NEITHER NEW NOR TRUE*

Martin Steinmann, Jr.

(Professor Steinmann spoke at last May's MCTE Spring Conference on the topic "New Research in Rhetoric and Composition." In response to a request from the editors, he is allowing Minnesota English to publish this paper, which was delivered at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication at Denver, Colorado, March 24, 1966. He is Professor of English at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.)

If an academic subject has been taught long and almost universally but without results commensurate with the time, the energy, and the money expended upon it, then we may safely conclude that something is radically wrong with it -- that there is a fatal flaw either in the pedagogy of the subject or in the discipline that lies behind it. Two examples in our time of such a subject are foreign languages and English grammar. Foreign languages, it turned out, had a pedagogical flaw (the false principle that the ability to recite the grammatical rules of a language entails the ability to speak the language). English grammar had a disciplinary flaw (several false principles, among them the principle that grammatical forms can be classified upon the basis of meaning). A third example in our time of such a subject is freshman composition. For about seventy-five years, it has been an almost universally required subject in American colleges and universities; yet, by common consent, the teaching of it is a failure. We founded the Conference on College Composition and Communication sixteen years ago to discover what fatal flaw accounts for this failure, and we are still looking for it. I should, I suppose, be guilty of hubris if I were to announce that I have discovered what so many have so long looked for in vain; but perhaps I may venture a hypothesis.

We have not discovered the fatal flaw, I think, either because we have assumed that it is pedagogical rather than disciplinary (with the result that freshman composition has become the most tinkered-with, and vainly tinkered-with, course in the curriculum) or because, believing it to be disciplinary, we have looked for it in disciplines that are not central to freshman composition (with the result that we have cultivated nearly every discipline except the one central to freshman composition: not only linguistics and semantics, which are on the periphery of that discipline, but philosophy, psychiatry, cybernetics, literary criticism, the history of ideas, sociology, and political science, to mention a few). In doing these things, we have not been altogether the fools that one might imagine us to be. Certainly there are pedagogical flaws in the teaching of freshman composition, though not fatal flaws; and, as I shall suggest in a moment, there are in a sense almost as many disciplines central to freshman composition as there are topics to write about.

Let me state my hypothesis. The teaching of freshman composition is a failure because, paradoxically, no discipline does lie behind it and every discipline must lie behind it. In one sense of "central," the discipline central to freshman composition--namely, rhetoric--simply does not exist, not at least in the way that linguistics and semantics exist. Consequently, far from having true or even false principles upon which to base the teaching of freshman composition, we have scarcely any principles at all. In another sense of "central," every discipline that can provide a topic is central to freshman composition. Consequently, we have a set of principles infinitely numerous and infinitely various upon which to base this teaching; and, to teach our subject, we must be universal geniuses.

Perhaps I can clarify my paradoxical hypothesis by describing the three sorts of knowledge that (it seems to me) one must have, and the corresponding sorts of choice that he must make, if he is to write effectively, and by describing also the disciplines relevant to these three sorts of knowledge and choice.

First, in order to write English at all, one must know the English language, know how to choose between English and non-English expressions. The disciplines relevant to

this sort of knowledge and this sort of choice are (1) linguistics, structural and transformational (concerned with the form of expressions); (2) semantics (concerned with the meaning of expressions); and (3) mechanics (concerned with the graphic representation of expressions). There is no question about the existence of at least two of these disciplines, linguistics and semantics; research in linguistics, indeed, has been one of the great intellectual achievements of our time. Unfortunately, however, these disciplines are not central to freshman composition. On the whole, our freshmen know the English language well: their ignorance of it rarely makes their themes bad, and their knowledge of it cannot make their themes good. This knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of effective writing.

Second, in order to write English effectively, one must know how to choose well between different ways of saying the same thing, between synonymous expressions. The discipline relevant to this sort of knowledge and this sort of choice is rhetoric, the study of effectiveness of expression. Unfortunately, however, this discipline, though central to freshman composition, simply does not exist in the way that linguistics and semantics exist. In our time, rhetoric as I have characterized it has not been a serious systematic study. There is no new rhetoric, and no true rhetoric either. There are, for example, few undergraduate or graduate courses in rhetoric; and the few that bear that name generally turn out to be either courses in the history of rhetoric, courses in composition, or courses in the teaching of composition. Valuable research in rhetoric has certainly been done, and more is underway. But, compared with research in linguistics and semantics, research in rhetoric has not amounted to much; in any case, it has had little influence upon freshman composition. (Cf. Steinmann, "Rhetorical Research," College English, XXVII [1966], 278-285.)

