MINNESOTA ENGLISH JOURNAL

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Debunking Some Myths About Traditional Grammar

by
Linda Miller Cleary and Nancy Lund

Learning traditional grammar has been part of coming of age in America. Our parents had to study it, we had to study it, and now, as teachers of English, we struggle with how to teach it . . . or whether to teach it. Well-meaninged parents and administrators tell us that grammar is good for our students. However, even though research has told us for over fifty years that traditional grammar does not help with reading or writing or thinking, fifty years' worth of students have spent a good deal of their time in English classes from grades two to twelve studying grammar. This article will examine the myths that have supported the teaching of the rule/exercise approach to grammar.

When strictly used, the term "grammar" refers to the set of rules that deal with the form and function of words and their arrangement of meaningful order, but the word "grammar" has also come to refer to the isolated study of usage, mechanics, punctuation, and even occasionally spelling. In short, it is often seen as anything in that little book of "basics" which accompanies the literature anthology under the arm of the student bound for the English classroom.

Experts in educational research tell us that there is a fifty-year lag between the publication of research and its implementation in the classroom (Lehmann and Mehrens, 1979). Clearly it is time to "re-view" the well-entrenched myths that have sprung up about traditional grammar and to debunk them. The fifty years are up.

Myth #1: *That traditional grammar is an accurate description of standard English.*

Grammars are attempts to describe the structure of language. The problem with our "traditional" grammar is that it has evolved out of the 18th century neoclassicists' attempt to glorify our language by perceiving within it a Latin structure. Crunching the English language into the Latin structure was like crunching a foot into an ill-fitting shoe. It has not been a good fit. Yet to the neoclassicists (who all knew and revered Latin), language was a divine inspiration, originally perfect, but debased by man (Postman and Weingartner, 1969). They implemented the crunch so that English might absorb some of the linguistic purity with which Latin and Greek were imbued. In his book written in 1762, *The Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), Robert Lowth outlawed the double negatives that kept popping out of the Latin overlay on the English sentence. At the time, a rising middle class in search of respect and status were only too willing to use language as a mode to get that status. Their children were trained in Lowth's English even though it was not characteristic of even the upper class at the time.

Language has remained a tool for the perpetuation of social class ever since. The irony is that Priestly (the discoverer of oxygen) surveyed the language of the English people to find that from royal to peasants, every social class used double negatives (Priestly, 1768). Writers from Chaucer to Shakespeare used double negatives as well. Now standard English has exorcised the double negative in formal written text, but other structures that Lowth would have fainted over have crept back into acceptable speech and in many cases into acceptable writing. For example, split infinitives and end-of-the-sentence prepositions (both of which were outlawed by Dryden because they didn't occur in the Latin sentence) have reappeared (Postman and Weingartner, 1966).

That traditional grammar is an inaccurate description of the English language should give us some impetus to look at some other myths that claim that the teaching of grammar in the traditional manner has an effect on our use of language or on the use of our minds.

Myth #2: *That learning grammar disciplines the mind.*

There is no research that has proven that grammar disciplines the mind. Hoyt found no correlation between the study of grammar and the ability to think logically (Sherwin, 1969). In some ways, grammar is confusing instead of clarifying (Hillock, 1986). Once a student has identified the grammatical pattern to be learned, thinking can become rote. Take, for example, the s-v-i.o.-d.o. pattern. If you give a student twenty sentences with this pattern, thinking can become automatic. There may be an original insight, but getting students to internalize the insight seems to fail; hence, the necessity to repeat instruction year after year. Conscious knowledge of what students already know and use unconsciously early in life may not seem relevant or important to the child or adolescent.

Many grammatical concepts are in the abstract, making thinking very difficult for students who are not developmentally ready. In addition, some of the definitions we ask students to understand are not very logical. The definition of a pronoun is "a word that takes the place of a noun." The word "boy" is a noun and not a pronoun. Even the definition of a sentence is confusing: A sentence is a group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought. What is a complete thought? What may be a "complete thought" to one person may not be to another. Children tend to punctuate by complete thoughts rather than by structural completeness until they have read or written to internalize sentence patterns. They have difficulty in seeing the run-ons and fragments that occur in their complete thoughts. They have no difficulty, however, in finding fragments in our best authors who use them to futher their craft.

We also have to come to some informed perspectives. What's more important: determining whether a prepositional phrase is adjectival or adverbial or writing about how *Huckleberry Finn* reflects life? If we want students to use higher order thinking skills, then they need to read literature, interpret it, and write about it. Students are often excited about searching for meaning in reading and creating meaning in writing before they are ready to make adjectival and adverbial distinctions.

Myth #3: *That grammar is best learned deductively, from rule to examples.*

For some years now linguists have studied the way that children acquire language. Children listen to the language around them and learn to speak by a process of unconsciously building a rule system from the examples of language presented to them. This is an inductive process. "Students need to develop good intuitive sense of grammar, but they can do this best through indirect rather that direct instruction" (Weaver, 1979, p. 5). Correction doesn't affect their language acquisition, though some take it to heart emotionally. Children persist in incorrect forms until they have accumulated enough instances and maturation to figure the rules out for themselves (Moskowitz, 1982). Knowing that the human mind learns concepts more effectively in an inductive manner brings to question our pedagogical strategy in teaching grammar—from rule to example to exercise. Children learn their language from home as well as from their peers. If children learn nonstandard grammar and usage at home (their home dialect), it is difficult to eradicate that grammar by "grammar instruction" of rule and example and exercise at school (Cleary, 1988). Time would be better spent if students read and wrote extensively. They would begin to make inductive distinctions between oral and written language and to develop sentence and story sense.

Myth #4: *That learning grammar helps with the study of a foreign language.*

For years foreign language teachers have told us that students need to know English grammar before they can learn another language. It is embarrassing and frustrating when we are asked if we teach grammar when we know that our students have studied grammar from grade two to twelve. Not only does it simply not stick, but it doesn't transfer. There are several reasons for lack of transfer. English grammar is unlike other grammars in that it is structured on word order while many languages are based on inflection. Thus, syntactic structure in English may be quite different from those in other languages. Knowing grammatical terminology does not increase a student's proficiency in learning another language. What may be defined as an adjective in one language may be a noun in another. And except for a few pronouns, English does not have grammatical gender; other languages do.

In the last decade or so, grammar has been a sticky issue with foreign language teachers. They're in the same quandry as English teachers: should grammar (not English but that of the language being taught) be taught at all? Their argument is that if the goal of learning a language is proficiency in communication, why spend time on teaching grammar? Time would better be spent on expression and meaning. Their contention is that students can become proficient users of language without memorizing grammatical rules (Garrett, 1986). The same holds true for English, as our first graders come to school with an almost fully developed grammar system.

Actually, foreign language teachers perform an important service for our students of the English language that we as English teachers have difficulty doing in isolation. Instead of English grammar helping with the study of foreign language, quite the opposite is true. Many of us have had the experience of finally making sense of English grammar when we study a foreign language. It is in comparision that the structures of our own language become clear.

Myth #5: *That the study of grammar improves reading and helps with the interpretation of literature.*

No evidence supports this conclusion. If anything, the reverse is true. As previously stated, the act of reading itself fosters the understanding of the structure of language as grammar exercises never will do. Recent research refers to communicative competence, the unconscious knowledge about the structure and function of language, including meaning, structure, and sound. By the time students enter school when they are five or six, they have a great fund of unconscious knowledge about the spoken language and use it rather well. Whatever is not developed will grow systematically as they learn to read and write. Through reading, these youngsters pick up a lot of information on story grammar or genre schemes (the conventional organization of a particular story or genre, e.g. setting, plot, resolution), the beginning steps in understanding literary elements (Pearson, 1978).

Current practice in reading instruction emphasizes comprehension strategies such as story mapping, clustering, webbing, prereading writing, all of which lead to the understanding of literature and give students experience with sentence structure that models further complexity year by year. Futhermore, research also indicates that preschoolers who write (scribbles, invented spellings, etc.) have a rather sophisticated knowledge of language, especially sound. This might be one of the most important steps in learning how to read. Researchers are also telling us that students who write become betters readers, and readers who write, become better writers (Weaver, 1979; Graves, 1983). This holds true for the first grader as well as for the senior. In short, if we want to improve reading instruction and literary interpretation, we must have our students read and write daily. Not only will comprehension and interpretation be improved, but students will also learn the structure of language.

Myth #6: *That the learning of traditional grammar improves spoken and written expression.*

Since the turn of the century, studies consistently and emphatically have shown that there is not a direct correlation between the knowledge of grammar and writing competency. There is a correlation between the amount of exposure to literature and writing, and between oral and written communication. Recent literature in the field cite a number of studies [Harris (1962), Elley (1976)] to support this conclusion. Ingrid Strom (1960), after reviewing over fifty studies, concluded that writing is a far better way of teaching sentence structure, usage, punctuation, and other such elements than are activities such as identifying the parts of speech, diagramming, and memorizing rules (Hartwell, 1985). More research needs to be done to investigate the effects of the functional teaching of grammatical concepts, usage, and mechanics—the folding of language instruction into writing instruction.

Students enter school with syntactic structure nearly intact. Most so-called grammar problems are really usage problems (problems in dialect difference); and writing problems usually deal with usage, mechanics, and organization, or with a student's lack of confidence in having something to say. If students show a lack of growth in writing,

it is probably because they have had little opportunity to write (Cleary,1988). Ironically, it is usually the least successful students who are most often involved in the isolated drills that become roadblocks to good writing.

The hours of remedial exercises that these students do often keep them from becoming fluent in the other language arts and may contribute to a feeling of low self-esteem as students (Cleary, 1988). If, however, instruction in usage is folded into writing instruction, students can formally compare the difference between their home dialect and standard English and can begin to express themselves in both dialects, learning which dialect to use for which audience.

If we want students to become better writers, we need to have them read and write daily, avoiding countless and futile hours of labeling sentences. Students need to create sentences, not tear them apart; it is in these generative activities that they come to an intuitive sense of language. Patrick Hartwell poignantly notes that if knowing grammar makes better writers, then linguists and grammarians would be our best writers, and, he adds, "I can certify that they are, on the whole, not" (Hartwell, 1985 p.115). Studies reviewed by Hillocks (1986) indicate that exercises in sentence combining and sentence construction are the only exercises that have beneficial effect on syntactic maturity. It is not known, however, how lasting the effects are.

Myth #7: *That grammar instruction raises SAT scores.*

The verbal section of the SAT is primarily a test of a student's vocabulary and reading comprehension. Parts of speech and parts of the sentence are not tested. The SAT verbal areas include antonyms, analogies, sentence completion (based on vocabulary and sentence sense), and reading comprehension. If we wish to help students perform well on the SAT, then we need to give them many and varied experiences in literature and vocabulary development. It should also be noted that most standardized achievement tests focus on usage, mechanics, spelling, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and knowledge pertaining to composition. It has long been shown that students who read and write often excel on these tests. Time taken away from reading and writing for formal grammar instruction will work to the detriment of students' test scores.

In Conclusion

It's time to take another look at what we really want our students to know. More time is spent in our schools from grades seven to twelve on grammar instruction than on any other English instruction. Many researchers think this is why the time spent on grammar instruction is inversely proportional to progress in writing. While students are spending time on grammar drills and exercises, they are not learning to write by writing or reading. Moreover, students in many schools receive a large dosage of grammar from grade two on. Each fall they come to school with an excitement and eagerness to learn; but each fall we start them out with the same definitions: A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. This boring repetition year after year shows negligible results; yet, traditional grammar still has a prominent place in the curriculum. By the tenth

grade students are still identifying the parts of speech and many still fail tests on them. That in itself should indicate the futility of long term instruction on traditional grammar.

With some of the myths about the teaching of traditional grammar debunked, we can get a clearer picture of how grammar study, or more broadly, language study, should be taught in our schools. Does this mean that attention should no longer be given to the parts and order of the English sentence? No. Knowing the names of the parts of speech (and the parts of a sentence) provides both the student and the teacher with common terminology. Students need these terms for car parts to discuss the adjustment of a carburetor with the owner. More importantly, if the students talk about their writing with other students and the teacher, the students will remember these terms, and they will not have to learn them over every year.

