focus

approaches to composition: new-born and renewed

Mr. Bacig's "A Humane Rational For Composition" and Mr. Larmouth's "Models in Remedial English: an Intermin Report" are planned as complementary articles. The writers have team-taught a course in remedial composition and have co-operated in writing the articles. Neither feels that the different approaches illustrated by the articles are sufficient in themselves. An effective composition program, like effective writing, will balance the demands of freedom and discipline. In addition, the writers feel that effective writing programs demand a careful analysis of the various tasks involved in the composing process. Such an analysis suggests that we may need to use radically different techniques to help students achieve freedom of expression and technical competence. The articles, then, are an attempt to suggest some strategies for helping students to write, speak and think imaginatively and skillfully.

A Humane Rationale for Composition

by TOM BACIG
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In my first year of teaching I told my class of high school seniors that while I would justify most of what I taught on "shaky" humanistic grounds, I could with equanimity claim that what I taught them about writing would be useful, would help them to achieve success in college, or would make them better equipped to survive in the business jungle. At this moment I can only attribute my arrogance at that moment to a view of the arena of discourse no wider than the Freshmen English course and the college paper, and a naive faith in the efficacy of teaching a paragraph rhetoric. That same naivete produced a three week writing unit, taught simultaneously to three sections of senior English, requiring students to write a paragraph a day and the teacher to read 75 paragraphs a day.

Suffice it to say that at the end of three weeks my office was full of paragraphs that students didn't want to write and that I didn't want to read. I don't mean to imply that the students didn't learn some things, or even that the only thing they learned was to dislike writing more than they already did. But whatever they learned had no more to do with them as human beings than most Freshmen English programs or college papers do.

If I were teaching that class now, I might begin by asking the students why anyone, students or teachers, ought to compose. How many essays will the typical student write after he leaves the schools? How many do teachers write? If the student becomes a politician, will he write his own speeches? Will he turn out handwritten drafts of letters to his constituents? If he's in business, will he write out his correspondence? As a matter of fact, some equally pertinent questions might be asked about his experiences in the schools. In how many of his classes does he write essay exams or term papers? How often is he called on to deliver prepared speeches in his classes? When he moves from the high school to the college, does the demand for "composed" speeches and essays increase or decrease? We might press additional questions here, but I think the point is already perhaps too well made. Perhaps I could then get my students, with just wrath, to turn to the larger community and proclaim that if "they" want us to learn composition "they" had better make certain that every teacher becomes a teacher of writing and speaking, and that business men and senators stop using secretaries, dictating machines and ghost writers; perhaps the students would settle for becoming competent secretaries and ghost writers to fulfill the increasing demand for such people in our society; or they might, as I hope they would, reject the utilitarian rationale for instruction in composition altogether.

Once they have rejected the utilitarian rationale, I'm not sure that my students might not go on to reject learning to write. But if I can assume that they might press the question a bit further, I believe they might discover a new rationale, a rationale of a higher order and broader scope. Without trying to detail sources or develop the argument completely, I think my students would discover that the real rationale for writing is in its humanizing potential, its capacity to help us order our universe or discover our "selves." Perhaps they might even point out the private contemplative experience that writing makes possible, noting that privacy is hard to come by in mid-century America, or that in writing they could for a change, revel in their differences, their idiosyncrasies, their individuality, thereby coming to new understandings of themselves and others. If my hypothetical (and wonderfully perceptive) students did reach such conclusions, they would not, I think,

be far from agreeing with the statements made by the CEEB's Commission on English in Freedom and Discipline. The commission suggests that what one learns in learning to write is to "...care for the truth, care for the audience, care for one's own integrity." It is also I think what John Holt had in mind when, in introducing Herbert Kohl's Teaching the Unteachable, he said:

> ...What we have to recognize is that it is the effort to use words well, to say what he wants to say, to people whom he trusts, and wants to reach and move, that alone will teach a young person to use words better. No doubt, given this starting point, some technical advice and help may at times be useful; but we must begin from here or we will make no progress at all.

