Writing Programs and the Department of English

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I see this article as a way of bringing you two sorts of message. One has to do with sheer information—current items about the teaching of writing that "every department head ought to know." (And probably does know; much of this, maybe all of it, will be familiar.) Second, I suggest, in a more evangelical spirit, some reasons why the teaching of writing might be a personally rewarding intellectual experience.

So I begin with some cheerful information about recent events in the profession that are relevant to composition. Obviously we are all working under the constraints of the current public brouhaha about literacy, a new rage for testing, a return to the basics, and all the rest of it. Much that has been thought and said on these matters, before and after that infamous article in Newsweek a couple of years ago, is simplistic nonsense. But there is an opportunity here, in the general political climate, to do something useful, to make the teaching of writing, both in school and college, a serious and respected activity. If, out of the current clamor, nothing more happens than that budgets for composition get a little looser and that directors of freshman writing programs feel a bit less forlorn, those results alone will be welcome progress.

Meanwhile a number of occurrences during the past few years have somewhat altered our teaching of composition, mostly for the better. For one thing, the opportunity for serious research and scholarship in rhetoric and pedagogy has never been healthier. An important milestone was the publication in 1976 of Gary Tate's collection Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays (Texas Christian Univ. Press). This volume does just what its title predicts: it provides bibliographical information on a series of topics (invention, style, and so on) of great use to anyone wishing information on the state of the art. For even more recent coverage, we have articles by Richard Larson in each May issue of College Composition and Communication, bringing us up-to-date on materials published during the current year. We have never been better able to keep track of ourselves, to find a handle for this burgeoning activity.

Other recent publications will occur to you that have affected the way we approach our task. Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (Oxford Univ. Press), published in 1977, is of great practical importance to teachers and administrators confronted with semiliterate open-admission students. Shaughnessy's book has also been a valuable psychological reinforcement for every teacher on the firing line of "basic English," because her work shows that one can bring to this effort a measure of serious scholarly discrimination. At the very least, the teacher of the so-called "new student" can feel a fresh intellectual dignity.

Another recent work to call to your attention is E. D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977). Whatever one's reservations about this book, it remains a high-minded, almost severely academic effort to define what happens when we write—an effort that would be hard to imagine taking place ten years ago. (Hirsch "stepped down," as the metaphor goes, from his position as head of the English department at the University of Virginia in order to become director of freshman English there. To all department heads I say, "Go thou and do likewise.") I should also mention a volume called Options for the Teaching of English: Freshman Composition (MLA, 1978), edited by Jasper Neel. This book is comprised of full descriptions of eighteen freshman writing programs. Department heads and everyone responsible for composition should be interested in these statements.

Meanwhile other writers, like Wayne Booth and Walter Ong, while not addressing themselves directly to the composition classroom, are saying things about language and literature and society that are crucial to the teacher's understanding of what should be going on in such a classroom.

I mentioned the journal of the Four Cs, College Composition and Communication, which is, of course, a must on every department's coffee table. College English, under Richard Ohmann, has also devoted many issues to the problems of writing, and no doubt it will continue to do so under Donald Gray. In fact, it would be agreeable to think that, at long last, professors in liberal arts colleges will begin to see that there is much to interest and help them in the activities of the National Council of Teachers of English. Another useful journal, in a more modest, newsletter format, is Tate's Freshman English News, edited out of Texas Christian University, in Fort Worth. And for a bit of leavening from the Marxist side, I recommend The Radical Teacher, which Ohmann and others have been producing in Cambridge for the last two years.

The government, in its tentative way, is getting into this act, mostly through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). In 1973, when the NEH's

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summer seminars for college teachers got under way, only one such seminar was devoted to rhetoric and composition. (That was my own, at the University of Massachusetts, so I know vividly how much like a fish out of water I must have appeared, among all those highbrow literary performers.) Now, I'm pleased to report, several seminars around the country are centered on writing and teaching, including an ambitious program at the University of Iowa, directed by Carl Klaus, that is committed entirely to directors of college composition programs. There are also full-year fellows-in-residence programs now, notably one called "Rhetorical Invention and the Composing Process," under Richard Young, at the University of Michigan. In 1979-80, James Sledd (Univ. of Texas, Austin) will offer a program at Texas for two-year college writing teachers.