Broader language study, the study of grammar, usage, and mechanics, can be taught with positive results in connection with writing or in mini-lessons right before a writing assignment, for it is in students' own writing that they can see their dialect differences and can consider why it might be economically beneficial to acquire a more standard form. Students should be and can be taught to value their personal language and also be able to vary that language for different audiences. Studying problems that occur frequently in a classroom may alert students to become sensitive to those errors/problems when reading their own or their peers' papers. By eleventh or twelfth grade most students are developmentally ready to rediscover language in all its complexity, and to be challenged by "the tantalizing problems that language has always posed for those who are puzzled and intrigued by the mysteries of human intelligence" (Chomsky, 1982, p. 84). If they haven't been inundated with "grammar" study previously, they are curious and eager. Phrase structure rules, transformational syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics, and semantics can be fascinating to the student who wants such knowledge. It is also clear that prospective teachers of English must have a thorough understanding of their language to help their students use language effectively (Weaver, 1979).

Debunking some of the myths that surround the teaching of traditional grammar is important so that we, as teachers of English, can consider what to do for our students. The teaching and learning of traditional grammar from grade two through twelve no longer need to be a hurdle for us as teachers or for our students. Our task must be to educate parents and administrators who haven't had the benefit of a close understanding of the research that has been fifty years in the making. It is exciting to see that curriculum guidelines from the State of Minnesota Department of Education are beginning to have some effect on district curriculums, and that inservice teacher training and writing projects in Minnesota are making important steps towards the change that is over fifty years in coming. . . and several years overdue.

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Psychology and Writing: Delphi Revisited

by
W. Scott Olsen

We began the semester with what we hoped would be an ambitious experiment. The goal was to try to discover, using psychoanalytic reader-response theory as a starting point, the ways by which short stories, poems, or essays move from first idea to "finished" text.

There were several questions we wanted to answer. How do each of us, as individuals, decide what is "good" in our writing, and what subjective criteria do we use while revising? Because writing is essentially a way of re-creating and ordering the world according to a highly personal and individual pattern, in what ways is writing an act of self-therapy? And what, if anything, can a text say about an author's Self?

In our attempt to answer these questions, the course was divided into three sections. The first consisted of readings in basic theory, to discover the methods and patterns readers use while creating a response to a text. The second asked students to write their own responses to several short stories, poems, and essays, to begin to understand unique patterns of defense and incorporation.

The third and most important section of this class used the knowledge gained from sections one and two to determine whether, and if so how, patterns of response determine and inform our subjects as writers. We wanted to develop a psychological model for writing—much as there are models for reading. The result, we hoped, would be a bit more control over the writing process.

What I wanted was to try a course which included the average undergraduate writer (though not necessarily English majors, as I wanted anyone who took up a pen and didn't think of it as punishment), an overview of psychoanalytic literary theory, and an environment that encouraged the students to create their own theories about their own writing. The reasons for this were many. When I was a graduate student I enrolled in a seminar on Psychology and Literature, during which we read a paper written by Murray Schwartz and Norman Holland and published in *College English* in 1975, entitled "The Delphi Seminar." The paper described a course they taught which helped students understand the nature of subjective responses to literature. As I read it, I was struck by the apparent success they had, and I wondered whether such a course could be taught by someone who was not trained in analysis.

More importantly, as I write mostly fiction, I have wondered why reader-response has become such a flourishing study and why there has been very little work using the same materials to look at the writer. Psychological studies have been done on writers, but rarely (if ever) have writers been given the language of analysis or a detailed understanding of response and then been asked to look at themselves. More often than not the analyst says "thank you, I'll let you know what you mean." Those writers who are superlative critics tend to be always looking at someone else.

I assigned Simon Lessor's *Fiction and the Unconscious* and Norman Holland's *5 Readers Reading* because they are lucid explanations. Then we went to *The Conscious Reader* for practice looking at our own responses and Identity Themes, to use Holland's term. Finally, after supplemental lectures on Erikson and Winnicott, I wanted the students to look at their own work and figure out, in psychoanalytic terms, how they write. There are limitations, of course, in using an approach based solely on Freud, but I saw the theory as foundation only. In a course on literary criticism there would have been time for more.

The answers we were looking for were fundamental. When a writer looks at a rough draft and makes a revision, even something as simple as substituting "swiftly" for "quickly," the reason he or she gives is usually that it "sounds" better. This is certainly valid, but it is not an explanation that helps our understanding. Given all the events which occur in everyone's daily life, I wondered how we decided which could be source material for a story, poem, essay, whatever. I wanted to know why we give up on some ideas and pursue others despite tremendous effort and sometimes pain. I believed a model could be developed, much like Holland's model for reader-response, which would explain the writing process and take into account the very different ways each individual writer goes about writing.

We met on Tuesday nights, for three hours. And after the usual mess during the add-drop period, the class contained six women and two men, including myself. There was one sophomore and an even split between juniors and seniors. They all saw themselves as writers, and many of them had begun to publish in campus magazines and newspapers.

At first we read half a book a week, so in five weeks we had worked our way through Lessor and Holland. I asked my students to disagree with these people if they found something that didn't go with the way they saw their own work, but that didn't happen. As we worked through Projection, Analogizing, Identification, Identity Themes, Symbolism, Transitional Objects, Generativity, Signifiers and Signifieds, etc., the students found the ideas too divorced from their experience and quite difficult to understand. They asked mostly for clarification and I found myself lecturing more than I wanted to.

However, at the end of the fourth week, just after we discussed the idea of an Identity Theme, I asked each of my students to take twenty minutes and come up with a statement that represented his or her own theme. They balked a bit, asked that what they wrote not be shown to anyone else, then wrote. A week later, after they had some time to think about it, I let them revise their statements. What they described was more like personality traits, but it was also the true beginning of the experiment.

Kelly, a bright woman very proud of her recent engagement, first wrote: "I am an idealistic trusting person who avoids being hurt at all costs. I will tell anyone my deepest secrets as society would see them (sexuality, mistakes) but hold on very dearly to my childhood fantasies. I don't get mad so much as hurt or embarrassed. I enjoy achieving goals but am embarrassed by praise or credit for those goals. I like to feel in control of my life but seldom do. I want to please others but have begun to learn to live for myself." She revised this to: "I trust people and seek to please them or win their approval but without having to lose myself in them. I like doing things for others if I am in control of when or how much."

Pamela, a quiet but not reticent woman, wrote: "Not a power seeker and aggressor but also far from a helpless follower. I throw my whole heart into things I believe in. I think I am unconventional and unpredictable (or maybe I just try to be!). With family and friends I am very loyal and emotional—they are of the most importance to me. I tend to have a maternal instinct toward male friends—and sometimes act over protective as if they were my children—(most of my friends are male and are like brothers to me). I don't think I am very demanding to anybody— and I've been called a very strong person." She revised this to: "I search for balance in everything around me to justify the imbalances in my life."

Charlie, who spoke frequently through what seemed like labored articulation, wrote: "Identity Theme: To feel deep emotions—my own and others—and to help others by troubleshooting for others." He revised this to: "Charlie wanted to experience the intensity of a wide range of emotions and use these intensive, emotional experiences as a basis for controlling through subtle methods other people's lives."

Deborah, who was also mostly quiet, yet when she spoke it was almost always begun with some joke, wrote: "Desire to be able to control and manipulate situations and people. Fear of losing objects and people." This was revised to read: "I seek sources of strength and nurture, but fear having them gain too much control. Want to avoid putting myself in situations where I am vulnerable to loss."

Anne, the sophomore, quiet and unsure of her place in the class (she made a point of telling me she had never taken a creative writing class, and that her own writing wasn't turning out so well) wrote: "To reach and find meaningfulness in existence, in people, and in feeling through living and experiencing. Stupid! Seeking meaning. I seek meaning, I avoid people who are not genuine, artificial bullshit and petty people aggravate the hell out of me. To better understand purpose and why people value what they do. I am looking for what I don't know, Is it a person people say no, Is it a feeling or is it a thought, Where am i, i think i am lost." The revision read: "I am looking for security within myself, meaning in life and good in people (genuine people)."

Finally, Kate, obviously a class favorite, wrote: "To seek to maintain my control over situations and to minimize anger directed at me, and to minimize anger in situations in which people I care about are angry at each other." She revised this to: "My identity theme is to maintain control over situations by alleviating tension either directed at me or others whom I care about who are participants in the same situation."

When I first read these statements, I was struck by the themes they contained. A desire for power and a fear of loss were somewhere in everyone's self-examination. Then I remembered I was dealing with people who felt some need to write, to re-create the world in terms that gave them pleasure, and to control that creation. After they finished their revisions, I simply put the pieces of paper in a folder and tucked them away. I wondered about many of the changes. Why, for instance, did most of the statements become shorter and less personal? Why was Charlie writing in the third-person? One of the dangers of this type of course is a tempting slip into a group

psychoanalysis, however, so I let these questions remain unanswered. I could not have answered them anyway, because I am not an analyst.

What we did was begin to look at literature, to see if our stated themes held true to our readings. During the second week with *The Conscious Reader*, I asked the class to take half an hour and "recount your experience of reading the text," in this case Cheever's "The Enormous Radio." Afterwards I asked them to take another half an hour and explain why they said what they did, why they chose certain details to emphasize above others. Here is what three of them said:

Charlie:

1) *The Enormous Radio* by John Cheever. At the beginning of the story, I can place myself with the Westcotts regarding their lack of understanding about appliances and the mechanics involved with them. I found myself drawn from an intimate identification to the place of a member of an audience watching an extremely ludicrous satirical comedy. By the time I finished the story Jim and Irene Westcott were contrived and flat characters. The characters showed no real emotion and no attempt to do anything but whine.
2) Self-Analysis: I found myself carefully scanning the text before I wrote my impressions about the story. I found upon scanning the story again that my indifferent attitude became one of critical dislike and causal dislike. My analysis points out that the characters are too static and desiring self-punishment. I have no sympathy for dull, unrealistic whiners who wish to set themselves up for abuse. The Westcotts never actually do anything until forced to and I am tired of reading about the semi-rich people who put their selves, in some way, in a very serious predicament. I could not analogize with the Westcotts because their world was too remote and removed from mine and the narrator never draws me in enough. For me, there was no actual emotion in the story written and the story seemed to be a poorly written psychological case study. No aspect of the storyteller's craft seemed either evident or well-developed to engage me in this story.

Kate:

1) As I read *The Enormous Radio* the thing that kept coming into my mind was a feeling that the Westcotts, especially Irene, thought they were better than other people. The story immediately gave me this impression when in the first paragraph the following statement was made: "The Westcotts differed from their friends, their classmates, and their neighbors only in an interest they showed in serious music." This interest in classical music seemed to me to represent a separation from their other friends that Irene thought made her better than them. I found myself hoping something would happen to bring Irene back down to earth. When Jim bought Irene the new radio so that she could get more enjoyment from the classical music she loved so much, my immediate feeling was that something was about to happen that would bring Irene down to earth. The radio is depicted as something ugly and malevolent. It is almost given human power in its ability to cause pain. When Irene and Jim had their first problems with the radio, I could hear the grating discord. I could also feel Irene's anger and disgust at the instrument and I pitied her, but at the same time, I was glad the radio was giving her so much trouble; I found myself saying "Good for you." Then, when the radio began to pick up on the conversations of the other people in the apartment complex, I found I was horrified that Irene would become so obsessed with her curiosity about other people's lives. But, like before, I found myself (a little against my will) understanding and identifying with Irene's nosiness. I wanted to be angry at her, but couldn't be fully angry because I realized I would probably have wanted to do the same thing (although I like to believe I wouldn't have listened). By the time I reached the point in the story where Irene was obsessed with listening to the other people's conversations, I was totally disgusted with her and wanted her to get some kind of punishment for her behavior. At the end of the story when Jim pointed out all of Irene's faults, I had completely lost the small sliver of sympathy I had felt for her and was glad that she was finally exposed to the hypocrite that she was. I loved the last two paragraphs because Irene was forced to face the same kind of situation in her home she found excessive in other homes. In the last paragraph she goes back to the radio hoping to find comfort in it and finds it is back to normal. This seemed to be the final straw in her punishment, and I loved it!
2) I think I focused on Irene and her shortcomings because I saw a personal fault in her obsession with the radio. Then I was really upset with her hypocritical attitude toward the problems in the other people's lives. I guess I ignored more of the other aspects of the story because this had such a big impact on me. Irene's faults seemed to outweigh everything else. Her faults, including her totally simple-minded and submissive role in the marriage, really got under my skin. The author's portrayal of her gave me the feeling of the traditional dumb female, dependent on her husband and living a life in which the only thing of importance is the music she listens to for recreation.