If we were operating from a humane rationale like the one my hypothetical and incredibly cooperative students discovered, Mr. Holt's statement could at least, serve as the starting point for a new approach to composing. Before taking up that new approach, I want to enter a few disclaimers. I want to avoid the too easy rejection of concern with "technical advice" that Mr. Holt mentions. One of the easiest errors to make in the pursuit of freedom is to ignore the demands of discipline. The task of helping students to express themselves must involve a concern with providing students with the conventional means that a linguistic community uses to communicate. While it is obviously foolishness to begin teaching children to compose by teaching them to spell, it is equally foolish to suppose that they can share experience fully using the written language, if they do not become minimally competent in spelling and in using a dictionary or word list. As a matter of fact, perhaps the problem here results principally from our blurring of some important distinctions between teaching our students how to deal with questions of substance and questions of form, a bugbear that is not new to us.

For the moment, reservations in hand, we might do better to consider briefly the amazing fluency of our students with the spoken language. In the light of our concern with expression we ought to note that, while our students are not necessarily brilliant at declamation or debate, they do in most informal situations succeed admirably in expressing themselves. They invent elaborate excuses for lateness or missing work, they hoodwink assistant principals and us, they speak of love, war and politics with one another, they coin new phrases and words, they swear and joke. When we note that, though to be sure they are more and less successful in these various uses of language, most of them, despite tremendous differences in IQ, reading ability, and Iowa Basic Skills scores, do manage to use the spoken language to express an incredible range of nuances and

understandings, a question suggests itself. Why is their formal speaking and writing, their effort at composing so unsuccessful?

I don't think we need to look far for the answer. Let's contrast their experiences in learning to speak and write. The infant babbling in his highchair produces, accidentally, DA DA. Much to his surprise, suddenly he is the center of an almost incredible uproar. He is being patted, poked, kissed and fed. Since most of this is eminently enjoyable he soon establishes some connection between action and consequence. As he continues to make noises and receives encouragement, he begins to produce more complex utterances, imperfectly. How are these imperfect utterances treated? Imagine yourself in the living room of a friend whose small child has just entered the room and produced a stream of what appears to be complete gibberish. His mother responds, however, with complete understanding and gives him a cookie and a glass of milk. The experience is almost enough to make one doubt one's sanity. Gradually, of course, mothers and fathers, friends, relatives, and strangers force refinement of those early crude utterances, and one variety or another of English, French or Spanish arises. But the process begins in love and acceptance.

Contrast Johnny's first experiences with producing the written language. Pen in hand he is told to reproduce a meaningless series of chicken scratches arranged in a particular order. In some cases he is praised when he finally manages to write "johnny" for the first time, but as often as not he's almost immediately informed that his work isn't neat enough or small enough, or that it's backwards. Far too frequently his experiences in sophisticating his skills in composing begin and end by being judged as totally inept; and in almost all cases no one ever reads and reacts to his writing as though it really mattered to Johnny or to anyone else. By the time he is in high school or in a Freshman English course his papers come back bloody rags, demonstrating his increasing weakness. We could talk just as easily about his experiences in preparing speeches, though "show and tell time" tends to qualify our picture a bit. In either case the effort to write or prepare speeches does not begin in love or understanding. It begins and ends in evaluation and judgment.

Of course all of this is an exaggeration and probably ought to be carefully hedged. But exaggerated as it is, it comes too close to the truth. When we must admit, as most of us do, that for most of our teaching lives we've never taught composition; we've simply graded papers and written critiques of speeches, the exaggeration doesn't miss the mark by much.

If this is the case, what do we need to do to change our practice, to make composition humane and humanizing? And, moreover, what can we do to provide our students with the skills

they need to achieve higher levels of self expression? While no one can claim that any carefully tested, surefire methods to accomplish these goals are immediately available, it does seem clear that there are some basic principles that generate particular practices that ought to inform our teaching of composition. We ought, for example, to make the simplest kind of application of Bloom's taxonomy (Benjamin Bloom, et al., Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain; Handbook II: Affective Domain, New York: David McKay Co., 1956, 1964) to our discussion of composition. In a word, we need to recognize that there are effective or attitudinal dimensions to the teaching of composition. We ought to recognize that the task of making students want to write and speak or making them like writing and speaking is a task requiring strategies different from those necessary to build habits of punctuation and spelling. In this regard the most obvious need is to convince students that they can use the written language to share experience, to shape experience, to discover things about themselves, without fear of being graded or evaluated, without fear of teacher reprisals, or administrative outrage. This may involve learning to hear our students speak of the failings of our schools, our colleagues, and ourselves. We may even have to admit we are not all good writers, and ask our students to help us with our own writing. But if we can find honesty and integrity in our student's compositions, if we can make our students want to write, even enjoy writing, the pain of facing our own weaknesses seems a small price to pay.

