THE TEACHING OF EXPOSITORY WRITING: A REVIEW ESSAY[1]

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(Last fall the Sloan Foundation announced that it would not be giving any money toward the improvement of the teaching of composition, for a number of reasons. A few weeks later the Foundation sent to many campuses copies of the booklet which contained essays on which this decision was at least partially made. Because most of the essays were by people of some prestige outside of the field of English teaching and because they dealt with some significant points of view about composition, we looked around for some knowledgeable person to review the publication. On the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota we found Professor William A. Gibson, who was doing research for the year at the Center for Advanced Studies in Language, Style and Literary Theory. Editor)

No reviewer's attitudes toward this little volume are apt to be much more consistent than the attitudes of its authors toward their subject. The editor of the volume, James D. Koener, characterizes it as an exploration whose "main purpose is to stimulate discussion, provoke comment and criticism, and help provide the Foundation with the further information and insights it needs if it is to undertake any kind of program on writing skills" (p.iii). Anyone concerned about the written language can appreciate this modest aim and the prospect of foundation support for disciplined work on the teaching of writing; a reader must also welcome the appeal for advice and criticism before the launching of yet another program, study, or experiment. Nevertheless, while offering some useful criticisms of many current attitudes toward English studies, and the teaching of writing, the volume raises some serious questions about the Sloan Foundation's approach to "the problem of student writing." A number of

assumptions and beliefs are much more open to criticism than most of the contributors seem to realize.

The volume is organized in six parts; except for the last selection, each part builds upon its predecessors. It is arranged in what the editor calls a "chronological order" and the volume, it is said, "constitutes a rough history of the evolution of an idea within the Foundation" (p. v). As such it represents a stage in an interrupted process, a process, from my point of view, whose beginnings, rationale, and effects have not been considered carefully enough. What emerges is analogous to the process by which committee reports are usually created. In the functioning of committees opening statements can determine agenda and thus the topics that will be raised for discussion. Persuasive statements can even limit topics and fix attitudes toward them. According to the courtesies and conventions of committee work, no one can readily offer new suggestions without taking into account what has already been said. Radical revisions or even incisive criticisms can be offered only with difficulty, for changes occur by a process of slow accretion and timid qualification rather than through a rigorous review of assumptions, premises, evidence, and methods of inquiry.

The governing attitude behind this book can be summed up by a familiar cliche: The subject is too important to be left to the "experts." Many of the criticisms directed at English teachers, their profession, and the state of their knowledge on the teaching of writing are certainly justified. What the contributors have to say is of considerable interest because they all

derive their authority from significant experiences as administrators, teachers, or writers, and they demonstrate the depth of both professional and public concern for writing skills. On the other hand, few of their specific proposals are novel, and their arguments reflect the prevalence of much conventional wisdom about the creation and teaching of written English. The intentions and limitations of the volume may well be of more importance than what it specifically advocates about curriculum revision, the training and retraining of teachers, or the seeming and real contradictions among the aims and priorities of English programs. The major parts of the volume can be outlined quickly.

The first paper is "Writing Skills and Institutional Articulation" by Albert H. Bowker, currently chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley (pp. 1-10). It is concerned largely with "articulation between high school and work and between high school and college." This leads him to consider also reasons for the decline in writing skills, competency tests, standards for college admission, and some proposals for solving the problems he has identified.

Second is "A Response to Albert H. Bowker" by Stephen White, a vice president of the Sloan Foundation "with a background in journalism" (pp. 11-17). His response to what is explicit or implicit in Bowker's paper focuses on what will become the major issues in the remainder of the volume: confusions about the functions of educational programs (especially those in English), possible analogies between the teaching of writing and the teaching of mathematics or the sciences, suiting programs of study to particular groups,

the apparent antithesis between teaching writing (especially "expository" writing) and teaching "English literature" (by which he probably means literatures in the English language), and teachers' attitudes toward the discipline and their qualifications for teaching it. Also persuasive for the other contributors is White's scheme for the creation of "expository writing" wherein he translates his own practices into a universally applicable generalization: "Anyone who sets out to write expository prose goes through several successive stages." The stages repeat a strategy advocated in at least dozens of text books -- discovering "thoughts," shaping and reshaping an outline, writing a full draft, revising for precision and style (pp. 15-16).

Following this paper is "An Interim Report on What the Foundation Has Learned," again by Stephen White (pp. 18-28). It is characterized as "an internal document" summing up the results of conferences "with some sixty persons representing higher education, pre-college education, and the writing profession itself" (p. 18). Their identity is never indicated. This paper elaborates on the themes already introduced, outlines "four possible courses of action" (creation of new text books, curriculum reform, research to develop "a firm pedagogical base for the teaching of expository writing," and financial support for remediation), and proposes a role for the Sloan Foundation in creating a program on writing skills. By this time the direction of the discussion is fixed, and what remains are efforts to review further implications of the dominant themes and to translate some of them into programs for

reform.

