Trading Places: A Recent Teacher Exchange

by
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I had not taught in the English classroom for ten years—in the high school classroom, that is. I have been teaching, of course, but at the college level, off in the "ivory tower," so to speak.

I decided to teach in the high school again because I am Director of English Education at St. Olaf College, a middle-sized liberal arts college in Northfield, Minnesota. In order to be an effective director of the program as well as a credible methods instructor, I knew I would have to stop talking in the abstract about how to motivate high school students or how to teach them "the writing process." I would have to do it.

Two years ago I did. I traded places with Marsha Besch, an English teacher and Department Chair at Apple Valley Senior High, during St. Olaf's Interim semester, convenient for the sort of exchange that we had planned. Marsha taught a course entitled "Minnesota Writers" at St. Olaf, while I took over her full load at Apple Valley—four sections of composition and one section of teen fiction.

Faculty exchanges like the one that Marsha and I implemented will be happening more often in the future. Teacher Education Programs have been automous for too long, according to the report "Minnesota's Vision for Teacher Education: Stronger Standards, New Partnerships." In his address to the Minnesota Task Force that wrote this 1986 report, John Goodlad *(A Place Called School)* stressed repeatedly that education students must have powerful training experiences," and that School-University partnerships can provide these experiences. Calls for the renewal of teacher education, like the task force report and Goodlad's address, commonly cite three needed additions to teacher preparation: more extensive laboratory field experiences, formal induction periods, and "ongoing staff development" for teachers in the schools as well as in the teacher preparation institutions (Task Force 20).

Our own faculty exchange program is actually one part of a large scale venture between Minnesota's Independent School District 196, which includes Apple Valley Senior High, and St. Olaf College. Started in the fall of 1983, the program includes summer symposia—St. Olaf and Apple Valley faculty jointly conduct seminars on topics such as "U.S.-Soviet Relations" or "Utopian Fiction" —as well as a series of lectures and student-faculty mentorships. The theme for this summer's symposium,

now called "Dialogue '88," is "Change in the '80's: Where Is It Leading?" Two other school districts—Northfield and Richfield (Minneapolis)—have joined in the "dialogue." St. Olaf and the local schools are not total strangers to each other now. We don't as often hear comments that so many of us have heard, or made, before, like "What do my students need to know in order to be prepared for college?" or "What are they teaching in the high school classroom?"

The specific question that sent me to Apple Valley was, "Can an English teacher with 120 students teach writing using "the process approach"?" When I taught at Liberty High School in Pennsylvania 12 years ago, I taught "the product." I taught grammar and all of the rhetorical formulae—thesis sentence, the five paragraph theme—all out of the context of students' own writing. I trusted that if my students knew the rules, they could transfer them to their writing, and write well. Needless to say, I didn't teach such things as brainstorming strategies and revision. My students didn't write well, a fact I attributed to either their inattention or thick-headedness.

My thinking, and consequently my teaching, has changed quite a bit since 1976. Now I teach the "writing process" in my Freshman English and other writing classes. In fact, I am probably the most process-oriented teacher I know. I am not even really "teaching" so much as watching my students write and responding to what they do. In these classes, students do not just "do their own thing," of course. Students read essays that I have assigned, keep writing notebooks, and meet in small groups that I have carefully structured and that I monitor throughout the year. Nevertheless, within this context, students have a great deal of freedom. I never lecture about rhetorical strategies, while I do mention them when they come up in the readings or in student's own essay ("Say, you have used a good transition here. What's a transition, you ask?"). I rarely assign topics, giving students instead strategies to come up with their own paper topics, as well as strategies for drafting and revising. I meet all of my students in conference at least every other week. I have not taught grammar for a long time. Rather, I teach "grammar" in the context of my students' own writing.

Of course, this is how I have taught freshman English and my advanced college writing classes. This is also how I have instructed my methods students to teach when they get "out there" in the high schools. But I have always wondered whether the process approach would work in the secondary schools as well as it has for me at the college level. Haven't I always had it easy? How would it be different if I had 120 students at a time rather than 50? And so I arranged with Apple Valley and Marsh Besch, to teach there for a while.