Another set of basic principles or processes that ought to inform our teaching of the "new" composition emerges from considering the "old" rhetoric. If, as many have suggested, the trivialization of the old humane rhetoric has consisted in part in dropping any real concern with the canon of invention, we might accept that one of the ways to broaden and humanize contemporary rhetoric would be to reintroduce a concern for invention. More precisely, what we need to reintroduce are the playful and creative dimensions of the composing process. For Aristotle, invention, the search for the available means of persuasion, followed dialectic, the search for truth. Using the terms in these senses, perhaps it would be more accurate to say we need to reintroduce a concern for dialectic or discovery In other words, we need to go beyond asking our students to sort the conventional wisdom either by getting "sources" from the library or by employing updated versions of the classical canons of invention. The library research paper or Edward Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (New York, 1965) are useful, but must be transcended. To accomplish our transcendence we will have to give up one debilitating canard. We will have to stop assuming that imagination is a gift of the gods or a genetically coded capacity. We will have to recognize that all of our students have creative potential

and that we have not met our responsibility as teachers when, in starting the creative writing "unit", we say, "Be creative!"

Creative behavior can be and has been analyzed, and some exercises in creative thinking have even been suggested. William Gordon's Synectics, for example, while it is often mechanistic and simplistic, does suggest some techniques that might be used to encourage creative pre-writing. His discussion of the use of personal analogy is a case in point. Asking students to identify themselves with inanimate objects, thus giving the objects the capacity to respond to and sense the world around them, can produce interesting notes which in turn can be used to write descriptive poetry or prose. In the following example a student began by trying to describe a drinking fountain. While I can't avoid smiling at the choice of subject, I can't help but be taken by the resulting notes. Something in them makes even water fountain descriptions worth the effort. Perhaps "making the familiar strange" is its own reward.

Sleek and silvery
Every angle gleaming
Upright, proud
Austere and haughty
Metallic taste, frigid
Galvanic to the touch
Warmed infrequently
By pulsating fingers
And suspended exhalation
From the yawning
Abyss of
Copper
Caves

Who would guess
That through
These steely coils
Flows the
Sustenance
Of Life.

-Glenda Holt

Clearly the object of such exercises is not to produce poems or prose. Instead the object is to encourage students to play with language and perception. Out of such play discovery or poetry may emerge, or if it doesn't, we might at least hope that a tolerance for the idiosyncratic and a sense of the freedom within the constraints of language and perception will.

Having thus made a start at "taking our students where they are," at becoming a real audience for whatever it is they

have to say and at helping them sense and develop their creative potentials, we can take up the task of "providing technical advice," of developing skills. Here we may have much to learn from a careful study of the language acquisition process. We might also learn from the classical rhetoricians of the Roman schools and our colleagues who teach foreign languages. We might note, for example, the way in which parents accept rough approximations initially, and then gradually demand closer compliance with accepted usage, insisting finally on near perfect performance. We might also notice the unbelievable number of repetitions that parents and foreign language teachers encourage. We might ask ourselves why the classical rhetoricians had their students spend so much time memorizing and imitating the speeches and writings of the "masters." Mr. Larmouth's companion article develops these matters in some detail.

I want to produce some evidence that the game is worth the candle, but I find this hard. My own most recent work in teaching composition may be with students who are too far gone, too much products of what we've been doing in the name of utility. I will say, that I have had some experiences in my advanced composition course, a course designed for prospective teachers, that reinforce my present views. In that course we have had some success in getting students to want to write by avoiding grading their work. While I think the mechanics of the operations of the course are not important at this point, you might be interested in a piece of student writing that indicates one potential outcome of providing students with freedom and finding that they do wish to write.

A VERSION OF A FABLE

by

James Johnson

...the howling moon was lost falling in a wilderness changing under a pair of Jack Frost underwear as I lay by my sunshine companion asleep in the dark cave of love. A self-made grizzly bear growled awakening my absent senses.

"Out of the cave." It was purple at first.

"Out of the cave." Again but less purple.