Anne:

1) I was behind Irene and saw things as she saw them but I saw her too. Until the end Irene seemed innocent and "put upon." I was afraid she'd kill herself over the depressing episodes on the radio. The main point was about how we deceive ourselves about our lives and other's lives, but the really depressing message that I got was that no one is exempt from the money worries and petty lies. The final paragraphs open to the real picture of home and Jim, exposing Irene's selfishness and Jim's worries about money. The nitty gritty. While I read this I was assuring myself that if I were in Irene's place I would not, first of all, listen in on other people's lives, second that I would not be in her place. The relationship was dry; they had kids but the nurse handled them. They lived together but separate and Jim had his work then he came home and the action was dead. Jim was the provider and Irene was the housewife. No thanks!
2) I guess I saw Irene as innocent because I wanted her to be or I want me to be. I see evil and bad and usually try to recognize it for what it is but at the same time

> don't want to be excluded in all this. Because I see or know of those evil things I should be able to keep myself free of them but it doesn't work that way. I think I see this story as another ferris wheel like life in that no matter what you do you can't avoid the hassles of life—I thought for a while that those hassles would overwhelm Irene and she would opt for death (suicide), which I personally considered several times in my life when things seemed too overwhelming and meaningless. I also see that I rejected Irene's position in life with Jim because she seemed to be reduced to an item not a being, not an equal in the relationship. Not that I am a woman's rights stickler, I am more of a human rights stickler. Also I would want to be involved personally with my children.

Obviously, if we wanted to try to re-prove some of the foundation for reader-response theory there would be a great deal of information in these confessions and their relations to the students' self-stated Identity Themes. Each of the students objected to the control and power the radio had on Irene. Of the other three students, Pamela insisted on calling the story an essay and focused on the issue of money before relating her own family's recent problems with two VCRs. Deborah first liked Jim Westcott, then didn't, and was also bothered by the elitism of listening to classical music and the maintenance of an artificial, "perfect" world. In her self-analysis she said that the reason Irene irritated her was "because I find some of her behavior in myself and it is irritating to me when I act that way." Kelly simply said she didn't like the story and therefore didn't have much to say about it, although she admitted "I like the ending because the way she acts is what ultimately exposes her actions."

There are many questions here. Why, for example, did Charlie find so little access to a story where the domineering force is inanimate and thus uncontrollable? Why did he displace his anger onto the author? Why, also, did Kelly, who wants to "hold onto" childhood fantasies, not have much to say? Why did Pamela, who sees herself as very loyal, relate the story to current events in her own family? Why did Anne think of suicide when confronted with ingenuine characters? Why did Kate identify with Irene's obsession with other people's problems yet enjoy her downfall? Given the dynamics of latent desire (cf. Lessor and Holland), I believe these questions can be answered by relating the students' reactions to their perceptions of their identities.

However, we were working towards an understanding of how our personal styles of subjective and objective comprehension determine our styles and subjects as *authors*. I gave the students their Identity Themes back, we talked about the relation of response to personal psychology, and they seemed to understand, albeit critically, the validity of an Identity Theme.

With this understanding, we began to look at our own writing processes. And the first question we considered was what constitutes an idea? How do we know when we have something to write about? If in the course of an ordinary day we see, hear, or experience a thousand events which could become the source for a story, poem, or essay, how do we know when an idea is particularly ours? How do we explain the fact that two writers of equal accomplishment may simultaneously witness the same event, and yet only one of them may feel any desire to write about it?

To answer this, my students said they write mostly about events which anger them. These events could be within their social spheres, or a great deal beyond, but the events always provoke a heightened response. I asked if all their writing came from anger, and they said no—of course not. After a few minutes they suggested that writing comes from a desire to change what has happened, or to create a scene that gives us pleasure. In psychological terms, an idea which creates a wish-fulfilling fantasy, based on our individual subconscious desires, is the most likely idea to bring us to write. As Kelly said in her final paper, "The writer begins with an idea for a story. This idea may be an image, a scene, a character, or a title, but it is an idea that bothers the writer. This idea is usually linked to an unconscious wish-fulfilling fantasy. Something within the unconscious desires to be experienced, yet the conscious can only accept this experience when it is detached from the person, as in writing. The idea is usually a strong one that reoccurs to the writer until he acknowledges it and experiences it through writing about it."

These unconscious desires could be any want which refuses to accept mediation. Thus, when someone close to us dies, for example, the desire to recreate that life becomes especially strong. Writing about it enables us to transform the death into a form that allows us to psychologically deal with it and accept it. Personal psychological history determines whether any individual idea can be the material for a wish-fulfilling fantasy. In this way, the act of writing is similar to Dream-work, in that Dream-work takes the events of a person's daily life, combines them with whatever need is most pressing in the subconscious, and creates a dream which presents the latent desire in a manner that aids resolution. In dreams, however, the resolution doesn't need to be consciously or intellectually understood.

My students pointed out that they could not write when the event or idea first presented itself, or at least they could not write well. Deborah pointed out troubles with her roommates, and how when she was most angry with them her writing was merely vituperative. She received no comfort, joy, or understanding from this type of writing situation. Later, however, she could write about them and receive satisfaction from her work. The other students quickly agreed. In Anne's final paper, she said: " . . . we must recognize that writing is not what we think, but what we think in terms of language." Much as the best reading comes in situations where the reader is relaxed, both physically and emotionally, the best writing comes during times when the author is relaxed and able to recall the idea for the composition through a reflection mediated by time.

Having talked about the genesis of writing, we quickly discovered that the process of writing a first draft was substantially different among us. Some students said they always wrote very quickly, never pausing to reread what's just been said. Other students said the only way they could write was line by line, carefully checking every word and sentence. Two of us said we frequently shifted between the two. Those who wrote quickly spoke of the "rush" of writing, using almost sexual terms to describe the speed and racing toward a climax they felt during initial composition. Those who wrote slowly said they also experienced a state of heightened sensation and tension, yet they simultaneously felt a need for control. Having worked our way through the need to

appease the superego during reading (expressed best in Lessor, and an idea we will come to in a minute), the students were quick to offer an explanation for the seemingly contradictory writing methods. Kate's said:

> In writing the first draft, we may experience one of two things. We may experience a rush of thought and feel a need to write quickly without stopping to think over or revise what we are writing. On the other hand, we may find ourselves writing quite slowly and cautiously, stopping at brief intervals to read and make corrections in what we have written. Both the almost reckless abandon in writing without thought of revision and the methodical, hypersensitive attention to revision are acts of defense triggered by the unconscious. The importance of the idea may be known to the unconscious but unknown to the conscious; in this case the wish to "get-it-out-quickly" may be a defense against too much intellectualizing. The commitment of unconscious thought to language causes a need to create a barrier against critical judgement. The barricading of critical judgement in the rush-writing stage [aids the] wish-fulfilling fantasy because the writer has complete [noncritical] control over his work. On the other hand, the writer who meticulously revises as he writes may do this as a method of distancing or defending against a subject that is getting too close to the wish-fulfilling fantasy and latent desire. In order to insure that the latent content does not become too "close" and threatening, the writer employs criticism to act as a defense against that which is threatening.

The process of initial composition, then, is a process whereby the story's, poem's, or essay's latent content, that element of the work which represents the wish-fulfilling fantasy in the author's unconscious, must move past the regulating functions of the author's ego, superego, and conscious. This can be accomplished by either getting the material out very quickly, thus avoiding judgement, or very slowly, thus appeasing judgement.

After writing a first draft, most writers revise. And the students also found this stage was governed by their individual psychologies, or Identity Themes. Revision is mostly the selection of appropriate form, at both the word and whole-manuscript levels, and as such it works in much the same way as form works during reading. In reading, form is what protects us from a conscious understanding of latent content. Lessor gives the example of *Hamlet*, which contains classic oedipal themes that would be distasteful to a conscious perception:

> Frequently the connections among various actions and meanings which run through an entire story would also arouse anxiety if brought to awareness, and are left to the unconscious to apprehend. There can be no question that in response to fiction the unconscious engages in a kind of activity which we may think of as a prerogative of consciousness: it ferrets out connections, draws inferences and establishes connections; it *synthesizes its observations*. When we read *Hamlet*, for example, it is the unconscious which is likely to take note of the contrast between the speed and sureness with which Hamlet acts on a half-dozen occasions and his powerlessness to proceed with that one action he has pledged himself to perform; the contrast between his dilatoriness and the speed with which Laertes acts in a similar situation; and countless other things which betray the secret sources of Hamlet's inability to carry out his mission. By piecing together and interpreting such observations the unconscious may penetrate to an entire level of meaning—or to numerous levels of meaning—to which, during reading at least, the conscious mind is blind. (200)
>
> Feelings are divorced from their real source and associated with something else in connection with which their avowal becomes permissible. As a result of the disassociation, feelings which, properly identified, would arouse abhorrence secure open and passionate expression. Another mechanism of "primary process" thinking, "splitting," contributes to this result. The original father is decomposed into three principal figures, the Ghost, Claudius and Polonius. The rage and jealousy and fear felt for the father can be legitimately directed against Claudius, who has murdered Hamlet's father, who though unworthy possesses his mother, who has injured Hamlet and has power and motive for injuring him further. Polonius is a depreciated father figure, against whom Hamlet enacts his rivalrous feelings toward the father and the impulse to disparage him. It should be remarked in passing that the displacement of Hamlet's hostility onto Claudius and Polonius also facilitates the eloquent expression of his sanctioned filial feelings. The respect, admiration and love which during his father's life were admixed with other elements can now be asseverated without qualification. (108)

During reading, form is an adequate defense against conscious understanding of latent content and subconscious fantasies. And we should remember here that the latent content and fantasies belong to the reader, not the author. The reader is protected by a form created by an external source.

However, in writing there is no external source. Form's ability to protect is limited because it is the author's latent content the author is reading. Whatever may be distasteful or painful cannot be fully hidden from the author, and the students picked up on this. Anne, whose Identity Theme revolved around security and meaning, said: "While writing may act as a type of purging and thereby relieve anxiety, returning to the text may also bring up latent meanings which escaped subconscious ground in the initial writing process. These messages are probably not available to anyone other than the writer. The process of writing may help the writer deal with subconscious currents, but distancing the Self from the content does not eliminate any undercurrents."

Kelly, who said in her Identity Theme that she would tell anyone her deepest secrets, said: "I get very frustrated when I start major revisions. I always feel I am losing something good when I start looking at the work as a critic. There is something in that rush of a first draft that is totally honest and open. When I make revisions my conscious takes over and tones down the honesty. I know that revisions may improve the work, but they also change the feeling and the meaning in some way. I am afraid to risk sacrificing what is written for something that usually seems elusive in my mind. If the rush is to get the unconscious thoughts on paper before the conscious takes over, I am afraid that revising, which is the work of the conscious, will take the emotional depth out of the paper. The conscious wants to tone down any strong or controversial emotions and make the paper safe."

Kate, who mentioned control and the reduction of tension, said: "There is a tendency to use too much criticism as a defense when we realize we have revealed more of ourselves than we intended. We wish to keep our writing "safe" so we find critical avenues to help us weed out that part of the writing that comes too close to our latent fantasies and desires; paradoxically we wish for the courage to reveal our true feelings and feel cheated when we revise so much that we remove those feelings. When we must revise our own work we tend to become very critical because we recognize the work as a representative of ourselves to the world. The most crucial difficulty in revision occurs in the inability to be totally detached; instead of simply revising critically, we revise critically and emotionally. Hence, revision becomes more than just a process by which we improve the quality of our work; it is a process by which we attempt to make the final separation between ourselves and the work we have created."

This seems to be the reason so many writers find revision a difficult and disorienting process. If we take into account Winnicott's concept of a Transitional Object the problem becomes even clearer.