As I began thinking about my days at Apple Valley, particularly my writing classes, I grew apprehensive. Won't these high school students need more structure? Can I trust them to work hard enough to come up with their own topics and to sustain this work long enough through successive drafts? What if they start talking about skiing instead of critiquing essays in small groups? Adding to my fears were the number of schools

that taught formal grammer and the number of cooperating teachers, whom I met when I observed student-teachers, who never had conferences or responded to rough drafts, claiming that because of their teaching loads and the numbers of students that they had to manage each day, it couldn't be done. Nevertheless, I was slightly encouraged by the fact that some of my colleagues at Apple Valley and other area high schools were requiring rough drafts and teaching brainstorming strategies. They were not "process" teachers to the extent that I was, perhaps, but that was one of the things that I wanted to find out. How would I need to modify my teaching strategies so that they would work for high school students? Although still a little apprehensive, I looked forward to the days that I would start getting some answers.

Finally, I found myself on that first dark January morning driving to Apple Valley, wondering what I had gotten myself into. My spirits matched the weather—cold and bleak. My colleagues at St. Olaf and Apple Valley lauded my commitment to quality education and teacher training, but they also doubted my sanity.

In order to ease my transition into the high school, and the students' adjustment to a new teacher, I had met with Marsha for two weeks before we traded places. I talked with her students, browsed through the book storeroom, reviewed high school red tape, shuffled attendance cards, deciphered Marsha's grading system, and planned my classes almost down to the minute. I was in some respects prepared.

But I was not really prepared. I was not prepared for the long day, for standing up six hours straight each day. My legs ached for the first week. I was not prepared for the frantic pace. I had no time to reflect on my classes, what had worked, what had bombed. I had three minutes to put down one pile of books, corrected papers, handouts, and class notes (Where did I put the attendance cards!), and pick up the next pile for the next class. God forbid if my piles got mixed up, which they often did. Apple Valley is an "open school" and my desk was strategically placed in a busy walk area. When students ran from class to class—They never just walked. They ran, danced, rolled, or bounced from class to class, but rarely walked—someone inevitably careened into my desk, sending papers and books flying everywhere.

I was not prepared for the noise. I taught on an open platform, suspended almost in midair. My "classroom" had no ceiling and no walls. (At least it had a floor. I suspect that if the architects could have gotten away with it, they would have dispensed with the floor, too.) We hovered over the library, and were encircled by the chemistry laboratories. My lessons were punctuated by clinking glassware, and by the incessant hubbub of students walking (running, dancing, rolling, bouncing) to lunch, or flirting and giggling in the library.

I was also not prepared for how quickly I adjusted and to what degree my experiences began to affirm most of what I had been teaching my English Education majors for so many years. Of course, not everything that I had been asserting in methods

classes proved to be workable. One crucial aspect of my thinking about classroom management changed dramatically. In past methods classes, I have always discussed earnestly the importance of keeping students "on task" at all times. I urged methods students to come up with mini-lessons in case the hour lasted longer than the lesson. I had warned of the pedagogical dangers of letting students get off the track in small groups. At Apple Valley, however, I discovered quickly that it was impossible to keep the kids on task for the full hour, partly because of the high school environment, which the open architecture exacerbated, and partly because of the level of development of high school students.

After a few days of angry frustration, I began to see that keeping kids constantly on task was not only impossible, it was also undesirable. Staying on task the whole day would overload the kids' minds. Often, too, when I gave them breaks, I was also giving myself a break, before we all broke. I also tolerated some socializing, especially in small groups, because my students were (are) adolescents, after all, and their growth and development depended a great deal on socialization. In education lingo, I was "addressing the affective dimension in education." Put another way, "kids are people, too."

A more relaxed classroom allowed me to get to know these students "as people." What should I call it—"bonding," "establishing the appropriatet student-teacher relationship"? All of these terms seem inadequate. Simply put, I cared about them, and cared about what they learned or didn't learn. And it was this caring, and not just how much I knew or how effective my pedagogy was, that influenced their learning. They mattered to me. The material mattered to me. Maybe, they thought, there was something in this after all.

A more relaxed classroom also meshes with my philosophy of teaching writing. I have over the years recognized that learning to use language is an ongoing process, a natural process, and decided that the best that we can ever do is *not* push, or test, or drill, but create an environment in which we encourage students to see how language works, probably an environment that replicates a child's early language learning experiences. Such an environment in which children are "rewarded" for language use; that is, language helps fulfill the child's needs or enriches her life. Or the child is not rewarded. She fails to communicate and does not get what she needs until she is clear. She tries harder, then, because it matters to her. "Choice" and "will" are crucial factors in her decision-making process. In the classroom environment that I describe above, the student wants or needs her peers, or the teacher, to get her point. I don't mean here "writing for the teacher, but writing to make real contact. Kevin wants us to know why it was so hard to leave his best friend Bobby in the second grade. Anne, the hearing-impaired student, wants us to know what it's like to live in silence. The writing context and the interaction with readers demonstrate the importance of clarity or the mode that would be most effective, and lead to a real understanding of how and why the language works as it does. For learning to take place, a parent or teacher can not *do* it, but might *help* it.