The fourth paper, and the longest in the collection (pp. 29-44), is "How to Improve Writing Skills," written by Norman Macrae, deputy editor of The Economist (London). He reviews causes for the decline in writing skills and public dismay in response to it, costs to the nation and to individuals that result from lacking the "tools" of expression, and the paradox of such a state of affairs in a country where, quoting Gordon Thompson, "half the working population...is now employed in pushing pieces of information about." He proposes a full program of action to include "inventions" in syllabus reform (creating an "American Language" course with "expository" writing at its core), design of new programs for in-service and pre-service training (using White's model for composing), creation of new texts and teaching materials (requiring some changes in attitudes to ensure their adoption and use), and "pedagogical innovation" (leading presumably to "testable class courses in expository writing or American Language, teachable under closed learning systems"). The Foundation could for a limited time, he suggests, support workshops for designing experimental curricula, teacher-training courses, and the production of suitable text books or text series.

A most thoughtful paper is "A Response to Norman Macrae" by Donald L. M. Blackmer, a professor of political science and associate dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at M.I.T. (pp. 45-49). He asks the level of instruction at which Macrae would direct his program, notes that many freshman English courses, because of the need to satisfy remedial functions,

already do devote more attention to writing than to literature, questions how reliable a basis we possess for creating the model text book, supports the emphasis on primary education, and argues for instruction in more than a single mode of discourse. His recognition that series of simple antitheses (literature/composition, reading/writing, expository writing/expressive writing) provide inadequate bases for program design sets him off from most of the other contributors. Although conscious of limitations of our knowledge, he is unable to identify just the kinds of knowledge that are needed.

The final part, "Some Comments from the Field" (pp. 50-66), comprises three responses to the previous five papers by "experienced public school teachers" and a letter discussing another preliminary project on writing skills supported by the Sloan Foundation. Jayne Karsten, head of the English department at Langley High School (McLean, Virginia) is wary about committing American education to "Norman Macrae's American Language courses" as well as the antithesis between "'fine' writing" and "'lucid expository prose'"; she endorses enthusiastically White's attention to "the teaching of writing as process" and identifies some problems calling out for systematic research, including "a vigorous, definitive probe of how language, experience, and thought processes hinge and of what sequential implications are involved in the classroom development of this interaction" (pp. 50-53). Richard W. Hatch, who has both taught in secondary schools and edited books on scholarly subjects, is the most skeptical of all the contributors about the capacity of texts, technology, and curriculum reform to improve the teaching of writing;

he advocates continual practice and the review of each paper in written comments and in conferences (pp. 53-55). Dante Peter Ciochetto, a public school teacher from Westport, Conn., reviews what he considers five "major problems in the teaching of writing": the ill consequences of exposure to television and radio, inept teaching, inadequate time allotted to the teaching of writing, difficulties in evaluating written work, and the lack of sequential programs for the steady development of skills. He recommends intensive training programs for teachers and the creation of an articulated three-stage program aimed at developing skills from the elementary grades through high school.

The final statement is by Theodore R. Sizer, headmaster of Phillips Academy/ Andover and former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (pp. 62-66). He comments upon a report submitted to the Sloan Foundation by the Andover Committee and suggests that previous efforts to improve writing have failed because 1) the "field of writing, and of English generally, lacks both focus and a clear and useful link to modern culture," 2) teachers and scholars in the humanities are impractical, unwilling to compromise and unable to see the difficulties of diffusing "improved teaching methods." Analogies to curriculum developments of the 1960s carried out by the Physical Science Study Group and the School Mathematics Study Group are unproductive, he argues, because "writing is a skill, a craft, a process" and not a substantive field capable of "coverage." What is needed, therefore, is a curriculum for teachers" and recognition that some ways of teaching writing work

better than others. He offers only tentative suggestions about solving the problems of teaching loads in a field where success depends so much upon interactions between student and teacher.

The volume thus reflects many issues and orthodoxies of the last decade or so, and contributes little to a new, coherent view of the problem. Yet it serves both to remind us of some problems and obligations and as a symptom of what inhibits the development of improved syllabi and teacher-training programs. Because so much of the discussion overlaps from paper to paper, I shall concentrate on what seem to me some important points rather than attempt to critique each paper in turn.

Some complaints are obviously overstated -- e.g., that English teachers as a group are enamored of "'fine' writing..., elegant writing, allusive writing" and contemptuous of "lucid expository writing" (White, pp. 14, 15), that the ill effects of large class sizes are exaggerated (Macrae, p. 37), or that teachers are uninterested in books on expository writing (Macrae, p. 35). But other charges are certainly justified. Teachers of English are fully capable of undeserved complacency about their resources for the teaching of writing. What White says about public school teachers (p. 21) is generally applicable to college writing teachers as well: "In general, it seemed a matter of full agreement among the teachers themselves that they know pretty much all they needed to know about how to teach expository writing, and that they possessed in the way of resources all they needed to possess (except time)." The triviality of many books and articles on composition, and the

lack of a clear basis for choosing among the proliferating materials, demonstrate that many writing teachers never question their own knowledge or seek new perspectives on the subject.