If you haven't heard about the WPA, let me mention it too. This nostalgic acronym refers to Writing Program Administrators, an embattled band of composition directors who are determined to improve their lot in life by exchanging information and advice. Any director who doesn't belong should join (by writing to Joseph Comprone at the Univ. of Louisville and sending along the $10 annual dues). One of the charms of this new organization is that, in order to be a member, you must also join both the MLA and the NCTE, a requirement suggesting that only by working within these massive organizations is progress possible.

Now I come round to what has been happening within the Modern Language Association itself. When the Divisions were set up in 1975, one was called the Division on the Teaching of Writing, and this group has turned out to be one of the most populous and energetic of all the Association's many divisions. Our offerings on writing at the two annual meetings have been packed: clearly a lot of people in the Association are looking for enlightenment. Division chairman Edward Corbett, of Ohio State, plans another groundbreaking series of presentations for the 1978 MLA Convention in New York. As 1979 chairman, I hope to produce an attractive program for the San Francisco Convention.

Let me return briefly to the general anxiety about literacy that I alluded to at the beginning. Why have SAT scores gone down so drastically in recent years? Even that question needs qualification: there's some doubt that they have gone down very much, and there's some evidence that they may be leveling off. At any rate, discovering the reasons for the decline was the charge of a commission of distinguished citizens appointed some time back by the College Board itself. The commission's final report (available for $4.00 from the College Board headquarters in Princeton) is usually referred to as the Wirtz Report, but the actual title of the document is On Further Examination, which I commend to you as a rather charming example of wordplay, given the solemn circumstances. The Report is written with some wit and some understanding of many sides of the question—and maybe that's why it can be attacked from both left and right. In any event, the Report reminds us of a fact ignored by wailers of the Newsweek type, that one reason SAT scores began declining a decade and more ago is that the student population, the test takers, changed, with a huge influx of minority groups whose mastery of Edited American English is understandably less than masterful. It's good to be reminded that our democratic effort to educate practically everybody is a staggering undertaking. But the Wirtz Report goes on to say that the more recent declines in scores are also due to some other familiar whipping boys: TV watching instead of book reading, of course; the decline in motivation that accompanied the military and political scandals and violence of the last decade; and—yes—some weaknesses of our own profession, notably, perhaps, a certain cavalier attitude toward the disciplines and pains of learning to write decently, both in schools and colleges. The complaint that the Wirtz Report emphasizes is the proliferation of elective high school courses, some of which have no doubt been less than rigorous.

Not long ago I talked to a university official about the Wirtz Report and heard from him a familiar confession. His own children, he told me, don't score anywhere near so well on tests as he did when he was young. (Many of us would probably have that to say about our own scores and those of our children.) And yet he has a distinct and positive feeling that somehow they know more than he did at their age. That's a hard feeling to document, of course, but it's an observation that I certainly share, for all its resistance to proof. Scoring well on tests isn't everything. And this point too the Wirtz Report does not overlook.

The main thing for us to remember, as we consider the Wirtz Report and the whole SAT situation, is that, like most other issues, the literacy problem is a complicated matter, with no simple cause. Surely one cause is rooted somewhere deep in the culture and has to do with Americans' changing attitudes toward the value of the written language. You don't have to be a fan of Marshall McLuhan's to concede that the written language faces stiff competition as a medium of communication. I've been fond of predicting for some time now that in the near future, when there's a videophone at every bedside, no one may ever again write a love letter. It could be that this back-to-basics movement, whether it's used for good or ill, represents only a little backward wave against forces of history and technology that are quite beyond our control.

But, instead of stressing that gloomy possibility, I want to suggest again that in the politics of basics there exists a renewed and affirmative opportunity for all of us who care about the teaching of writing.
Now I want to move ahead into something more interesting—not so much to fill you in on the current situation as to offer some larger relations. What do we mean by good writing, anyway? That is a question calculated to get us back to basics for fair. What do we mean by good writing, and how do we get people to produce it?

