

# Let's Give Zoellner's Behavioral Approach to Writing its Chance

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The January 1969 issue of College English was devoted almost entirely to Robert Zoellner's article, "A Behavioral Approach to Writing." The space, we think, was well used. And the subsequent interest that teachers of composition have shown in the monograph is quite justified. For Mr. Zoellner has emerged from an unlikely source of inspiration, the Skinner box, with a rare trophy, a new approach to the pedagogy of composition.

Zoellner finds most teachers guilty of using the "think-write" metaphor as a basis for instruction. This metaphor springs from the assumption that if a student can be taught to think well, then he will be able to write well. Zoellner finds this view too narrow. Thinking, he says, is quite different from writing. Indeed, how else can one explain the student who fluently and articulately explains in speech the idea that he has failed again and again to express in writing?

It is the process of writing that we must teach, Zoellner insists. We spend too much time trying to teach students how to think and how to evaluate finished pieces of typed prose. We spend too little time helping them to learn how to go about the process of writing. If a golf pro taught his skill the way we teach ours, Zoellner says, he would explain to students that they should get the ball into the hole in as few shots as possible and then send them around a course a dozen times a term. Instead of commenting on the student's ongoing behavior as he swings the clubs and plays the game, the golf pro would wait with a red pencil at the end of the course to mark a grade and brief comment on each scorecard. Though we suspect that the analogy is a bit extreme, we must admit that most of our teaching does ignore the active process of writing. How many of us have dared to walk unprepared into a classroom and model for our students the same process of organizing words on paper that we expect them to accomplish when they write essays and exams?

Zoellner draws his recommendations from an application of the principles of behavioral psychology, primarily from Skinner. We must, however, try to set aside our prejudices against such psychology and our aversion to Zoellner's wordy and defensive style long enough to find the value of what he has to say. When he compares students to rodents and essays to metal reinforcement bars, we must dilute our distaste and remember that

he asks us to decide "not whether the following critique is theoretically defensible, but only whether it is practically suggestive."

From his application of behaviorism he evolves a number of suggestions which may be briefly and imperfectly summarized as three principles.

- 1) Expose students to models of people writing well, in addition to models of excellent finished products.
- 2) Reinforce students for writing a great number of short pieces.
- 3) Shape writing style by reinforcing immediately any behavior by the student that produces an approximation to good style. Then gradually raise the standards by selectively reinforcing only the better approximations.

In application, these principles suggest to Zoellner a classroom with blackboards on all the wall space. Students stand at them and learn the process of writing in a social and public way through dialogue with the teacher. We can only guess at the effectiveness of such a set-up, but it certainly is worth a try.

Nowhere does Zoellner deal with the problem of abstract standards. He explains how the student can be taught to approach the norms of the teacher, but he does not reveal how it is that students can gradually approach norms they have within themselves. There is a good reason for this omission. If a student is striving to approach his own standards and makes progress without the intervention of his teacher then, at least in some sense, he may be said to be reinforcing himself. And the concept of self-reinforcement is difficult to explain in terms of Skinnerian theory. In fact, it is the crux of one of the most damaging criticisms of the theory.

If, however, we accept the concept of self-reinforcement we can perhaps find more practical suggestion in Zoellner's ideas even if we must sacrifice some theoretical rigor. His theory, with the principle of self-reinforcement added, might well include five principles.

- 1) Expose students to models of people in the process of writing well.
- 2) Reinforce students for all writing so that they come to enjoy the process of writing and so that the number of responses becomes great.
- 3) Reinforce the student whenever he makes an accurate critical judgment, since he must come to recognize good writing by testing it against a set of standards which he can use critically.
- 4) Help the student to feel personal pride, pleasure and a sense of satisfaction whenever he writes well, thereby reinforcing himself whenever his writing approximates his own standards. In this way the student gradually comes to train

himself to write well independently of the teacher.

5) Stress that learning writing is a process in the same way that writing itself is. The student must see the development of his writing skill as a gradual process so that his goals and standards rise as his competence does.

We have simply extended Mr. Zoellner's idea of process from writing itself to the learning of writing. Just as thinking is not the same as writing, learning to write is not the same as learning how to learn to write. Teaching a student how to write will not necessarily help him to learn the process of learning how to write. So if a student's writing is to improve throughout his lifetime instead of just in the classroom, he must be taught how to learn to write, instead of merely the process of expressing thoughts clearly on paper.

Many others will, no doubt, add more extensive speculation to the foundations laid by Mr. Zoellner. His article will be read often. It is not as clear and straightforward as it might be, and its extensive use of Skinnerian psychology may cause it to be unnecessarily narrow and misunderstood. But the perspectives offered by "A Behavioral Approach to Writing" are new, valuable and worthy of further study.

## Cinquains

By DORTHINE BLASCH

Hubert Olson Junior High School, Bloomington

"How far  
is Camelot,  
that shining citadel?"  
Merlin replied, "It's just beyond  
the soul."

Alone,  
fettered, earth-bound  
am I...while silver gulls  
soar and swoop above a sea of  
turquoise.

To long  
for yesterday  
or yearn for tomorrow  
is to renounce all that we have:  
today.