Winnicott took a second look at the "Fort" and "Da" game Freud's grandson played, and recognized that the spool and string the child was throwing away and then drawing back played an important role in the child's actions. He proposed that they acted as what he called a Transitional Object, something that is both Me and Not-Me, and was only one in a long series of such Objects a human uses throughout a lifetime. The first Transitional Object, Winnicott said, is a mother's breast—in that the child cannot distinguish between Self and breast. The spool and string were symbolic representations of the child's mother, and allowed him a way to substitute his desire for instinctual satisfaction (81).

What it comes down to, I believe, is that all texts under construction are linguistic Transitional Objects. Not only do they have the characteristics of Me and Not-Me, they are governed by the properties of signification as well. No text starts at the point of Transition. Rather, it starts completely in the Not-Me. What happens during the successful process of composition is that the text moves into Transition, and when something is in Transition it is on the way to becoming a signifier, an adequate substitute for the author's meaning.

What writers must do is distance themselves from what is meaningful to them by providing a symbolic alternative through language, so readers can get closer to it. And this distancing is not an easy thing to do. If any word can mean anything, how can we find the right word—much less sentence, paragraph, or essay—that will adequately express our topic and psychology? Even worse, it is the words we know will be judged.

Yet revision is accomplished. The more practiced and experienced a writer becomes, the less painful revision becomes. With experience comes the skill to judge the formal matters covering our own latent content, and we can begin to experiment with different styles and methods to see which ones best aid a reader's perception and understanding. New writers may feel an inordinate bond to certain passages of language, as these passages contain something precious and meaningful, and not be able to distinguish between the language and the idea behind it. Practiced writers may feel no less of a bond, but they have learned that change may create a clearer understanding. Writing, after all, is an act of communication.

At the end of the semester, we seemed to have learned something. The students were unsure about Lessor and Holland, but they all said the course gave them a new way of looking at their own work and increased confidence. We had, albeit in rough form, and in a form which needs a good bit of further testing, a model for writing which includes individual variation. I would state this model in the following way:

Every idea that comes freely to a writer is an idea which has entered the author's subconscious and transformed itself into a wish-fulfilling fantasy that represents a latent desire and is characteristic for that author. During the initial composition, the controlling functions of the author's psychology must either be bypassed through a tremendous rush of creativity or appeased through a hypercritical, line-by-line, instant revision. An author's intuited awareness of his fantasy, or latent desire, is unusually sharp; thus, even the form an author gives a composition is unable to completely shield the author from a conscious understanding. This understanding, however, combined with the author's perceptions of the needs of his audience, is what guides revision.

Because the semester ended, we were unable to consider two questions as fully as we would have liked. The first one concerns the formal elements an author chooses first, by intuition, during initial composition. This form should speak to the level of anxiety the latent content produces, perhaps explaining how an author seems to "know" a work belongs in first or third person, etc. And the second question concerns an author's relation to a "finished" text. Most of the students said they experienced a catharsis during composition, and the work became finally fully externalized, but they also said they felt uncomfortable reading their own work because the form was an inadequate barrier against a fresh experience of latent content. What the course needed was another semester. The ideas were good ones. The need to develop the model, to answer the questions, and the potential the answers may hold for our understanding of writing as a creative, highly personal process, are promising.

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Establishing, Administering, and Holistically Scoring A Placement Writing Assessment

by
Laurie Rozakis

In the summer of 1987, the English Department at the SUNY College of Technology at Farmingdale, working closely with the faculty of The Learning Center (a broad-based tutoring/advisement center), instituted a placement vehicle, designed to winnow entering students in need of extra help from those capable of successful completion of Freshman Composition. More accurate English placement would, we felt, increase student retention as well as create more homogenous English classes. On the basis of their scores, students would then be assigned to either non-credit English 095 or credit-bearing English 101.

The placement test had two parts: a standard short answer usage exam and a one hour holistically-scored composition. All first time, full-time matriculated day students were required to take both sections. To accommodate the waves of admissions, we established a continuous testing and grading schedule during the summer and early fall, into the first week of classes.

The assessment vehicle would be administered only to full-time matriculated students. Non-matriculating students who desired admission to either English 095 or 101 would have their credentials evaluated individually. The scores of those tested would be evaluated on a three part hierarchy:

Short Answer Exam: 1) Students who scored above a specific cut-off point on the standard short answer usage exam would be placed in English 101.

Essay Exam: 2) Students who scored below the cut-off point on the short answer usage exam would be evaluated on the basis of their score on the holistically-scored essay. If their score on the essay was above a specific cut-off point, they would be placed in English 101.

Regent's Exam 3) Students who scored below the cut-off point on the essay would also be evaluated on the basis of their scores on the English Regent's Exam. This state-wide competency exam comprises a fifty point multiple choice and fill-in section including grammar, usage listening, spelling, reading comprehension; a twenty point literature-based essay; a thirty point composition. Since this requirement proved cumbersome and affected only ten students, it has been dropped from this year's exam.

In total, we tested almost 2,400 students. Given the diversity of our community, we required a test that could be administered in no more than two hours (to leave students

time for additional placement testing in both reading and mathematics); that would be applicable to a wide variety of people from diverse backgrounds; that could be evaluated quickly.

After a year of assessing our specific needs, we tailored an exam that met these criteria. We began by gathering and evaluating exams from a wide variety of universities and colleges before deciding on the combination short-answer/essay format. The short answer section proved easily settled. We studied a series of short-answer exams and ordered a standard version from the Educational Testing Service, which has proven satisfactory. The essay portion, in contrast, required a great deal more study.

Since we were dealing with a non-teaching situation, and those administering the exam were neither trained nor required to answer questions, we felt it especially important that the assignment be precisely worded, with clear, easy-to-follow directions. In addition, since we were testing such a diverse population, we also needed a question sufficiently wide in scope to ensure all participants would be able to provide an answer. As Miles Myers explains in his pamphlet *A Procedure for Writing Assessment and Holistic Scoring*, a prompt should be designed to stimulate student writing, not test specific facts. Direct and easily understood, the prompt should enable the student to start writing quickly. We needed a prompt that could be answered by everyone, easily—but not simplistically—so students could focus on how to frame their responses as well as what that response could be. Naturally, the question will vary according to results of the needs assessment, and what works in one situation will be ineffective in another.

We began by canvassing the English Department, inviting members to submit all questions they thought suitable for consideration. A committee was formed to evaluate the submissions and come up with a final candidate. Among the questions we considered—and ultimately rejected—were the following:

Too narrow: Very few workers feel they are being paid enough for the work they do. You might feel that in certain jobs the salaries are too high or too low. Select one kind of work you know a great deal about or have an interest in and write an argument for its pay being either more or less than it currently is.

In the past one hundred years, numerous inventions have changed the way we live. Think about all the different inventions and discoveries that have occurred in the past century. Which one do you wish had never been invented? What, if anything, would you put in its place?

Too vague: Write an essay that describes the meanest thing or the nicest thing you ever did. Clearly explain what you did and why you believe it was mean or nice.

Write an essay about an object you owned in the past or currently own that is especially meaningful to you. Explain clearly why this object is important. You can write about specific incidents that show the object's importance.

Too difficult: Describe one tradition or custom you think ought to be maintained and one that ought to be discarded. Describe each custom or tradition in detail and explain why you have decided it should be retained or rejected.

Write an essay about an event in your life about which your perception has changed with the passage of time. Be sure to carefully explain what happened in the past, how you felt about it then, and how you think about it now.

The prompt we chose was:

> A close friend is considering a move to your community and is expecting to raise a family there. Using specific evidence from your own experience, advise your friend whether or not to make this move. Be sure to include both advantages and disadvantages of growing up in your community. You have 50 minutes in which to write, and your essay should be between 250-300 words. Before your begin to write, take a few minutes to think about what you say. Make sure your essay is clear, well organized, and contains specific examples.

This turned out to be an effective question because everyone could provide at least the bare bones of an answer. We had discussed adopting questions that asked for cultural knowledge—most memorable book, movie, television show—but discarded these as too specific for our needs. Since we were as much interested in *form* as well as its *content*, we required a question whose supporting details could be marshalled rather easily by the writer. We were careful to specifically state the time limitations, and add any necessary writing directions. We kept our instructions to a minimum, but many assessments programs instruct students to write on every other line, in pen rather than pencil, and so forth. Based on the results we obtained from last year's testing, we are considering expanding our directions to specify an audience and provide guidance on planning and revising.

To ensure precise measurement, it is vital to pretest the question under simulated test conditions. What looks great in committee may not always work in the field, where conditions may be very different. We conducted careful pretesting to make sure the question would indeed work—and it did—for everyone was able to provide an answer of some sort. It was from this sample we gathered the papers from which we formulated our model papers and scoring guide.

After reading Peter L. Cooper's *The Assessment of Writing Ability: A Review of Research*, Miles Myers' study mentioned previously, and a variety of lesser-known studies, we decided on the 4 point grading scale as affording greater reliability for its dual reading. We also felt it was best suited to our needs as the easiest to work with,

having the least number of divisions, and no fence-straddling middle ground, such as the "5" score on the 9 point scale. A committee gathered in late spring to sift through the packets of pretested essays for papers that clearly reflected each of the numerical divisions. We also choose "problem" papers: essays that fell between two divisions (a 3/4 split, for example); embodied a characteristic dilemma (such as not addressing the topic); or were bizarre, disturbing, or prejudicial in some manner. Based on these papers we wrote our rubric, containing specific guidelines for assessing papers.

The following is the rubric we developed, based on our goal of assigning no more than 22% (the national average) of our incoming students to English 095.

1 This score represents the weakest papers, marked by serious deficiencies in the conventions of standard written English; lack of organization, details, transitions, repetitious or poor word choice, little or no sentence variety. Essays that fall into this category may be totally off the topic, advance an irrelevant or far-fetched theory, or remain unfinished. Often, there will be marked evidence of a learning disability (reversed letters, etc.) or non-native writer. The community under discussion will not be identified either by name or specific details.

2 The upper part of the lower division papers, these essays also signal their weaknesses by lack of organization, although there is usually evidence of some attempt at description, purpose, and audience. There are still a number of serious writing flaws, especially sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling, but they are less obtrusive than in the weakest papers. The advantages *or* disadvantages of the community under discussion (rarely will both be included) will be listed rather than arranged as to arrive at any conclusion. As with the "1" papers, the community will usually not be named, but its identity can sometimes be inferred by details.

3 The lower part of the upper division papers, the essay that falls within this category will be marked by well-developed paragraphs, good organization, and detail. There is a sense of audience; the writing errors do not obscure meaning. The community will be identified by name and specific reference, but rarely will both advantages and disadvantanges be weighed. The balance is usually heavily tipped in favor of one or the other.

4 These essays are well-organized, carefully thought out, logical. There is a clear sense of purpose and style, words are unusually striking, examples vivid, phrases creative. The community is named; often, historical perspective is provided. Both advantages and disadvantages are used to support a specific thesis; a conclusion is reached.

Most of us found it easiest to quickly assign a paper into either "upper half" (3,4) or "lower half" (1,2) and refine from there. We found each end of the scale easy to identify: the 1's were severely lacking basic writing skills, and the community was often

impossible to identify. Sometimes the entire East Coast was defined as a writer's "community;" other times, a writer proclaimed his community's wonders, but failed to identify any by name.

The 4's—rare birds indeed—stood out for the ease with which they fashioned language and expressed complex ideas. In these instances the community was drawn with vivid and correct detail, the advantages and disadvantages intelligently weighed, the conclusions cogent. The papers that posed the most problems lay in the murky 2/3 zone, for the 2's failed to provide any backing for their ill-arranged assertions, while the 3's drew upon detail but rarely weighed their community's advantages and disadvantages equally. For our purposes, however, this distinction was relatively unimportant, since any paper with a score of 4 or more was placed in English 101. Thus, if the first reader assigned a "2" and the second a "3", the paper would receive a combined total of "5" and clearly be placed in Freshman Composition.

We fashioned this guide by selecting papers from the pretesting that illustrated both specific grading categories and problems, and wrote brief paragraphs that described why each paper received its score. Below are some samples.

Sample A:

Moving to a new neighborhood families have been migrating from neighborhood for centuries. Many people are moving into new neighborhood daily. Moving into my community would be a great move for a young family but, would be at a disadvantage for senior citizen because, style of living, noisy, schools.

This community consists of ninety percent of adult under forty years of age. Most families have very small children some younger. Moving to this community and starting a new family, would be very beneficial for you and the community. The children can grow up and play together, be close friends.