What is good writing? In discussing that question here, I shall almost certainly write nothing of any practical use to anybody. And I'll begin, with that perversity common to our profession, by drawing your attention to a piece of bad writing. Here is a paragraph from that Newsweek article I mentioned (8 Dec. 1975, p. 60):

In the opinion of many experts, another major villain is the school of "structural linguistics." Writing is far less important than speech, the structural linguists proclaim. Philologist Pei traces the predominance of this school to the 1961 publication of Webster's Third New International Dictionary, the first English dictionary that did not give preference to the way the language is used by its best-educated writers. Since then, he suggests, teachers in the classrooms have come increasingly under the sway of the structural-linguistic dogma: that the spoken word is superior to the written, and that there is no need for students to study the rules of their language at all.

You'll note certain phrases that are calculated to get the author off the hook, phrases like "in the opinion of," "Philologist Pei traces," "he suggests." As if Newsweek were not pressing its own view at all, but just quoting the experts. It would be easy to protest that the choice of Mario Pei as the language expert quoted does not encourage much faith in the thoroughness or discrimination of Newsweek's reporting. But more sinister in this paragraph is the pattern of metaphor, a pattern that is surely Newsweek's and not any expert's. A major "villain" is the school of structural linguists, who "proclaim" their villainous view that students don't have to study their language at all. (Would anyone, of any persuasion, say that?) Teachers have fallen under the "sway" of their "dogma." See how the royalist language make one's adversary into a kind of ecclesiastical tyrant. Much of our education in English needs to be devoted to sensitizing people to that kind of bogus metaphor mongering. If we're going to talk about villains, then such unscrupulous uses of metaphor are what's really villainous in our attempts to communicate with one another.

Now I'm calling that bad writing, of course, because in my judgment it presents a simplistic and one-sided view of an issue we have already seen as extremely complex. I feel dismayed, not to say angered, by the bland authority of that voice. But as I look more closely—as I try to look, that is, with an English teacher's eye—I see that my dismay can be expressed in terms of the author's metaphors, of which she was probably unconscious. The bad writing that confronts us here is not, obviously, a matter of subject-verb agreements and run-on sentences. It's the adoption of a know-it-all voice when one doesn't know it all. And very often, as here, that means a voice that doesn't know when it's being metaphorical.

Let me offer another example of bad English, of a simpler kind perhaps. This one happens to be oral, and it is one of my favorite examples of public doublespeak. (It won our annual Doublespeak Award at an NCTE convention a few years ago.) I take you back to the final months of the Vietnam disaster and our "incursion" into Cambodia. Our hero is an Air Force public relations officer. This colonel was annoyed at the way the reporters were describing American air activities, and finally he called them all together and chewed them out. "You keep writing it's bombing, bombing, bombing," he remonstrated. "It's not bombing, it's air support." Now, the colonel was obviously insensitive to all sorts of other points of view—for instance, the point of view of the homeless Cambodian peasant, for whom the distinction between air support and bombing would have been academic. The colonel's error may be defined as an error of imagination, for he was fixed in just one way of seeing, which is to say, one way of talking about things. In Air Force jargon, there is no doubt an operational difference between air support and bombing. No doubt the AF pilots were doing one and not the other. The failure is one of language, a failure to see how a distinction that is clear in the lingo of one's own group (the Air Force) isn't at all clear to other groups (the American public, the Cambodian peasant). One group's air support (as they call it) is another group's murder (as they call it), and as English teachers we ought to be concerned about such failures in communication. One way to explain them is to use the term "code switching" and to argue that adeptness and imagination in switching codes can become not only a key to good writing but a central educational—and humanitarian—goal.