Behind this problem is an important question that recurs in various forms in all of the papers. In accounting for the failure of previous experimental programs Sizer identifies it explicitly: "Most important has been the fragmentation in the field of English, or, to put it differently, a high level of disagreement about what should comprise the core of the area" (p. 63). This uncertainty of focus and priorities results in pointless arguments about whether literature or language studies, writing or communication skills, critical reading or appreciation should be considered as central to the discipline. But the problem has been recognized longer in the profession than the contributors to the volume seem to realize, and it is receiving increasing attention.[2] Two effects of it are especially serious: 1) the essential components of the discipline cannot be accounted for completely, and 2) those that are identified tend to be ranked according to a dogmatically-held hierarchy of value (e.g., literary interpretation is assumed to be superior to linguistic or stylistic analysis). Relationships among the components cannot be perceived, and changes that do occur in the discipline often take the form of substituting one priority for another. This volume unfortunately encourages just such another substitution of one unexamined conception for another.

Most papers in the volume, it seems to me, lack a full and clear con-

ception of what is involved when using written language. Consider what White says in his report on "What the Foundation Has Learned." He complains, with some justification, that text books are "remorsely analytic"; some of them begin and end with "a close analysis of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric." He offers an already familiar alternative: "But writing itself is synthetic and not analytic. It begins with the process of deciding exactly what it is one wants to say and what might be the most effective structure of its most lucid statement. That statement itself, if it is to be maximally lucid, must conform to the rules of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric, but those are subsequent considerations" (pp. 21-22). How choices are to be made, or criteria for effectiveness and lucidity determined, he does not suggest. And again in outlining "courses of action" he suggests that perhaps "television must be converted as an ally. The elements that go into successful expository writing are exactly those that go into successful expository television: logical process and orderly structure. The syntax, grammar and rhetoric [italics mine] are quite different but it remains our conviction that such matters are truly secondary; they do not create lucidity, they support it" (p. 25). His reification of "lucidity" and his notions about the grammar and rhetoric of discourse are indeed astounding, and could be passed by in embarrassed silence if they were not so prevalent.

It is impossible to conceive of any discourse, lucid or obscure, independent of its "syntax, grammar, and rhetoric." Syntax is but one component of grammar as it is analyzed in modern linguistics (phonology, syntax,

semantics, and pragmatics). But this particular opposition may represent nothing more than an inexact use of technical terms to mean something like graphemics and sentence style; "grammar" may also be used to denote matters of agreement. The inclusion of "rhetoric" in the phrase suggests that he considers rhetoric as extrinsic to discourse rather than as essential to its creation. But the notion of rhetoric as extrinsic "flowers of ornamentation" has been too long discredited to merit much attention.

His account of how people write implies that he would accept Sizer's belief "that the craft of writing is wholly a process -- never in any important sense a body of particular facts" (p. 63). Yet the "process" cannot function without grammar and rhetoric, for without language, disciplined thought is not possible; "orderly structure" is the product of rhetoric and cannot exist prior to the operation of the skills and knowledge that create it.[3] White's tacit knowledge is greater than what he professes, for he introduces rhetorical concepts without being conscious of doing so.

The reduction of the act of writing to a set of discrete operations like White's can give the illusion of identifying what is fundamental to the process. However there is nothing intrinsic in the mental operations themselves or in the acts of outlining or enumerating that determines an appropriate style, the choice of subtopics for a given piece of discourse or their most effective disposition. Part of the problem may be inherent in the metaphor itself, for the analogy to the "processes" of invention or manufacturing has some unfortunate implications. Consider, for example, the

process of turning a shaft on an engine lathe. The lathe operator in a large machine shop will work from a methods plan that specifies the number of revolutions per minute at which the stock is to turn, the material and configuration of the cutting bit, the depth at which the cutter is to be set on a given pass, the distance it is to advance with each revolution of the lathe, the lubricant to be used, etc. If the principles implicit in the methods plan were articulated they would take into account such things as the purpose for which the shaft is being turned, the material properties of the stock, cutter, and lubricants, the lathe bed's resistance to distortion, etc. The analogy implies that processes are capable of precise description, and that the description must take into account their purposes, what takes place in them, what means they depend upon, what materials they operate upon, and how their steps are segmented and sequenced.

