking and writing: even though students are proficient in the use of their native language verbally, we cannot assume such proficiency in their writing. If they are beginning writers – a beginning writer is one so considered by a teacher – then they need help in all the stages of the writing process – from the time the topic confronts them to the time they present a paper to be read by someone else. The beginning writers need help not only after they finish the final draft but from the start of formulating ideas, rehearsing them, drafting them, and revising them. The beginning writers have no idea how writers behave. They lack control of the lanuage and are thus afraid writing will expose their inadequacy.

As teachers we need to give them anxiety–free forums for formulating and developing ideas. In this category we can use free writing, directed free writing, collage, journal keeping, and class discussions. Any or all will help the students generate ideas. In addition to these invention techniques, the use or a systematic approach of inquiry will help in the thorough examination of any topic. Two such approaches, heuristics, are Kenneth Pike's tagmemic model–based on nuclear physics' theory of particle, wave, and field–and Kenneth Burke's drama of thinking with its pentadaction, actor–agent, scene, means, and purpose. Both heuristics provide a matrix of questions, that when asked will generate ideas. The advantages of using one of these heuristics lie in their general rather than particular natures and in the ease by which they are remembered. Repeated applications of either will most likely result in the internalization of the Process by students. Of course these heuristics are not to be used with any degree of rigidity since heuristics must match the way the minds of students work rather than the reverse.[13]

The distinctions between speaking and writing and the emphasis on process rather than the product should induce us to error analysis and to see the errors in students' writing as belonging to three major categories. Some come from an intermediate system of grammar internalized by the writer, others are simple accidents that the writer can correct during revisions, while others are the result of language transfer– a second language or a second dialect. These categories can be helpful to teachers only when they see

errors not as maladies that need healing but as "necessary stages in all language learning, as the product of intelligent cognitive strategies and therefore as potentially useful indicators of what processes the student is using ".[14]

Another assumption of error analysis is that beginning writers do not all have the same problems and when they do, they do not have them for the same reasons.[15] Mina Shaughnessy suggests a contrastive approach of teaching. She proposes contrasting the students' grammar with standard grammar to illuminate the differences that caused the errors and to give the student a respect for his dialect and a perception of why the error is made.[16] Of course this approach builds on what the student knows rather than on what he does not know. It assumes that the student knows something and that when given adequate incentives can produce "well formed" sentences. The problem of these sentences lies in their not being marked according to the grammar and structure of standard written language.[17] Shaughnessy points out, however, that grammar gives the writer methods of looking at sentences; that it helps in correcting sentences but it does not help in the composing process. Grammar gives the students an understanding of important concepts– sentence, tense, agreement–and a tool to check their writing.

Semantic grammars can be of use also. Dale W. Holloway iliustrates the uses or three grammars. In case grammars, verbs are seen as the pivotal part or a sentence, and nouns are in case relations to it. In the "given-new" contract, old information regularly appears at the beginning of the sentence, and new information at the end."[18] Finally, Holloway using the findings of Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan in Cohesion in English suggests teaching cohesive devices– reference, substitution and ellipsis, lexical, and conjunctionas providing the structure of meaning that holds a paragraph or blocs of discourse together.[19]

There are other pardigms that can help students in their attempts of making the craft of sentence construction and paragraph building. Such models have been formulated by Francis Christensen in his articles "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," and "A Generative Rhetoric of the

Paragraph." Christensen advocates the "cumulative sentence" where the main clause advances the discussion, while the additions modify the statement of the main clause.[20] He suggests using the principles of direction of movement, levels of generality, and texture in conjunction with that of addition to generate sentences. He extends these principles to the paragraph. Thus, a paragraph is a structure of related sentences where the top sentence of a sequence is a topic sentence. He adds that there are two kinds of sequences: coordinate and subordinate. These sequences are often combined to form a mixed sequence–the kind most common.

And then analysis turned generative is the tagmemic analysis of the paragraph. A. L. Becker suggests that expository paragraphs have several patterns which can be summarized as TRI–T (topic), R (restriction), and I (illustration). Another pattern is that of PSP (problem) and S (solution).[21]

I have surveyed in this paper some of the assumptions that current research makes concerning the basic writer, I have also indicated some of the solutions proposed to cope with the problems facing a basic writer. The attached maxims give a summary of what seems to me to be reasonable mandates supported by enlightened research.

Maxims for a Basic Writing Program

1. Writing is a mode of learning.
2. Emphasis on the process of writing should be as great as it is on the final product.
3. The distinctions between speaking and writing should always be parmount in the mind of the writing teacher.
4. The composition course is a writing course and not a speech course.
5. Students' speech, native language, or dialect should be respected.
6. Concern should be shown more for the content of students' writing than the errors they make.
7. Erros show students' intentions rather than students' ignorance.
8. A short course of grammar is often needed when explaining a problem to students.
9. Instruction should not start from scratch – instruction must build on what students know.
10. Teachers should do everything they ask students to do.
11. Writing assignments should be clear in purpose, strategies, and context.
12. Students should start with writing narrative and then move to descriptive, expository and finally to argumentative papers.
13. Students will benefit from a great deal of writing – 1500-2000 words a week– including free writing, journals, drafting and revising.
14. Students need to know how to use heuristic devices for generating ideas.
15. Students will benefit from generative models of sentences, paragraphs, and discourse blocs.
16. Isolating testing as an activity performed by someone other than the instructor creates a goal that can unite students and teacher.
17. The teaching of writing is the responsibility of all teachers in a college.

Notes

1. "The Relationship of Personality Factors to Learning in College Composition," CCC, 18 (May, 1967), 64.
2. Ibid.
3. William F. Irmscher, Teaching Expository Writing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 50.
4. Ibid.
5. David Bartholmae, "The Study of Error", CCC (Oct., 1980), 259.
6. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1962), p. 98.
7. Ibid., p. 99.
8. The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 8.
9. "Writing as a Mode of Learning," CCC, 28 (May, 1977), 123-124.
10. "Writing as a Way of Learning and Developing," CCC, 30 (Oct., 1979), 243.
11. Kenneth Dowst, «The Epistemic Approach: Writing, Knowing, and Learning» in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, Eds. Donovan and Mc Clelland (Urbana, I11. NCTE, 1980), p. 69.
12. James E. Miller, "Rediscovering the Rhetoric of Imagination," CCC, 25 (Dec., 1974), 367.
13. See Irmscher, Teaching Expository Writing, pp. 89-91.
14. Barry Kroll and John Shafer, "Error-Analysis and the Teaching of Composition," CCC (Oct., 1978), 244.
15. Mina P. Shaughnessy, Error and Expectation: A Guide for the Teaching of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 40.
16. Ibid., p. 154.

17. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

18. "Semantic Grammars: How They Can Help Us Teach Writing," CCC (May, 1981), 207.

19. Ibid., 211 - 215.

20. "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" in The Sentence and the Paragraph (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1966), 33–38.