We teachers have good intentions and work very hard to make things happen. We structure and organize, and struggle to "finish the book" and "get through the material." This is particularly true in the area of language and writing. Elementary students must master key vocabularies. Junior high students must be able to formulate a thesis sentence and put together the five paragraph theme. Senior high students must be able to do it all, especially if they plan to go to college. Workbooks, worksheets, grammar exercises, structured assignments will help them do it, we think, and do it faster and more efficiently. We have quantified and listed and prescribed. And we push our students to achieve these competencies at the point in their educations that they are expected to achieve them. We mean well, because we know the sad consequences of illiteracy. At the very least, we worry that our students will not make it in college. In the process, however, we may be teaching language or writing in ways that it cannot really be learned. How much real learning takes place if grammar or rhetorical formulae are taught isolated from the contexts of writing or speaking, or life, that give them meaning?

What I just said sounds beautiful. It sounds like something a college professor would say, off in the ivory tower, sitting comfortably in her padded chair and writing her article that she has lots of time to write because she has only one class to prepare, and only 20 students this semester. The methods of teaching writing that I use on the college level did work in the high school, but I would again be lying if I said that I had to make "only a few adjustments to accomodate the level of students I was working with and the context in which I was teaching." I wrote this phrase at first, but as soon as I wrote it, I knew it wasn't so.

I was a different teacher in the high school than I am in college. I was tired. I felt rushed and pushed and harassed. There was never enough time for anything. There was never time between classes to reflect on my teaching. There was never enough time to put the comments on rough drafts that I wanted to. There was never enough time in "conferences" (I even hesitate to use the word) to "allow the meaning to unfold" in my students' drafts, to allow them to discover their purpose, their voice, their focus. I was always hurrying them up. I felt like the impatient doctor standing ready with forceps to the child from her mother's womb. I despaired at the number of drafts I never saw because I had lost track of time and the bell rang too soon.

Nevertheless, my disappointments and frustrations are not the whole story either. My methods students will hear about how they must adjust their expectations and about how to accommodate the realities of the high school classroom. But they will also hear about how I did manage to teach writing using the process approach and create a student-centerd classroom in which language use is meaningful and enriching, perhaps not as well as I am able to do it on the college level, but good enough. Certainly better, I am convinced, than with grammar books, drill, and the five-paragraph theme.

While I never assign topics in Freshman English or Expository Writing at St. Olaf, Apple Valley curriculum required that I assign a topic in my composition classes, but the topic was broad enough—an autobiographical essay that the students had a great deal of room to make the topic their own. My prewriting activities were fairly structured, but while prewriting they were free to discover their own purpose and focus for their working drafts. Students wrote three short pieces about their most memorable objects, places, people as a means of collecting ideas and increasing their awareness of how they had come to be the people they were. Out of these pieces, some pulled material that they used to fashion working drafts. Others did not use any of the original material. In these cases, the prewriting activities had still been valuable as a means of jogging their memories and discovering a topic that they would finally focus on. Even though some of the activities were structured and monitored, students were not mindlessly adapting formulae or filling in the blanks. They were trying things out and making choices. They were making their topics and fashioning their drafts the way that "real" writers do.

I also met with students in "conference," that is, talked briefly with students about their essays while the rest of the class worked in small groups.Obviously, these "conferences" or talks were short, five minutes at most, and I could not meet with each student for every assignment. Nevertheless, I monitored each stage of every student's writing by requiring rough drafts that I put written comments on, although, again, my written responses were short—selective and to the point—because I had at least 80 drafts to look through each time I collected assignments. Finally, I taught grammar, though not in the traditional sense. I talked about "grammar" in the context of their own writing. Such grammar instruction was not thorough, but I wrestled with that particular angel a long time ago. That kind of thoroughness does not guarantee that our students will write well.