The analogy regrettably appears to be more elegant and useful than it is. A machinist operates upon materials extrinsic to his own consciousness, and relies upon procedures which if followed precisely will result in the production of a perfectly predictable artifact. The number of variables to be considered are finite and largely independent of the machinist's manual and mental habits. On the other hand, neither outlining nor classifying, association games nor pre-writing exercises, fixed sequences nor prescribed modes of discourse can assure the production of effective written artifacts. And the variables of the writing process have not as yet been adequately described. Simply to shift attention from the written product to the

processes of its creation will not correct the deficiencies in our methods of teaching writing. And to do so may have the effect of distracting our attention from the question of what we need to know to do the job.

In spite of a great deal of work during the past decade, basic research on the rhetoric and pragmatics has not advanced very significantly. Martin Steinmann's call in 1966 for "basic research" is echoed again in E. D. Hirsch's recently published book The Philosophy of Composition.[4] Susan Karsten, who recognizes many of the variables of the composing process, suggests what some of the aims of such research might be: "What we need out of research is a vigorous, definitive probe of how language, experience, and thought hinge and of what sequential implications are involved in the classroom development of that interaction. I would urge, also, that any university research be soundly underpinned with counsel from the real world of the elementary and secondary schools" (p. 52). Research proposals suggested in this volume are not apt to produce valid results, and possibly not useful ones either.

The research proposed would depend upon experiments with model programs and studies of existing practices in the teaching of writing, but the proposals lack a framework for drawing inferences or for deriving from them an explanatory theory. Bowker, for example, proposes a "national project that would tell us with some authority what is really [a favorite word in this volume] happening in high school English programs" (p. 9). The project would show if writing requirements have been decreased, what text books are used, what

work loads the teachers carry, and how well prepared they are. He suggests that the project would show if more emphasis should be given to the preparation of writing teachers, and perhaps even what kinds of training would be "most promising." In the next paragraph he discusses the widely publicized Bay Area Writing Project, whose teachers use "some of the hard-won tricks of their trade." Of its approach he says, "It is not professor to teacher, but teacher to teacher, and it seems to work." He seems to imagine that gathering data will produce useful research. What is needed is not an enumeration of strategies that "seem to work," but evidence that they do and a set of principles explaining why. White recognizes that a "firm pedagogical base for the teaching of expository English" must include knowledge about "the fundamental cognitive processes that accompany the development of skills in the use of the mother tongue" (p. 26). Such a base is not to be discovered in current teaching practices. Nor can experimental data or hypothetical explanations be evaluated merely by referring them to Karsten's "real world of the elementary and secondary schools." A useful theory must be able to describe the principles essential to the creation and interpretation of written English.

Not every teacher of writing needs to possess a full and conscious knowledge of the principles of rhetoric and philosophy of language implicit in the exercises and teaching strategies that they make use of. Their materials, methods, and "hard-won tricks of the trade" must, however, be based upon a demonstrably valid theory of discourse. And special care must be taken to

ensure that such a theory informs whatever improved training and retraining programs are to be developed.

The contents of such a theory are not to be found in experiments with one model program after another. Karsten, Ciochetti, and White are right to suggest that a theory of composition should include attention to the social and psychological processes of language acquisition. Yet the consideration of the components and sequences of operations in encoding and decoding written discourse must not be limited to those of White's model, endorsed so enthusiastically by Macrae and Karsten. A more comprehensive structure for developing a valid theory of pedagogy is suggested in Steinmann's outline of grammatical, speech-act, genre, and rhetorical competences.[5] Research aimed in these directions could explain how written discourse is created, how it achieves its effects upon readers, and how choices may be made among a multiplicity of competing approaches to the teaching of writing. In this volume we are instead offered such things as Macrae's provisions for the contracts governing the conduct of those who will produce the model text book. "Laws" are indeed at stake, but they are of a very different kind from those outlined in legal codes. This volume can help us recognize what we must try to accomplish even if it cannot suggest how to go about the task.

Notes

[1]Review of The Teaching of Expository Writing: an Occasional Paper from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, ed. James D. Koener (New York: Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 1977), v +66 pp. Parenthetical references to the volume appear in the text of this paper.

[2]See, for example, James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), Ch. 1; John C. Gerber, "A Glimpse of English as a Profession," Profession 77 (New York: MLA, 1977), pp. 26-33; Richard Lloyd-Jones, "Mr. Sleary's Circus, or English Under the Big Top," ADE Bulletin, 52 (1977), 10-14.

[3]Cf. Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Central States Speech Journal, 18 (1967), 9-17.

[4]Martin Steinmann, Jr., "Rhetoric Research," College English, 27 (1966), 278-85; E. P. Hirsch, Jr., The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 3-6.

[5]Martin Steinmann, Jr., "Rule Competences and Rhetorical Competences," Papers from the Twelfth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistics Society, ed. Salikoko S. Mufwene, et al. (Chicago: Chicago Ling. Soc., 1976), pp. 610-17.