Senior citizens would be at a disadvantage by moving into this community. They will have very few people to associate with. The younger people will have their parties, dancing, and loud music. Most people enjoy associating with their own peers. This type of community I would highly recommend for a friend of mine. The entire family and sometime community go bike riding or roller skating as recreation.

Grade: 2. (Both readers assigned a grade of "1")

Assessment: Paper lacks organization, weak in conventions of standard written English; lacking consistent voice/point of view. The community is never named; advantages and disadvantages blur together; paper fails to hold together.

Sample B

I live in Oceanside and my close friend is considering to move here and raise a family. I told Nancy, my close friend of the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in my community.

The first advantage of living in Oceanside is that the highschool is ranked in the top ten of schools on the island. The children would be getting a very good education that would prepare them for college. Another advantage is that there is a community pool

where the kids could spend the summer. The last advantage is that Oceanside is close to the beaches and it is not a very far distance to travel.

The first disadvantage of living in Oceanside is that it is a very rich community. Many material needs are much more expensive than other cities. Another disavantage to the move to Oceanside is the housing is very expensive. New houses are being built everywhere but not many people can afford them. Another disadvantage is that Oceanside is becoming a very crowded town. There are not many empty lots of land as there used to be. The land is being filled up by shopping centers and everywhere you look another shopping center goes up. The last and largest disadvantage is in the town of Oceanside exists a very enormous dump. This dump is so big people refer to it as Mt. Oceanside. People complain because if the wind is blowing in the right direction you get a horrible smell from the dump. People are afraid with all the dumping in the canals and the dump itself in Oceanside, the pollutants will get into the drinking water and be hazardous to your health.

I think that my close friend Nancy should not make this move because of the reason I stated above. There are too many disadvantages then are advantages and I think Oceanside would be a poor choice.

Grade: 5, (First Reader 1 assigned a "2"; Second Reader, a "3")

Assessment: Paper directly addresses the question from the very beginning, mentioning both "advantages and disadvantages." The writer attempts to direct the paper to a specific audience, as shown through the use of "Nancy." Nonetheless, the examples are not fully fleshed out, and the conclusion fails to follow from the evidence; to many, the information in the 2nd paragraph would outweigh the information in the 3rd. Some sentences are awkward; the paper lacks a mature, sophisticated style.

Sample C:

On the surface, my hometown would appear to be a "good" community-- "good" schools, "good" kids, "good" grades. I was rather content as an elementary school student. A bored, bookish, quiet, intelligent child, I was someone with a potential. Therefore, I was put into my community's advance programs for academics and art. The greatest impact these programs had on me was that I learned how to waste time effectively. I actually *seemed* to be accomplishing something.

Other graduates of these programs have agreed. But perhaps that's changed; sometimes I look around at the kids who are now at the age I was then, and they seem truly brilliant in comparison. Your kids will have the same chances—hopefully, they won't squander them as I did.

As your children grow, they may come to realize that they live in one of the dullest, most middle-class, most conformist comunities around. Yes, there are plenty of trees and the air is fresh enough, but the mind begins to stagnate. This is a great place to make friends and grow up, and then it's a great place to leave. If a person can take his education and the advantages given and make good use of them, he will grow up fine in a community like mine. One simply has to take care to avoid the creeping complacency and rampant pigeonholing of those who don't understand.

As your friend, I am saying that the crime is there, though not very bad; the drugs are there, the problem exists, but if you help your kids through the rough spots, growing up in my town can be good preparation for the real world. All any kids has to do when he has absorbed all he can is be daring enough to leave.

Grade: 7 (First Reader assigned a "4"; Second Reader, a "3")

Assessment: Sophisticated tone, point of view, word choice and sentence structure; unusually mature insight and personal view. Clear sense of audience. Drawbacks: conclusion poorly constructed, as sentences are weak and new material seems irrelevant to entire argument. In addition, paper seems one-sided to some in its point of view. Organization weak in places.

Although studies are continuing, preliminary results indicate that the placement testing appears to have increased student retention as well as created more homogeneous classes (by redirecting the bottom quarter of the class to Developmental English). There may be a causal factor operative here, as more homogeneous classes can encourage students to work at their own pace and allow the instructor greater flexbility with pacing of material.

Based on these preliminary findings, as well as more subjective impressions, we plan this year to draft several different prompts to afford greater variety for raters and lessen any chance of prior student preparation. We have dropped the Regent's grade requirement, as discussed previously, relying instead on the short answer and essay measures. Suggestions have been made regarding easing the paperwork by relaying the student's grade during actual registration via computer. We have discussed the possibility of expanding the placement testing to those non-matriculated students who intend to enroll in introductory English classes.

Louise Erdrich:

A Room of Her Own and a Writer for Our Time

by
Louise A. Mengelkoch

In her penetrating essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes the new and ideal woman writer as one with an androgynous mind, 500 pounds in her pocket and a room of her own with a lock on the door. Louise Erdrich may measure her wealth in dollars, and her room may have a baby and playpen in it somewhere, but her powerful androgynous mind allows her to fit the description of Woolf's ideal.

"A great mind is androgynous," says Woolf. "It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine . . . the androgynous mind is 'resonant and porous; . . . [it] is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided' " (102). She explains herself more fully later in her essay: "some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the act of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated" (108).

Erdrich's voice is an original product of the contemporary feminist movement and ethnic awareness, but free of the cumbersome weight of self-consciousness. This fortunate state of affairs is the serendipitous result of her background, her time and place in history, her sex and of course, the fostering of an innate talent.

Erdrich's fledgling writing talent was lovingly nurtured by her family. Born on July 6, 1954, in Little Falls, Minnesota, of a German father and a Chippewa Indian mother (both teachers), she says of herself in *Contemporary Authors:*

> My father used to give me a nickel for every story I wrote, and my mother wove strips of construction paper together and stapled them into book covers. So at an early age, I felt myself to be a published author earning substantial royalties. Mine were wonderful parents; they got me excited about reading and writing in a lasting way. (146-147)

She spent her childhood in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where her parents taught at the Indian boarding school on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. She was the oldest of seven children, and her parents had ambitions for her. Her mother decided she should go to Dartmouth because they had a native American studies program, and she became one of that school's first female and first actively recruited Indian students. There she met her future husband, Michael Dorris, who at that time was one of her most encouraging teachers.

They are now married and have five children, three adopted by Dorris before he married, and two daughters of their own. Dorris (also a published novelist) has now

become her source of professional criticism and moral support. Every interviewer seems fascinated by their unusual working relationship. This post-modern couple collaborates on everything from their novels to their extensive child-care duties.

"The only way we distinguish who wrote what is by whose name is on the book," Dorris says. "It's hard to tell where one of us begins and the other ends because we throw ourselves into each other's work. One writes, one edits, and then we reverse the procedure." They admit that "they function almost as one person when they work" (Grossman 4C).

How does Erdrich maintain a room of her own in the real world of mortgages and kids?

> "We sit in different rooms," Dorris explained (his is in front, on the second floor, with papers lying everywhere; hers is in back, not quite as messy, with a playpen for the baby), "and put down words on paper, and then after a couple of days we exchange manuscripts and the other person goes to work, suggesting changes and rewordings." (Lundegaard 1F)

(It may be significant that Dorris's novel, *Yellow Raft on Blue Water,* is the only male-authored book on the reading list in a class dealing with women in literature at Bemidji State University.) Dorris and Erdrich could be considered living proof of the accuracy of Virginia Woolf's instincts regarding the artistic superiority (not to mention excitement) of male and female minds working together, and also the need for uniting the feminine and masculine in the mind of each individual artist.

Erdrich's voice benefits from her curious status as both an outsider and an insider to several realities: she is very much a beautiful woman who obviously enjoys her feminity, yet feels no need to either assert a strident and political brand of feminism or discount her own talent because of her husband's and father's support. As Woolf puts it so gracefully, in describing the qualities of the post-feminist writer in relation to a contemporary of her own: "she wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself" (Woolf 96).

Erdrich is steeped in Chippewa culture, including religion (her maternal grandfather observed both Catholicism and traditional Chippewa religion); and yet her German father makes her an outsider to that experience. One interviewer addresses that issue in her own words and includes quotable phrases from Erdrich herself:

> Erdrich (like Dorris) had a "gothic-Catholic childhood," but never thought about "what was native American and what wasn't. I think that's the way a lot of people who are of mixed descent regard their lives — you're just a combination of different backgrounds" (Berkley 58).
>
> Erdrich had to work on finding her authentic multi-ethnic voice:
>
> > . . . she had not written fiction about her Indian background before this novel (*Love Medicine*). "I tried to write about it," she said, "but I just wasn't able to address that part of me, to speak in that voice. It was difficult. It forced me to come to terms with who I am." (Portales 6 VII)

She also says something revealing about both her ethnic identification and the power of male support in the lives of female artists. "*Love Medicine* is so weighted toward my mother's side of my family that I feel as if I abandoned my father" (Watkins 6). But one reviewer points out that "all Americans, native or immigrant, live along ethnic interfaces," and that Erdrich's strength lies in the fact that "she encourages us to imagine them [Native Americans] neither in isolation from other groups nor contrasted reductively against stereotyped abstractions . . . " (Kroeber 3). It seems likely that not only have Erdrich and Dorris achieved a marriage of the male and female mind for creative purposes, but that her Indian/German and his Indian/Irish influences have enabled them to speak to the sometimes discordant, sometimes humorous, sometimes painful common American experience of strong but confused racial and cultural identity.

This is a woman who could lay claim to more than her proper share of rage by virtue of both her sex and race; but she has either worked through that stage or has not had to in her own life because of her fortunate set of personal circumstances and her place in history. Consider the way in which Erdrich herself assesses the tendency toward stereotyping in fellow North Dakotan Louis L'Amour's novels;

> Mr. L'Amour's treatment of Itchakomi reflects his portrayal of native Americans and women in general. He is absolutely scrupulous and applies stereotypes with no reference to ethnic origin or gender. His stories are about heroes and villains. Accordingly, his Indians are either noble savages or downright sidewinders. But so are his Spaniards, ranchers, gamblers and gunslingers. His women are refreshingly gutsy, although they are long-lashed, gorgeous, slim and intoxicatingly beautiful, bold, intelligent and well versed in the lore or survival. (Erdrich, NYT Book Review 42)

With an enviable style and grace, Erdrich makes us aware that she is aware of the inherently racist and sexist nature of L'Amour's books; however, she allows us to smile about it and still read L'Amour without guilt or shame. This ability to enter into another's sensibilities while remaining objective about them characterizes all aspects of her writer's vision.

Erdrich claims to have been influenced by Meridel LeSueur, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Toni Morrison; and says she tries to read every Minnesota author, especially Patricia Hampl, Linda Hogan and Carol Bly (Lundegaard 10F). Her style and voice have been compared to that of William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Alice Walker, Joyce Carol Oates, Mark Helprin, Gunter Grass and even Herman Melville. One more could be added to the list — Minnesota's own Garrison Keillor — for they both have the ability to lovingly and faithfully recreate an obscure and unique subculture with sharp observation instead of sentiment, so that the particular becomes universally appreciated.

Another source of her strength lies in her belief in the supremacy of classic comedy over tragedy. Like Gerald Vizenor, another mixed blood Chippewa writer from Minnesota, she asserts the dignified triumph and dramatic power of humor. Her stories and poems allow no tears without hope, an incredible feat when one considers the burden of history she brings to her art. Vizenor maintains that comedy, when done well, is a stronger and greater art form than is tragedy. He uses the device of the traditional Indian trickster to give the reader the necessary distance to appreciate the humor inherent in potentially humorless situations and characters: Erdrich uses the polyphonic

voice. It is impossible to not appreciate the comic possibilities when forced to deal with multiple points of view.