And, third, in order to write English effectively, one must know how to think effectively, how to choose well between things to say, between nonsynonymous expressions. All disciplines are relevant to this sort of knowledge and this sort of choice. As the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle has shown (The Concept of Mind [London, 1949]), thought and expression are inseparable. Though a given

thought may have different expressions (for there are different ways of saying the same thing), a thought does not exist until it is in some way expressed. One does not know the solution to a problem, for example, until he has in some way (in an essay, perhaps, or in a diagram) expressed the solution. Most bad themes are bad because the freshmen who wrote them are bad thinkers or, at least, thought badly when they wrote them. When we say (as we often do) that our chief task in freshman composition is to teach freshmen how to think, we are right: it is our chief task. Unfortunately, however, this is a task to which we are not, and cannot become, equal--or to which we are equal only if we restrict theme topics to those disciplines in which we happen to be experts --literary criticism, say. For no one can teach, and no one can learn, thinking-in-general. To put the matter another way, to teach freshman composition well, we must teach at least one discipline well. To be sure, this fact gives us a good excuse to make freshman composition a course in whatever discipline we believe ourselves to be expert--in literary criticism or linguistics or semantics or the history of ideas. But, to the extent that we make it that, we are preparing our freshmen to write good essays in literary criticism or linguistics or semantics or the history of ideas. We must not imagine that we are also preparing them to write good essays in world history or anthropology or electrical engineering or botany.

If I am right, then, the teaching of freshman composition is a failure for two reasons. First, that discipline that is central to freshman composition whatever the topic --namely, rhetoric -- does not exist. Second, because all disciplines that do exist are also central to freshman composition, it is a course that no one can teach well. What, if anything, can we do to improve the teaching of freshman composition? At least two radical things.

For one thing, we can encourage rhetorical research so that, in preparing teachers and building courses, we can begin to replace rhetorical ignorance with rhetorical knowledge. To the extent that we are ignorant of rhetoric, we are no better qualified to teach freshman composition to botany majors, for instance, than are our colleagues in botany. Indeed, we are worse qualified; for

our colleagues in botany are experts in botany, experts in the relevant sort of thinking, and we are not. If we are unwilling or unable to encourage rhetorical research, then we had better confine our teaching of freshman composition to English majors.

I must ward off a possible confusion. I urge that we as teachers of freshman composition encourage rhetorical research, not so that we can teach our freshmen rhetoric, but so that we can teach them composition. Though rhetoric is a discipline central to composition, teaching rhetoric is not to be confused with teaching composition. The principles of rhetoric would, if we discovered them, constitute a body of knowledge that, like any other body of knowledge, could be taught as an academic subject. But learning the principles of rhetoric is not identical with learning how to write themes that conform to them, any more than learning the rules of French grammar is identical with learning how to utter sentences that conform to them. Writing good themes, like speaking French, is a skill. One may learn a skill without learning the principles that lie behind it, and one may learn these principles without learning the skill. Once the principles of rhetoric are discovered, it remains to discover how to use them in teaching freshman composition; and this is a problem for pedagogical research. My point is that rhetorical research must precede pedagogical research; otherwise there are no principles to use. Our failure in teaching freshman composition is in part due to our failure to grant this point.

The other thing that we can do to improve the teaching of freshman composition is to share this teaching with our colleagues in other disciplines, to devise some practical ways of making this teaching a genuinely interdisciplinary enterprise. If our colleagues in other disciplines are unwilling or unable to share this teaching, then (once again) we had better confine our teaching of freshman composition to English majors. Ours is not, and cannot be, the whole duty of man.

(Cf. Steinmann, "Freshman English in America," Universities Quarterly, XIX [1965], 391-395; and "Freshman English: A Hypothesis and A Proposal," Journal of Higher Education, XXXVII [1966], 24-32.)