

TEACHING WRITING: PROCESS vs. PRODUCT

by Joseph W. Miller

The teaching of writing is seriously deteriorating, notwithstanding the proliferation of workshops, institutes, group meetings, seminars, visits of specialists, conferences, and conventions, all dedicated to the improvement of teaching writing, and notwithstanding the new respectability of English teachers who teach writing and not only literature.

The decay comes from the professionalization, an artificial codification of methods, the development of a kind of arcane mandarin cult in which practitioners talk only to each other, while the work of the student who is supposed to be improving his writing is ignored, or taken for granted. Often the work itself--the product--is not examined or analyzed; after all, grading is very boring for the teacher, and surely a summary comment shows the piece has been read, however sketchily. How the student writes, the processes he goes through as he plans and eventually commits words to paper, are analyzed and discussed at great length; terms like "pre-writing" abound, and there is much wordplay involving psychology and linguistics and learning theory. What the student writes, and whether the product is good or bad, whether it says anything, and in what ways it says it well or poorly, are all ignored.

Many human endeavors start out as worthwhile, serious, and important activities, genuine efforts to improve some social problem. Consider, for instance, the institution of marriage, and the establishment of labor unions, and then examine the present status of each. These initially worthwhile attempts,

however, seem to deteriorate into specialized professionalized entities, with increasingly rare participation by the rank and file, except via votes at annual meetings. There is increasingly frequent manipulation by the elite in power. Thus programs for improving the teaching of writing get state and federal grants, and private funding; universities and area agencies vie with each other to throw money at the improvement of teachers and teaching, with the avowed ultimate aim of improving the writing. All of them want to do a good deed, and at the same time enhance their own images. Andrew Hacker's "The Shame of Professional Schools," in HARPER'S, October, 1981, pp. 22, 24, 26, 27-28, reports the wide spread of this malaise.

We have developed entrepreneurs and showmen rather than effective teachers. When asked what the student writes, whether or not the product is good, and whether or not the technique allegedly applied has in fact caused the alleged improvement, the specialists respond with exasperation and contempt. They contend, first, that the quality is obvious, though they are non-specific about the ways and components which have improved. They say, second, that it is equally obvious that the improvement resulted from the special treatment being touted at this particular conference or meeting, or in this particular article.

Part of this pernicious situation is the result not only of the obvious need to improve student writing, but also the very human desire to improve professionally, to be better than one's colleagues or opponents, to secure tenure and promotion and, finally, to receive public and financial recognition.

Like doctors who become so specialized they are bored or annoyed when asked actually to deal with a patient directly--like the unidentified radiologist who "reads" the X-Ray and sends a separate bill after the patient has paid the hospital at which the X-Ray was taken--these writing specialists are eager to spend their subsidized hours in abstruse activities where they are not bothered by contacts with boring, illiterate students. Medicine would be a lot more interesting if it weren't for the patients, and the teaching of writing would be a lot more rewarding if one didn't have to deal with students and their wretched papers.

There is an ever-growing tendency to specialize, to mechanize, to computerize, to develop a fool-proof system which can be marked, for teaching writing. One computer program purports to teach writing, but is only a mechanized rehash of familiar grammatical clichés, that ignore and omit real problems of idiom and changes in attitudes towards usage. Such software can do very little with matters of tone, organization, sequence, and style. Even the sequence of those four items here--not a good one--could not be dealt with in such programs. Another approach, complete with cassette and film strip, only permits the teacher to let AV handle the familiar drill of parts of speech and sentence structure. One self-help tutorial package course asserts that it teaches writing, but little is said about actually grading a paper, or determining what is in it. Somehow the actual product, the evidence of a student's writing ability, seems to be largely glossed over, and assumed.