As much learning was taking place, naturally, during the unstructured times when the students least expected it. The whole environment was full of language. Students worked often in small groups. They gossipped, argued, teased. Sometimes they even got around to talking about the day's assignment or the essay they were working on. Actually, they were never completely off the track. At first when they got off the subject, I worried. Then, I listened

Kevin: What a dork, a durf. Dumb guy. Dope.

Scott: Another "d" word, yea, Kevin!

Kevin: Ded-i-ca-ted. I hafta admit, the guy was dedicated.

Kevin and Scott are jumping around like cheerleaders. I am sitting in another group eavesdropping on Kevin's group. They seem to be off the track. Kevin's also not being very nice. Should I say something?

Me: Who, Kevin?

Kevin: Mechanical Man. Mech Man. The mechanical manager at McDonalds. We worked there last summer.

Me: Why do you call him "mechanical"?

Kevin: Boy, he was stiff. He was a stiff.

Kevin stands up and imitates his walk and stiffly imitates someone making hamburger. He hands it to Scott, salutes, and then falls stiffly to the floor.He laughs, rolls over and sits cross-legged.

Kevin: He never laughed. Or even smiled. We would have worked harder for him if he had laughed once in a while.

What does all of this have to do with their assignment? Well, it does, in a way. The assignment is to talk in small groups about a person they recall from their past, a prewriting activity that will help them collect ideas for their autobiographical essays. I also "hafta" smile when I think of "Mech Man." Kevin's writing is usually as stiff as Mech Man's walk. When he fools around like this, Kevin has a great sense of humor and a clear voice. I wonder if he could get some of this into his prose.

Me: Are you going to write about him, Kevin? That's good stuff. Get it in there. Are you going to get him in your essay?

Kevin: Nah. His feelings would be hurt if he found out.

Kevin doesn't write about the mechanical manager. He eventually writes about making mischief in the second grade with his best friend Bobby. After he acts it out, of course, and after he discovers that it is 'OK' to "fool around" in his essay, too. In his final paper, he faithfully recaptures those times that he so obviously misses, even sounding seven years old when it is appropriate. His essay is funny and poignant as he reflects back, as a "wise" 16 year old, on his relationship with his friend and the "good ole days" that are gone. Has the linguistic play that I witnessed earlier been wasted?

My loosening up in class seems to have worked for Kevin. He took risks in his writing once he discovered it was OK to do so, once he discovered that each essay did not have to be five paragraphs long, that the thesis sentence did not absolutely have to be the last sentence of the first paragraph. He had used language every day, creatively, imaginatively, with his friends and brothers and sisters, in the cafeteria, in the halls, at the mall, and I began to affirm that use: "Get that in your essay, Kevin." His writing became a means of real self expression, then, once Kevin could see that it was connected to him and his life, once it was coming out of him, not distant and isolated on a

grammar worksheet or in a chapter on the structure of comparison-contrast essay. Kevin eventually did write a comparison-contrast essay. However, it was a form that the essay evolved into, that Kevin chose naturally, not a form that he imposed on the essay because I had required him to do so.

Having returned to methods classes after teaching at Apple Valley, I have told all of these stories, about Kevin and all the others, to my English Education students. All of the stories—the successes as well as the disappointments. My methods students learn more lessons, I think, from these stories than they ever learn from the methods textbooks. There is, of course, no substitute for doing it themselves, but I can now give them fresh and living applications of the theories and pedagogy we study. Their high school students will work in small groups, and the student-teachers will set up these groups with my concrete advice in mind. They will teach the writing process, but as they ask students to brainstorm and discover their topics, or try to meet with them in conference, they will understand the possibilities as well limitations of these methods.

Knowing the limits. Adjusting our expectations. Adjusting. Adapting. Flexibilty. These are all important in teaching. When my methods students read the textbooks, handouts, and my neatly typed sample lesson plans, they get the idea that there is one right way to teach, that if they follow what the book says, and do such and such on exactly this day in the term, they will be good teachers. (In this respect, they sound very much like novice writers.) Now I hand them my thick notebook in which I planned my lessons at Apple Valley. It is a mess. They see the changes, the Xed out pages, the revised schedules, the postponed and abandoned lessons, whole sections eliminated and new plans entered. Like writing, teaching is a process. We change and grow as writers. We change and grow as teachers. We are always becoming teachers. This is the most important lesson I have learned and that I hope my methods students will learn. My messy planning book is the visual proof of this lesson.

Works Cited

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