In Erdrich's work, it is possible to see the characteristics of her post-feminist, androgynous, multi-ethnic and comic voice. Her first published volume is *Jacklight*, a book of poetry. One reviewer, referring to this book, claims she "does not shrink from the ugly or the difficult," and indeed she doesn't (Buchwald 96). One of the liveliest selections, "Family Reunion," illustrates the point. It looks lovingly and yet mercilessly at much of what the mainstream culture despises about the American Indian: their cars, dogs, drinking and violence. In the story the narrator travels to a reunion with her uncle Ray in "Ray's third new car in half as many years:" she remembers other reunions at which Ray' s hand strayed inside her little girl's dress and where "the road ends in a yard full of dogs;" she recalls reunions at which "Ray dances an old woman up in his arms" or catches a snapping turtle and "pries the beak open and shoves/down a cherry bomb," reunions at which, after drinking up the case of Blue Ribbons "the boys and their old man fold him into the car/where he curls around his bad heart, hearing how it knocks/and rattles at the bars of his ribs to break out;" and as the narrator drives him away, "Uncle Ray/sings an old song to the body that pulls him/toward home" (*Jacklight* 9-10).

It is a credit to Erdrich's talent that she has not been subjected to greater criticism by feminist and native American writers and critics. Uncle Ray is a man feminists love to hate and respectable Indians hate to love; but Erdrich manages to show him, warts and all, and evidence a fondness for him, based not on the sentimentality of family or race, but his humanness and the creative voice trapped inside his old, defective heart. And above all, one can read "Family Reunion" and laugh with thoughtfulness at the image of Ray dancing with the old woman; at Ray saying "them's Indian dogs . . . lookit how they know me"; at Ray singing in the car (*Jacklight* 10).

In "Dear John Wayne," Erdrich comes as close as she ever does to stridency; and even then it's measured and tempered. The scene is a group of Indians sitting on the hood of a Pontiac at a drive-in movie on a hot August night. They watch "the settlers/who die beautifully, tumbling like dust weeds/into the history that brought us all here/together . . . " (*Jacklight* 12), Even through the well-justified rage, one can sense her ambiguity. John Wayne, of course, symbolizes the white man taking everything from the Indian; and her most disturbing image springs from that notion: "even his disease was the idea of taking everything./Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting out of their skin" (*Jacklight* 13). But she allows very little wallowing in either sorrow or revenge, for when the movie is over, "we get into the car/scratching our mosquito bites, speechless and small/as people are when the movie is done./We are back in our skins" (*Jacklight* 13). Once again her tolerance for the man dominates over her contempt for the stereotype.

Jacklight gives an early indication of her novelist's polyphonic, androgynous voice. The characters are diverse and memorable: they range from Uncle Ray to a female butcher; from Leonard (in "Leonard Commits Redeeming Adulteries with all the Women in Town" and "Leonard Refuses to Atone") (*Jacklight* 51-52) to Step-and-a-half Waleski (a woman), "Scavenger, bone picker" (*Jacklight* 50); to the lady in the pink

Mustang with "the body disposable as cups" (*Jacklight* 17). These characters are fully formed, not convenient vehicles for her own personal vision or ideology. They demand that their stories be told, and that is what Erdrich does in her novels, *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*.

Love Medicine first established Erdrich as a major contemporary writer — it was the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1984. According to one enthusiastic critic, "Reading *Love Medicine* is . . . like being drawn into a boisterous family reunion in a crowded kitchen" (Sanders 7). The fourteen chapters are narrated by seven characters, male and female, young and old, Indian and half-breeds. The book opens with the story of June Kashpaw, who dies in an Easter snowstorm attempting to walk back to her home on the reservation after getting drunk in a bar. The next chapter is narrated by Albertine Johnson, a young half-breed who lives off the reservation and goes to nursing school. Erdrich has been criticized for not developing this character, but it may be possible that Erdrich sees Albertine as a way of easing the uninitiated into the confusing and foreign world of the modern-day Indian reservation, June's funeral and the reunion that follows is the springboard for the stories of the other five, all of whom it seems, are related to one another, but none of them is aware of the fact.

But discovering one's identity is central to the theme of the novel. The characters are obsessed with knowing who they belong to, and who they are. This may be a concern close to the author's heart, for she labors under the burden of several compelling but arguably outmoded ethnic and cultural and religious identities. But Erdrich never allows her own struggles to overshadow the voices of her characters. *Love Medicine* is a novel first and last about relations and relationships, and the drama and pain and high comedy we bring into our lives because of them.

A feminist with an agenda would not have done what Erdrich did in this novel: she tells the story of Nector Kashpaw, who rapes fourteen-year-old Marie Lazarre and later marries her, but carries on a decades-long affair with his first love, Lulu Lamartine, who is also married. Each of these three characters narrates at least one chapter, and all three are very human, likeable and strong. Nector, as the philandering male, comes off no better or worse than the women. In fact, Erdrich makes it possible for us to actually sympathize with the comic and dramatic struggle within Nector that has caused him to lead a double life. There are Marie's expectations;

> For a time there, Marie only wanted one thing that I could give her. Not love, not sex, just a wringer washer. I didn't blame her . . . (102)

There is his frustration with continually finding one more baby in his bed:

> Like the butter, there was a surplus of babies on the reservation, and we seemed to get unexpected shipments from time to time. (100)

There is his obsession with Lulu. He says;

> I do not compare her with Marie. I would not do that. But the way I ache for Lulu, suddenly, is terrible and sad. (97)

Erdrich allows the men to be every bit as sensitive as the women, and her writing is richer for it. It could be argued that her fairness to all characters, even those most repugnant to modern women, is her greatest feminist asset.

The title chapter in this novel nicely illustrates Erdrich's unique sensitivity as an insider and an outsider in the way it addresses Christianity and traditional Chippewa religion. Lipsha Morrissey, Nector Kashpaw's grandson, expatiates on his own struggles with religion by narrating a hilarious story about his senile grandpa screaming out to God during mass, "HAIL MARIE FULL OF GRACE," because Grandpa claims that God is going deaf (194). Lipsha compares the God of Christianity to the Chippewa Gods [sic] and admits that the latter had been known to stoop to such behavior as ravishing young girls; but he says thoughtfully; "Our Gods aren't perfect, is what I'm saying, but at least they come around. They'll do a favor if you ask them right. You don't have to yell" (195). With an irresistible and self-effacing humor, the author's voice conveys all the real pathos of the struggles faced by an Indian who is very much immersed in and yet outside of two conflicting religious convictions. As one critic so succinctly said, "It [*Love Medicine*] takes what might be tragic or solemn in a more conventional mode of telling and makes it comically human (even slapstick), sassy, ironic, and ultimately insightful . . . " (Sands 19-20).

Erdrich's second novel, *The Beet Queen*, is set off the reservation, and the reader is introduced to more non-Indian characters than in her previous work, a fact for which she has been criticized. In a scathing review of the book, Leslie Marmon Silko claims that Erdrich's North Dakota "is an oddly rarified place in which the individual's own psyche, not racism or poverty, accounts for all conflict and tension" (Silko 195). Such a criticism may be regarded as a sign of Erdrich's strength, for Silko loses her argument out of hand by insisting on the word "all." It's too sweeping a generalization for any observant reader to accept, although it is true that much of the conflict and tension arise from the individual characters's own psyches, and, one would add, their personal circumstances other than race or economic status - from their "private dreams of unconditional family love" (Kakutani C21). What Silko may find disappointing is the fact that Erdrich makes no obvious use of her opportunity to politicize the art form. One could assert that this makes for better art, and that her work will outlast those ethnic writers who belabor race issues; for once American culture comes to terms with racism (and sexism), those writings that serve only to further political ends will lose their power.

The racism and poverty are there in *The Beet Queen*, and are not ignored. Erdrich movingly writes about what Adelaide (a character of uncertain ethnic identity) faces as the mother of two children and an infant in Depression-era Minneapolis, with no husband, no money and no prospect of gainful employment. She flies off with a stunt pilot at a carnival out of desperation, leaving her children gazing after her. References to racism surface regularly, and the dialogue conveys so much more than any didacticism could. Russell Kashpaw, a mostly-silent Indian from the nearby reservation, at one point openly gloats over some bad luck experienced by Sita Kozka, a sadly pathetic character: "Sita had made fun of him for being an Indian, and he is always glad to see her taken down a notch" (40). What Erdrich does not do, and which could annoy some critics, is give the racial (or sexual) issue more than its due, or portray members of one ethnic group (or sex) as uniformly good or bad as individuals. Again, this will only add to the lasting quality of her work, rather than detract from it.

In *The Beet Queen*, she writes with sympathy and humor about a range of characters: a small-town homosexual who belongs to the boosters club, a Polish blonde compulsive pill-popper, a halfbreed juvenile delinquent girl. And she allows them all to have dreams, power and vices. Interestingly enough, Robert Bly points out that "*The Beet Queen* brings forward four main female characters who differ greatly in their responses to society's demands on them;" and that the men in the book do not have any channel to inner power as clear as Mary's and Celestine's (Bly 15). This is probably true: the female characters in this novel happen to be more fully developed and more powerful than the male characters. But this supports the notion that her voice is androgynous, that she speaks as a unique outsider. The women have a certain power, it is true, but the character of Wallace, the middle-aged homosexual, possesses something else usually found only in female characters: a genuine nurturing instinct. He helps "birth" Dot in his living room, and from that moment on, he displays the effects of a bonding one usually associates with women.

Erdrich is a talent to be reckoned with, and there is no doubt she will produce more and even better writing in the future. As a woman and a native American, she has the opportunity to speak for and to segments of the population who have previously not been heard from or spoken to. Erdrich, a post-feminist and post-ethnic writer, seems willing and able to create a new androgynous way of thinking and writing that is not only accessible, but irresistible. Her particular strength is the fact that she points the way to a post-feminist vision: that she measures a person with her heart, not against an ideology or political agenda.

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Beyond "Trends" In English And Language Arts Instruction

by
Charles Suhor

Trends. You hear about them all the time, reported in professional journals, outlined and implemented in inservice sessions, smothered in jargon or laid out in terms that seem to be, indeed usually are, deceptively simple.

The problem is, treatment of educational trends is seldom fine-grained enough to communicate the complexity of the issues involved. Worse yet, by the time a clear picture of a trend has been formulated, a new development is often afoot, challenging the assumptions of the trend-turned-cliche and offering alternative views which, in time, might alter your view of the trend in important ways.

I won't try to solve those dilemmas in this article. What I will do, though, is point out some new wrinkles in trends that are now well established in the professional literature of English and language arts. I'll give a capsule explanation of recent developments, using deceptively simple language and italicizing key phrases in the text, but citing sources numerous and varied enough to suggest the complex dimensions of the topics. Virtually all citations will be from 1986 to the present. All that objectivity is tempered by the fact that any quick view of the educational horizon is bound to reflect the summarizer's perceptions of what those indistinct shapes on the horizon really are. But no more caveats. Here are some beyond-the-trend analyses of movements and counter-movements in composition, reading, literature, and oral language.

Composition

The *writing process movement*, a major trend of the 1980s, has recently come under scrutiny that has resulted in some useful clarifications and refinements. Based on classroom applications of ideas from influential theorists like Flower and Hayes (1980), writing process instruction has been variously described as rigidly sequential steps of prewriting/drafting/revising on one hand, and as undisciplined "free writing" on the other (Rodrigues, 1985, Kucer, 1987).

Recent studies suggest that modified process approaches are needed. A central point in Hillocks' (1986) meta-analysis of writing research is that *"natural process instruction,"* which underplays structured assignments and teacher intervention, is *less effective than* instruction that combines theory with more clearly defined goals and procedures.

The teacher's role in process instruction is also discussed in *Writing Report Card* (Applebee, et a1., 1986), the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress Report. The NAEP report found that, although teachers who use process methods do

not presently seem to be producing better writers, students who employ process techniques such as planning, revising, and editing (regardless of their teachers' instructional methods) do indeed produce superior written products.

The NAEP report correctly notes that the process movement is still young as instructional movements go. But further development in crucial related areas—such as *ways of testing writing* and *evaluation of the teaching of writing* (Piazza and Wallat, 1987)—will also be required if the writing reform trend is to yield enduring results.

The role of computers in writing instruction is another issue that has taken some new turns. After an early flurry of predictions about revolutionary effects of computers (e.g., Cleaver, 1981; Zakariya, 1982), educators have settled down to deal with some fundamental issues—notably, the genuine utility of computers in teaching revision and the need to focus on keyboarding as an essential skill. While various modes of Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) still hold promise for the teaching of writing (Hubert, 1985), *the teaching of revision via word processors* has emerged as the major use of computers in English. Word processing software materials such as Bank Street Writer and WordPerfect permit students to do extensive revision without laborious hand-copying — and intensive skill in revision is clearly a major goal of composition instruction (Brown, 1985; Wheeler, 1985).

