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On Why We Teach Writing

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In the late 1970's we are purportedly witnessing an erosion of the general academic competencies of American public school students. In particular, serious deficiencies in student writing skills have become a major focus of criticism (Lloyd-Jones, 1976; Safire, 1976; Fiske, 1977b). In response to repeated expressions of concern, educators are once again emphasizing writing skills. Universities are creating chairs in rhetoric and directorships of writing programs, colleges are seeking composition specialists to train writing teachers and the College Entrance Examination Board has reinstated the 20 minute essay. Across the country, prescriptive and sequential writing programs intended to develop precise, coherent and vigorous prose are once more dominating English syllabi (Safire, 1976; Fiske, 1977a).

Coherent and effective written communication has traditionally been correlated with effective, underlying thought processes. Therefore, a basic assumption is that writing in general, but expository discourse in particular, makes a major contribution to students' cognitive development. Training in the higher mental processes through exercise in formal writing has been pedagogic practice, if not orthodoxy (See Beveridge, 1957; Applebee, 1974; and others). As a result, the place of creative writing in the curriculum hierarchy appears overlooked once again.

As a result of the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English of 1966 and the reform movement of the 1960's, personal writing had regained status among many English educators. By the mid 1970's, the National Assessment of Educational

Progress recognized that the traditional "guidelines for assessing writing, e.g., sentence length and large vocabulary alone do not guarantee 'good writing'." The NAEP found the ". . . dimensions of writing that include the ability to express personal feelings and ideas should be measured" (Mellon, 1975, p. 102).¹ Educators had just begun to implement this point of view in the early 1970's, when the countervailing basics movement developed. Conservative critics argued that the academic promises of the open classroom and open corridor programs introduced during the late 1960's and early 1970's remained grimly unfulfilled. According to these critics, the innovations that promoted creative activity centers, personalized learning approaches and student self-direction had in fact deteriorated into irresponsible teaching and, worse, haphazard learning (Hechinger, 1971, 1973, 1975).

Consonant with this point of view, professional sentiment has swung back to the familiar, salable and quantifiable skills. Consequently most current reports ignore the contributions of more personal modes of writing to student cognition.

Today, creative writing, still integral to the elementary level curriculum, is receiving little attention at the secondary level, being relegated to the status of "educational frill." As the tradition in English education has often demonstrated, creative writing:

. . . is not considered practical, which means that it is unimportant. Writing stories and poems may be all right for the few who like to do such things, but most students--and parents--ask: Where does it get you? Poetry in particular

¹As of the second-cycle writing assessment, the NAEP has included "personal writing and the free-form expression of feelings . . . , thus remedying what many teachers felt was a major oversight in the initial assessment," (Mellon, 1975, p. 106).

is a dead language for most. (Muller, 1967, p. 155)

While it is indisputable that a primary function of writing is to transmit information, to hold that writing is primarily a conduit to an external world is to hold a naive and vestigial belief that trivializes a complex and profound process.

Language supplies denomination, precision, decision; both awareness and knowledge. But as well it creates personal existence I speak in order to make myself understood, in order to emerge into reality, in order to add myself to nature. I speak in order to reach out to others, and I can join myself to them all the more insofar as I set aside what is mine alone The limits of expression and communication are the very limits of personal being (Gusdorf, 1965, pp. 37, 50, 89)

Participants at the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English held at Dartmouth in 1966 grappled with the merits of creative expression. In a study group that examined the subject of creativity, the British participants convinced their skeptical American counterparts that creative writing need not serve some utilitarian purpose; it had intrinsic worth in terms of individual human development and an entire range of inner satisfactions. By the end of the conference, the study group endorsed the personal growth paradigm for creative writing as an essential part of the English curriculum.

Out of the Dartmouth Conference emerged the widely shared view that English is fundamentally concerned with language operating on experience. In Growth Through English (1967), John Dixon most fully articulated the processes by which language makes and expresses meaning.

With particular reference to personal growth,

Dixon described how people build personal representational worlds through language:

Personal writing, as it has come to be called, . . . is . . . an effort to achieve insight--to brush aside the everpresent invitation to take the world as other people have found it, adopting ready-made their terms and phrases (their image of us). Writing is a way of building a personal world and giving an individual rather than a stereo-typed shape of our day-by-day experience.
(1968, p. 797)

Speaking for English educators in 1967, Dixon wrote, ". . . our subject is experience wherever language is needed to penetrate and bring it into a new and satisfying order," (1967, p. 114). He recognized that it was in the nature of language to impose system and order and to offer sets of choices from which, one way or another, our vital inner lives are constantly built.

Out of Dartmouth also emerged David Holbrook's conception of English teaching that took on an even more interior perspective:

Effective English teaching . . . has to do with the whole problem of the individual identity and how it develops. In this, words are crucial, and so in English teaching we cannot separate words from the dynamics of personality, nor from the processes of symbolism by which human beings seek to deal with their inward life.
(cited in Summerfield, 1968, p. 1)

Emphasizing the use of the imagination and symbolic processes, Holbrook stated that English was concerned with "literacy in its deepest and widest sense--the capacity to use words to deal with inner and outer experiences," (p. 2).

In that statement, Holbrook suggested a bifurcation of linguistic functions that Britton, Burgess,

Martin, McLeod and Rosen elucidated some years later.

One general effect is to set up, alongside a sense of the importance of language as a means of communication, a sense of its value to the user. With a communicative incentive, that of sharing experience, the speaker shapes experience, makes it available to himself, incorporates it, so shaped, into the corpus of his experience. (1975, p. 79)

Over the last decade, Dixon has become more appreciative of the uses of language for both insight and outlook. However, he has retained strong loyalties to the personal growth model he spoke for at Dartmouth.

There is a fundamental contrast in language, I believe. I have used "communication" to indicate the way we organize language for others. What about the other pole, when we organize language for our own sakes? At that pole, instead of considering the effect of our feelings and attitudes on others, we just let them loose (1975, p. 133)

At this juncture, Dixon contended, writing still maintains a sense of audience, though a very intimate one. A piece of writing of this "intimate" a nature both communicates and expresses something of the speaker.

And in 1976, Martin, D'Arcy, Newton and Parker continued to defend the personal growth paradigm, explaining just how the process of sorting and consolidating our accumulated experiences through language affects the composing and integrating of our inner worlds:

Writing is one way to set about making sense of new information. Every day we reconstrue our experiences as we remember, reflect, select, connect, imagine, speculate; we can also (and this is where writing perhaps can be most useful) do the

more complex job of organizing our memories, reflections, selections, connections, imaginings and speculations. In turn, these reconstructions of experience provide us with fresh insights and perceptions. (p. 68)

Despite the recent climate of criticism, the personal growth model of English studies that became to a large extent synonymous with the Dartmouth Conference, is still considered preeminently viable by many educators. That is, more important than any other single function, language serves the most profound and intimate of human purposes--personal development. Moreover, if language in fact maps personal experience, then the English program, according to this paradigm, can help students realize it through writing. Therefore, the immeasurable merit of personal writing must be cogently defended during the current back-to-the-basics movement.

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