He lit a cigar and filled two glasses with brandy. He gave me one glass.

"Skoal."

"But my companion?"

"That is another dimension of these lonely bloody woods.

Skoal and I shall tell..."

We skoaled and he began to tell a sleepy broken tale he too had once met--a girl with golden hair...

It was a worried silly once upon a time wisdom but the bear was entitled to a wondered share in the universal dream of all. He was once a black-eyed kid, so he said, driving a yellow cadillac and living luxury in a dingy papered shack. His mother was a scrub kneed wide bottomed working woman who scrubbed out the bowery places and came home to cook a perfect porridge. His father was a gambling bear. What summer brought fall would fill and winter eat. Spring was sometimes honey. Sometimes not. The porridge was hot one special spring day so the three drove over the bridge and bought in Superior a jug of wine made cheaper with dirtier tracks of another tread but drank well with the perfect porridge. Anyway, they returned in wishbone time, home to drink and dine. Pa's porridge was perfect Ma's porridge was perfect. The third was gone. The kid he growled once, he said, then he drank the wine. His sorrow tapered sad to bad. He slid upstairs and there--that was where he found the firl--the storybook girl the one with the golden hair, who awoke too soon and ran down the stairs away and away.

The kid left home to find the bear and a life his own. Sometimes he flew upside down laughing in the crosswinds, soaring among the barren branches, eating flesh and bone unpealed, and falling into the pond and stream running along the hill to the top of the mountain searching for something within the bees precious tree but only finding a yellow head bouncing in love in a one way canyon breathing breathless air and wanting not the honey but the golden hair. All summer he teased the young and small without reason and jealously watched the male and female enjoying most the female--the salmon, the berry, and the other selfless dying autumn myths. He found a cave in which to dream not deep as the pool in the stream and the mirror on the pond but instead hollow and long as the canyon of breathless air where the girl with the golden hair is a dreaming silence. Tomorrow the springtime sprung memories all over. Honey trees and berry vines and new salmon running times with sunshine lightening the endless canyon rising and setting within an elusive endless canyon that was cold and nowhere--the girl running thru with raving golden hair.

Dreams that rise in youth sometimes set younger yet when summer salmon swam with summer wine while bears with valid ids were drinking and the dreaming grizzly bears were sexing still for honey forgetting tomorrow only for a sorrow as an alley as ancient as the one way canyon. Otherwise make the wine in autumn then sleep all winter sometimes hanging empty sometimes hanging together with kisses in the morning or sometimes with a

thankful bleeding heart that asks only for today what is. Salmon berry wine within a grizzly bear lives. While golden hair is a multiple of zeroes in the mist.

I looked up to a dream disappearing. I was alone. My companion with the superficial raying hair was gone from the cave of love. It was no longer dark. The moon had changed; its shape was fading, dying remembering only a summer heaven while in the east fermenting was golden hair to live but for today and to die tonite and to vanish quickly with one real drink with reality...

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While I'm not sure I can paraphrase Jim Johnson or that I know precisely what he meant, I am hesitant to say that he ought to straighten out his syntax. He has gotten beyond me; he is better than I am; I enjoy his writing, question him about it and even suggest changes, but we both recognize the ironies in our respective roles. I hope that I can find this in more situations with more students.

I would like to close with a quotation. I've been discussing a new rationale for teaching composition and some implications of such a rationale for teaching practice. If anyone asks for a rationale beyond the rationale, a reason for humanizing composition, I think he might well find it in these words of D.K. Smith which appeared in the Octover, 1967, issue of Minnesota English:

> Our students are saying, or seem to me to be saying, that they want possession of an art of discovering more honest, more meaningful, more satisfying relationships with other human beings. They want to know how to escape from the masks of concealment, suspicion, and hostility which infect their engagements with elders and peers. They want to know how to discover what it is that lies between man and man, the truth which is not the possession of one or the other which does not exist at all prior to an actual engagement, which is created in the act of engagement, which is experienced rather than objectified, and which underlies all sense of community among men. They want, in short, not simply the skill of managing their speaking and writing in ways which will be reputable and traditionally efficient, but a skill in discovering the symbols that mark the gulf separating them from others, or in discovering the symbols that define the way in which men separated by such gulfs can still treat each other as human beings, and not as threatening objects.

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