Concerns about revising by computer are premature, though, if students lack *sufficient keyboarding skills* to compose on the computer. Koenke (1987) notes that some useful studies are appearing on several aspects of keyboarding—e.g., the feasibility of teaching keyboard skills to elementary students (Jackson and Berg, 1986; Warwood, 1985); rates of typing speed needed to avoid student frustration in composing via keyboard (Cox and Donin, 1986, Wetzel, 1985); organization of instruction in keyboarding, including time span of instructional sessions and number of sessions required (Jackson and Berg; Warwood; Wetzel); quality of computer software for keyboard instruction (Nolf and Weaver, 1986). At least two states, Alaska (Parston, 1985) and New York (1986) have published curriculum guides for teaching of keyboarding in the total composition program.

Teaching composition to basic writers—i.e., those who are markedly deficient in writing performance—is a matter of increasing urgency at all grade levels. The aforementioned NAEP study confirms past research indicating that ineffective writers come disproportionately from disadvantaged urban communities and Black and Hispanic populations. A NAEP report on students' problems with usage and mechanics (Applebee, et al., 1987) supports the notion that diagnosis and prescription based on actual student errors are superior to workbook sequences and global attacks on such problems with students of all ability levels. Rubin and Dodd's (1987) *prewriting oral language exercises* provide useful directions for teaching basic writers, adding to an increasing repertoire of language-based techniques— e.g., *sentence combining* (Strong, 1986) and *language/thinking skills materias* (Stanford and Stanford, 1985). It is important to add, underlining Rubin's point, that there is *increasing skepticism about materials and* techniques specially "simplified" for basic writers. Many of the techniques that promote higher order thinking in general and thoughtful writing in particular are applicable to students of varying backgrounds and ability levels (Marzano, et al., 1988).

Finally, the increasing interest in the *teaching of expository writing in the elementary school* is worth noting. (See, e.g., McLaughlin, 1987). This is traceable in part to the well documented neglect of expository writing instruction in elementary schools (Applebee, et al., 1986) and to increased general interest in the study of nonfictional prose as a literary genre (Commission on Composition, 1987).

Reading

Two major issues in reading instruction are the teaching of vocabulary and the use of basal readers. Considerable ferment exists both in practice and research on *ways to improve reading comprehension through vocabulary instruction*. Traditional approaches such as learning definitions, examining prefixes/suffixes/root words, and using context clues have produced little measurable improvement in reading comprehension. Although students who read extensively can, indeed, infer word meanings from context clues, teaching the use of context clues in itself does not affect reading comprehension for most students (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; Schatz and Baldwin, 1986).

Effective vocabulary instruction is multi-faceted, *stressing relationships among words to assure deeper processing of underlying concepts*. Prereading vocabulary study should not deal with a mere list of unfamiliar words from the text to be studied. Since students can comprehend texts without understanding every unfamiliar word, helpful prereading vocabulary study focuses on clusters of words related to the main theme or topic of the text (Nagy, 1988). Meaningful relationships among words can also be taught through *techniques involving graphic arrays*—e.g., semantic maps (Heimlich and Pittelman, 1986), semantic feature analysis (Anders and Bos, 1986), and hierarchical arrays (Kirby and Kuykendall, 1985). *Linking new words to students' prior knowledge* (schemata) is another powerful aspect of many of these integrative techniques for teaching vocabulary (Ogle, 1986).

These developments in research and practice in vocabulary instruction and reading have only begun to appear in teacher training programs and instructional materials. Moreover, Stahl and Fairbanks' (1986) meta-analysis points to the *greater complexity of effective vocabulary teaching which includes orchestrations of old and new techniques*. Good instruction is explicit and intensive, yet the teacher also helps to guide the student's extensive reading and seizes opportunities for incidental instruction. (See the special *Journal of Reading* issue on vocabulary, April 1986, v29, n7.)

The *role of basal readers* in American education has been debated for decades. (See, e.g., Stone, 1922.) But only in recent years have formidable scholarly studies and political forces been marshalled in efforts to effect fundamental changes in basals. The highly influential volume *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, et al., 1985) acknowledges systematic alternatives to the use of basals such as *whole language instruction* and *emergent literacy* approaches but essentially recommends more thoughtful use of basal texts and calls for improvement of future materials. (For alternative views see Davidson, 1988.)

Cassidy (1987) holds that publishers have become more responsive to the legitimate criticisms of basal readers and are rapidly improving their technical aspects and literary

quality. Others, though, see changes as minimal and regard the basal textbook as a continuing obstacle to creative reading instruction. They view basals as part of an entrenched system, driven more by market research than by concern for the learner (Goodman, et al., 1988).

Although the controversy over basals sometimes takes on a doctrinal cast, reflecting what Dillon (1985) has called a "hardening of the ideologies," eclectic approaches have been advanced. (A many-sided discussion of basal readers appears in the January 1987 *Elementary School Journal*, v87, n3.) Consistent with recommendations in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, many reading specialists hold that *literature-based reading instruction* can compensate for the overemphasis on skills found in many basal-dominated programs. Higgins (1986) notes that students who have read widely in non-basal materials in early grades are less perplexed by more complex literary narratives and abstract content area texts when they enter upper elementary grades.

In fact, literature-based language arts instruction has received increasing attention at upper elementary levels (Poole and Poole, 1986, Cummings, 1987) and secondary levels (Myers and Hughes, 1985), quite aside from debates over basals. The profession appears to be reacting to a decade of emphasis on composition by giving renewed attention to literature study and to the use of trade books in language arts programs (Commission on Literature, 1986; Fielding, et al., in press). *Innovative reading tests*, moreover, are focusing on self-contained selections rather than disjointed snippets in statewide assessment programs (Valenica, 1987; Peters, and Wixson, 1987).

Literature

Few aspects of literature instruction have generated more comment than the *teaching of values through literature* and the related question of *content of the literature program*. Leaders from numerous organizations and agencies—among them, former Secretary of Education William Bennett (1986), Lynne Cheney of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1987), Nancy McHugh of the National Council of Teachers of English (1987), David Hornbeck of the the American Association of School Administrators ("Values Education Belongs in Schools," 1987), the American Federation of Teachers and the Educational Excellence Network (Connell, 1987), and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Panel on Religion in the Classroom (1987)—have commented on various aspects of teaching values.

While generally agreeing that public schools should not be advocates of particular belief systems, these educational leaders typically argue for the teaching of a common store of insights and values—variously called cultural, civic, moral, and intellectual values—that make our experience as a people cohesive. They note that history and literature are the subject areas that carry our cultural heritage forward in the most explicit ways.

Literature is a crucial discipline because values are embedded in complex, often ambiguous ways in literary works (DeMott, 1984). Some critics (e.g., Ryan, 1986) believe that English teachers seriously neglected analysis of values in the 1960s and 1970s, turning to skills instruction or stressing subjectivity in discussions of the moral dimensions of literary works. Others (e.g., Howell, 1987) hold that English teachers have continued the longstanding tradition of discussing moral and philosophical aspects of literary works.

The *absence of empirical data about whether and how values are discussed in literature instruction* does not make the question any less significant. The problem is of immense importance both to English educators and the public, especially in its most controversial aspect—viz., the teaching of religious values. Studies by Vitz (1985) and Bryan (1985) and critiques from groups as diverse as People for the American Way (Davis, 1986) and the Americans United Research Foundation (cited in McDermott, 1986) have revealed neglect of traditional values and religious topics in social studies, English, and reading textbooks.

The teaching of literature will no doubt be affected by the outcome of important *litigation centering on several aspects of religious values in instructional materials, student reading lists and school library books*. Among the issues are First Amendment rights, separation of church and state, secular humanism as a belief system, and the parents' right to demand alternative texts when existing ones run counter to their beliefs. (Details of recent suits, decisions, and appeals in recent cases—e.g., Mobile, Alabama, Hawkins County Public Schools, Tennessee, and Panama City, Florida—cannot be provided in this brief summary.)

Discussions of values take on a different cast in the debate over *content of the literature program* within the profession. There, the decades-old debate about the *teaching of classics and the teaching of popular literature* continues, expressed most recently in terms of content-based instruction and process-based instruction (Sims, 1986, Suhor 1988).

Advocates of process instruction have been increasingly challenged, e.g., by Finn ("In Box," 1987), to articulate the what of language arts instruction as well as the how. It is not sufficient to argue that process is the primary aspect of language arts; hard questions remain concerning what literature should be taught, and to whom. Those who favor a traditional canon of great works have been supported in the 1980s by numerous programs and texts. The *Paideia Proposal* (Adler, 1982) and *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) have been followed by the widely publicized texts by Bloom (1987), Cheney (1987), and Ravitch and Finn (1987). Indeed, classroom teachers seem to be gravitating towards exchange of ideas on teaching familiar literary classics (e.g., Carter, 1985).

At the same time, champions of the *increasing repertoire of young adult materials* continue to affirm its value for promoting enjoyment of literature, stimulating class discussion and writing, and even teaching difficult literary concepts (e.g., Amidon, 1987). Curriculum leaders in some states and school districts (e.g., California State Department of Education, 1987) have taken a middle ground, defining reading goals in terms of process while offering lengthy lists of literary works as suggested materials for classroom study.

Hirsch's (1987) call for *development of cultural literacy* brings a different dimension to the debate over content. His views relate to many disciplines, but he draws from schema theory, and includes numerous literary items on his list of important cultural information. Cultural literacy (which in Hirsch's system involves an"extensive

curriculum"—the learning of numerous items of information that help readers to understand allusions in texts written for general, literate audiences) has been justifiably attacked as trivial, elitist, and psychologically and pedagogically unsound (Tchudi, 1987). But Albert Shanker (1987) of the American Federation of teachers is among those urging serious consideration of cultural literacy, and general interest in the idea is presently strong.

Speaking and Listening

The phrase *guided oral discourse in the classroom* is a convenient umbrella for numerous techniques that hold promise for significantly strengthening classroom interaction (Marzano, et al., 1988). Variously called "supervised conversation" (Thaiss, 1986), "thinking together" (Staton, 1983), "dialogical instruction" (Paul, 1986), and "problem centered discussion" (Hillocks, 1986), the purposeful use of discussion to generate and intensify understanding has gained considerable support.

In recent years scholars have validated what many English and language arts teachers have long contended—that classroom discussion need not be mere recitation on one hand, or free-floating chatter on the other. Of course, there is a powerful historical tradition of concern with oral discourse, from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary rhetorical theory, and psychologists such as Vygotsky and Piaget have noted the centrality of oral discourse in children's cognitive growth. Recent studies have built upon those traditions and modified them by providing a *growing research base for oral discourse in the classroom*, and by suggesting *methods that effectively promote learning through oral languge.*

Among the techniques for guided oral discourse are reciprocal teaching, scaffolding, inquiry teaching, and cooperative learning. *Usable at various grade levels and across the curriculum*, these methods combine verbal fluency with educational purpose as students negotiate content-relevant ideas. In *reciprocal teaching* (Palincsar and Brown, 1985) students are involved in summarizing, question-generating, clarifying, and predicting as they read texts or observe phenomena. The teacher and students share responsibility for the verbal exchanges, providing cognitively focused discussions that do not have the restrictiveness of recitation. Lehr (1985) describes *instructional scaffolding* as a widely applicable technique in which the teacher initially provides a relatively high degree of verbal structure—a "scaffold" that assures a firm grounding for student discourse—then gradually withdraws the structure as students become increasingly capable of building conceptual edifices on their own.

Inquiry teaching long known as an interactive method in social studies and science instruction, has been further developed in terms of oral discourse strategies. Hillocks (1986) reports that inquiry methods—teacher and student question/discussion- generating techniques—underlie numerous studies in which students show writing improvement. Collins (1986) shows how teachers use inquiry techniques flexibly during the course of a discussion, helping students to become aware of misconceptions, highlighting what is known and not known, and setting future directions for class activities. *Cooperative learning* is another potent language-for-learning technique usable in many disciplines. Although cooperative learning activities embrace much more than oral discourse, guided classroom interaction is central. Johnson and others (1984) note that focused group discussion in cooperative learning has both social, value-shaping outcomes and cognitive, meaning-making benefits.