In large moral terms, I am beginning to think, code switching is a crucial human virtue. Consider the traffic cop who smiles, the English teacher who says "ain't," the judge on the bench who cracks a joke. By lapsing, more or less deliberately, into the apparently inappropriate style, we remind our listeners (or readers) that we ain't just a cop or teacher or judge—or a colonel—but human beings. By switching styles, we show that we're straining the bonds of our given social role, that we're aware of the absurdity and rigidity of playing any one role. Maybe this is one of the best ways we have of showing true respect for other people. By playing with styles, we are saying, in effect: you and I know how artificial are the ways of "proper communication," and while they're necessary, let us violate
them just enough to remind ourselves that our hearts are not altogether expressed or expressible in our language.

Last year, as we began our spring semester, I asked my students in a writing class, as I always do, to write down something about themselves there and then, at the first class meeting. Here is what one of my students wrote:

Again, I've found myself confronted with the same difficult task: choosing one thing about myself to disclose to an individual I've just met. I have a whirlwind of thoughts: just what should I tell him? How discrete [sic] should I be? What kind of impression do I want him to form? What is it that I want him to know the most?

This situation is encountered not only in English classes but in everyday life. In life though my reaction is spontaneous. [By “life” I take it the student means the oral language.] I do what is natural to me. This leads me to the conclusion that writing about myself is unnatural.

Unnatural. The one thing I probably know best in life (myself) is unnatural to me, at least when I try and explain myself to someone in writing.

I was much moved by that statement, even though it hardly gave me much vital information. The recognition that writing is unnatural, fundamentally abstract, removed from the living and breathing of natural speech, seems to me an essential understanding. It is a truth that has been uttered before, of course, most recently and eloquently by Walter Ong, in his book Interfaces of the Word (Cornell Univ. Press, 1977). And good writing, somehow or other, concedes its own artificiality, reminds its readers that what’s going on is a stylized event. As writers we do this in many ways, but in at least two ways I’ve alluded to here: through an awareness of our own metaphors and a willingness to switch codes. It follows that good writing involves a little disharmony, a deliberate play of voices consciously mixed, as any good novel will illustrate. We might also point to the wild cacophony that is many modern composers’ stock-in-trade. In language we don’t go that far. But good writing means more than a single voice or style, more than a consistent tone.

As we think about writing, then, one relation constantly on our minds is writing’s flirtation with the changing human voice. Writing does and does not evoke the flexible sound of a person talking. The term “voice,” which we use to describe both high literary art and the humblest student paragraph, is a metaphor. It is as if someone were speaking, but nobody is. Yes, I want to say to my student, it’s unnatural, you’re right, but you’d be amazed what you can do with an unnatural medium once you feel at home with it. After all, your own speaking voice was unnatural once, and look what you’ve learned to do with it. As Walter Ong has remarked, “It’s natural for human beings to be artificial.”

I imagine this manifesto on good and bad writing seems utterly irrelevant to my alleged topic, “Writing Programs and the Department of English.” Department chairmen and directors of composition programs are rightly involved in a number of pressing practical issues: money, scheduling, the hiring and training of young teachers, the recruitment of older teachers for writing courses. They are, very properly, more concerned with consistency of tone and with clarity of statement in student writing than with my fancy talk about disharmony. The nuts and bolts of running a composition program are manifold and complicated, as I well know. But none of them is going to hold together for long, in my view, unless we are also attentive to larger issues that transcend and make meaningful our assignments and our grading sheets. What do I mean by good writing, and what does that have to do with the young people in my class at 9:05 a.m. on Monday-Wednesday-Friday? I haven’t answered either of those questions here, but I insist they’re worth asking. In teaching composition we are dealing with the actions by which we compose ourselves and compose the world. It’s hard to think of a finer thing to try to do. To do it better, we need knowledge (of the sort suggested above) and, along with that, all the linguistic-literary sensibility we can muster.
Writing Programs’ outcomes focus on student individuation, and writing classes are small, promoting individual feedback and fostering community building. We attempt to utilize students’ pre-existing literacies to aid development of their critical reading, thinking, and writing skills. ASU Writing Programs also functions as a site of inquiry and research. Exemplary ePortfolio Awards Research Writing Programs Faculty Resources Find us on Facebook. A unit of The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.