The emphasis on complex, elaborated oral response in recent research seems especially promising. The techniques described above resist reduction to rigid sequences or formulas—a common problem, as Gibboney (1987) has accurately stated, with the popular Madeline Hunter model. (See the February, 1987 issue of *Educational Leadership* v.44, no. 5, for varied views on Hunter's approach.) Paul (1986) further observes that classroom dialoguing develops such traits as fairmindedness, intellectual empathy, commitment to reasoned analysis, and tolerance of divergent viewpoints. Dialoguing often includes but goes beyond typical Socratic questioning, in which the teacher asks penetrating "thought questions" to elicit discussion. The new interactive techniques are geared towards helping students to *pose* thoughtful questions as well as respond to such questions.

The *"English First"* movement (sometimes called "English Only" or "U.S. English") is by far the most widely publicized language issue in recent years. California's Proposition 63, approved by voters in that state in 1986, has been followed by "English Only" bills in 37 states (Crawford, 1987). An amendment to the U.S. Constitution, proposing that English be declared the official language, has been advanced (U.S. Congress). Popular and scholarly periodicals are publishing position statements and reports on the movement (e.g., Hayakawa, 1987; Judd, 1987; "Opinion," in *USA Today*, 1987). Numerous organizations have taken stands on the issue. The pamphlet "In Defense of Our Common Language" emanates from the group known as U.S. English (n.d.) for example; and the "Epic Events" Newsletter (1988) reports thirty professional associations opposed to the "English first" concept.

Interestingly, many apparent antagonists agree that non-native speakers should be taught English, and that their native languages and cultures should not be denigrated. Disputes center on matters such as the good or ill effects of requiring English to be used in various spheres of public communication; the political motives of those arguing on both sides of the question; and the particular educational and social initiatives that might best promote literacy in English for all of our citizens.

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REVIEWS

The Wrestling Match and *The Moonlight Bride*

Buchi Emecheta

New York, George Braziller, 1983.

by
David Rathbun

For many progressive thinkers and policy-makers in the field of education, the time has come—and is long overdue—to expand the study of Third World history, culture, and literature in elementary and secondary curriculum. A report released last summer by a Minnesota State Board of Education task force urged that school districts be required to include literature from a variety of cultures in their language arts curriculum. Some districts have already done so, and they are also doing better teaching American Indian and Black literature. But even if local districts fail to take a leadership role in this area, teachers and individual schools can assume the initiative. Some of the finest literature in the world today comes from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian woman and resident of London since 1962, would be an excellent addition to a secondary language arts classroom.

Emecheta has emerged over the past fifteen years as a significant post-colonial novelist, and one of the few published women writers from Africa. She is often categorized as a feminist writer because her novels frequently involve African women in conflict with men and a traditional social role of subservience. Her 1975 novel, *Second-Class Citizen*, based closely on Emecheta's own experiences, portrays a young Nigerian woman growing into a new self-realization of her rights and power as a woman. Although England is now her home, most of Emecheta's novels take place in Nigeria, and in such novels as *In the Ditch* (1972), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), she continues to explore the complex interrelationship of women and an African society still struggling with independence in the aftermath of British colonialism.

The above novels are perhaps most appropriate for students in the advanced level or enriched language arts courses. However, Buchi Emecheta has also written books specifically for a teenage audience, among which are *The Wrestling Match* and *The Moonlight Bride*. These brief novels (both less than 100 pages) focus on young people coming of age amid occasional conflicts with the older generation in rural Nigeria. The subservience of women in Nigerian society is clearly an aspect of everyday life in these works, but exists only as a backdrop for the story development.

The Wrestling Match centers on a young man and his companions at odds with the elders of the community. Okei ('male' in Ibo) is a 16 year-old orphan living with his uncle, Obi Agiliga, an important elder in the village of Igbuno. Okei and his friends Nduka and Uche are part of the Umu aya Biafra, children who were born during the civil war in Nigeria. The war lasted from 1964 to 1967 and over a million lives were lost. Like teenagers everywhere, Okei is bored and restless, but so much so that he often wishes he had died along with his parents. Okei, Nduka, and Uche are part of a young generation benefitting from a free education, but are looked down upon by most adults because they are 'idle' and do not work on the farms like the uneducated youth. In fact, Okei and his age-mates are even falsely accused of stealing from the old, and people are ready to believe it.

But Okei hears that the boys from a neighboring village, Akpei, have been the thieves all along. Rumors about the bad behavior of the boys in the two villages have been going back and forth between Igbuno and Akpei, most happily spread by the girls and uninvestigated by the elders. Perturbed by the unproductive activity of their young men, elders from Igbuno and Akpei convene a summit to take some action. They recall that their fathers used to say "that when young men are idle the elders must give them something to worry about . . . By the time they have finished solving that problem they will be wiser (14). The old conspire against the young, and the action of the novel gradually reveals how the young will achieve greater wisdom.

As the rumors spread by the local girls continue to offend Okei and his mates, an outraged Okei suggests that the young men of Igbuno challenge the young men of Akpei to a wrestling match. The elders are confident that this will prove to be a learning experience for the youth of both villages. As Okei and his friends plan the meeting with their age-group to discuss the wrestling challenge, they are confronted with a problem that troubles Africa today: traditional vs. modern ways. Nduka is responsbile for announcing the age-group meeting, and he wonders if he should use the traditional gong or make written notices. Since the age-group is made up of both educated and illiterate young people, he chooses the safest route and does both. As the boys begin their plans for the wrestling match in the next few days, the girls taunt them with songs of native fables that speak of the guilty ones losing fights.

But the results of this teasing soon take a nasty turn. One of the more sophisticated rumor-spreading girls, seventeen-year-old Kwutelu, returns home and repeats to her father the empty threat of Okpei that he would burglarize her compound. Her father, Obi Uju, takes it seriously and goes to bed angry. He is later awakened by a sound near his bedroom door and sees a human figure moving about. Imagining it to be the burglar his daughter warned him about, he attacks the shape with a cutlass. Unfortunately, the intruder turns out to be his own daughter and he discovers that he has severed one of her ears. Young and old are now responsible for this escalating antagonism within the community, and because of this incident and others the young people of Igbuno begin to work together to achieve victory over Akpei.

As leader of his age-group, Okei is expected to be the best wrestler and main hope for victory. But his peers soon discover he has little know-how in wrestling. One of the uneducated farm boys suggests that Okei ask his uncle for help. Although Obi Agiliga was a champion wrestler, Okei wants this war to be his own. Nduka, though, is learning what the elders had hoped: "A village that has no elders has no future. I hope we will always have elders"(54). But Okei soon understands that he must turn to his uncle for help. The narrator reveals Okei's new self-knowledge—"But until now it had never occurred to him that he and his age-mates could make mistakes at all"(55)—and gone is Okei's arrogant self-importance that the elders detected and despised.

Okei begins training with his uncle. He learns effective moves and traps along with traditional dances and songs. The community has moved closer together, and Okei receives admiration from the younger children. The girls are now singing songs of praise rather than condemnation. When the day of the match arrives, Okei is armed with traditional good luck charms (crocodile teeth to prevent loss of breath) and the wrestling tactics acquired from his uncle. Okei wins, loses, then wins again. Suddenly a spectator from Akpei shouts an abuse at Kwutelu about her artificial ear and a huge melee results. The elders break it up and Okei's uncle delivers a moral of the story, which is also the consummation of the adults' conspiracy: "And in all good fights, just like wars, nobody wins. You were all hurt and humiliated. I am sure you will always remember this day"(73).

The young readers who desire a clear-cut, winner-take-all ending may be disappointed. And they may also bristle at the "I told you so" tone of the elders. Yet a significant victory can be clearly found in the personal growth of Okei and the other young men and women of Igbuno who matured and pulled together for a cause.

If *The Wrestling Match* appeals more to male readers (boys as star athletes, girls as cheerleaders), one can turn to *The Moonlight Bride* to find female characters who are much more than a supporting cast for dynamic male action. Since *The Moonlight Bride* is narrated by a young girl, the reader gets more easily involved with her life than is the case with Okei in *The Wrestling Match*. The story revolves around the twelve-year-old narrator, Ngbeke, and her older cousin, Ogoli. In the opening pages Ogoli shares a secret with Ngbeke—a moonlight bride is coming to their village. As the title suggests, a moonlight bride is one who arrives in the village of her husband-to-be in moonlight, and various secrecies and adventures are attached to them (some were even kidnapped if the elders suspected she would not approve of the husband arranged for her). The two girls are very excited about this unprecedented event in their lifetime.

Reminiscient of the oaths between Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, Ngbeke and Ogoli swear to each other that they will tell no one about the moonlight bride, and they make plans to secretly fashion lamps and pots out of clay for her. The two girls take kitchen tools on the sly to dig out the special clay. The main obstacle, however, is that they must enter the banana grove to obtain the clay. Emecheta's skill in description and setting is apparent in her creation of an atmosphere that is at once natural and unsettling:

> Creeping plants wound round from the ground to the trees, and from one tree to the other. We were surrounded by a riot of green. Moist green all over the ground, leafy green around us and on top of us. Flies and other tiny insects buzzed around and became even busier on our approach. So closed and humid was the place, that I felt

for a time as if I were a prisoner in the belly of a thick, green bush: so damp, and sealed from the outside world. (13)

This claustrophobia in the grove intensifies when the girls discover that Ogoli has been sitting on a large python rather than the tree trunk she assumed it to be. The girls drop their tools and run screaming from the banana grove and soon their secret is known by all. At first the girls are rebuked and laughed at, but their fathers call them brave and order the young men to kill the monster snake. The community then realizes that the girls were heroic in uncovering such a threat to living things.

In Emecheta's village setting the strength and support within a community is the highest good, and we can see this throughout the rest of the novel as the bride and groom eventually become known. The groom, Chiyei, comes from Ngbeke's community, but is scorned by many because he's considered 'half-man'—without a wife and children. He's also known as a prodigious eater and drinker of other people's food and palm-wine. He also has a limp. However, all these aspects of his character become insignificant when Chiyei gets beaten up by the brothers of his bride-to-be. Ngbeke and Ogoli learn that the whole community has been insulted by this action, and they too begin to defend a man they had earlier laughed at.

Chiyei, accompanied by some men from his village, marches to his bride's family to defend his honor. Hours later the men return home drunk, happy, and reconciled. Everyone now gets behind Chiyei and helps with the wedding preparations. Ngbeke and Ogoli finish their lamps and pots with great pride. As the wedding day arrives, they are in for another surprise: the bride is albino. Despite a strange and unusual appearance, the bride becomes part of the community by marrying Chiyei. Instead of rice, the girls shower the new bride with chalk, symbolic of fertility (in less than a year she will deliver a baby on the skin of that python, a wedding present). *The Moonlight Bride* also ends with a moral, in this case a lesson learned by the young narrator and Ogoli: "The bride taught us it matters little the colour or superficial beauty of any person, the most important thing is the beauty of the heart"(77). In this novel and *The Wrestling Match* the community triumphs despite any disturbances from individual greatness or weakness.

If Ngbeke is learning an important lesson about the beauty within, she is also subtly learning the place of women within her society. Ngbeke and the other girls learn from their mothers that women have a specific place—a lower one—in relation to men. The following are remarks made by Ngbeke and some older women in the novel:

"Because being girls, we were all expected to help in the housework. The boys were not expected to do this, so they could spend as much time as they liked in flaying the python." (49)

" . . . boys will always be boys, but girls become mothers." (51)

" . . . our mothers would tell us that climbing trees was only for the boys."(53)

"The words ugliness and old age apply only to women, not men." (53)

"Men mature, women age." (58)

" . . . boys were brought up to be more reserved in showing their emotion." (68)

Such attitudes, of course, are not limited to 'primitive' people in the bush of Africa. In

The Moonlight Bride, though, female inferiority is an integral part of the social structure. Emecheta's longer and more complex novels are full of characters like Ngbeke who have grown up and endured and fought against the injustices of a patriarchal society.

Buchi Emecheta's strength lies in her ability to show realistic characters directly and lovingly, with warts and all. Her Nigerian teenagers have things in common with other teens throughout the world, but they also have their own unique culture. Students who read these books interact with people from other lands and societies, and indirectly grow to better appreciate what makes human beings the same and different.

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Announcements

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