In some classes students write journals, which are not graded. Comments include "ooh, good! I like what you say about your grandfather" and "Don't you think it's about time you shaped up?" The student's writing is characterized by emptiness and artificiality, a tacit recognition that this writing is mere busy-work, and that so many words or so many pages must be turned in, regardless; it doesn't matter what one writes. One student wrote the words to "The Star Spangled Banner," and another wrote those to "America." One was marked "Excellent," the other "Superior." Grading criteria were not specified. Teachers' comments often indicate only that the teacher is acknowledging that the student wrote something, rather in the fashion of the physiology teacher who has the class turn in lab notebooks at the final exam. He returns them at the end of the period, each page date-stamped in one corner so it can't be used again.

It is often alleged that the sheer fact of the experience of writing, no matter what is written, helps one improve. Swimming, without adequate direction, and guidance, only makes one perpetuate poor swimming habits. Why should writing improvement be inevitable?

Has any concrete, objective evidence been cited, via well-conducted, statistically sound experiments, that shows that ungraded journal writing actually improves the writing of students? Are there any before-and-after studies which "prove" that journals are the active force in the alleged improvement?

Journal writing is not, of course, necessarily nor always

a waste of time. It can be valuable and useful, frequently in a kind of psychological, social-adjustment manner. Consider Meta Potts' article "Dialogue Journals: A First Step in Helping Troubled Students." TODAY'S EDUCATION, September - October 1981, pp. 42-44.

Gimmicks are certainly "in." Many teachers seem to rely on them, on anything that can seem to get the student's interest or attention, and to assume that such a gimmick automatically produces writing improvement. In one class, the teacher prints on the board a series of initials, say IADBD or LMNHTSYS. The student is supposed to determine what they stand for ("It's always darkest before the dawn," and "Love means never having to say you're sorry"). In some transubstantiatory way the recognition or realization of the significance of the initials is supposed to improve the student's writing, even though the teacher often has to explain what the initials signify when the kids "give up." The mediating effect of this transmogrification is not explained; perhaps it involves magic. When asked about the evidence that writing was improved by this technique, the instructor responded with asperity, and contempt; the impact and the desirable effect were obvious to any one with the slightest intelligence.

In another class the teacher sets up simulation situations. He and an eager student teacher come to class and dramatically put on surgical gowns, caps, and masks. They explain, after writing various faulty sentences on the board, that they are going to do surgery, and the students will be consulting physicians. Adding a modifier will be doing a transplant;

removing words will be amputation; and so on. The analogy is, to say the least, strained. When it was complained that it was not clear how this approach improves the student writing, one teacher observer countered with "I thought it was kinda (sic) cute!" How such a device, or other role-playing simulations, can improve writing is not explained. No assessment of student ability or achievement is mentioned or discussed. The salutary effects of this improvisational theatre are assumed, and obvious, as any fool can plainly see.

A somewhat similar occasion occurred at one high school when students wrote a 5-minute silent movie, as the entire work of the semester in composition. In another, students who made banners or carts or toy animals for the model circus parade (possibly set up to illustrate "jargon," with roustabouts' language) got "A" marks because they participated in the "English" project.

In one class, in groups of ten, students each write one sentence of a progressive story. Each has to rely on what he has received as stimulus for expanding and developing the story, which is eventually supposed to have a plausible or at least meaningful ending. In all the examples observed, in every case there was some kind of cop-out conclusion, often ridiculous, of the sort that made clear the writers' collective contempt for the situation. One miraculous ending involved a magic cabbage which rescued a young couple from a stalled ferris wheel. Another had a goody-goody conclusion in which a Mafioso had a change of heart (an Italian Scrooge?), and agreed to try to do better if given another chance. Not once was there

a convincing resolution of the conflict, or even a recognition of the need for some consistency, or sequence, or relationship between cause and effect, between event and result. The net result was something like the old Uncle Wiggily game, or "the funny mixed-up story," or Kellogg's tri-partite animal books.

In this story situation, aside from the lack of realism or reality and the distortion into proto-TV plotting, matters such as misspelled words and error in sentence structure were ignored, in what seemed to be a reinforcement of the students' contempt for English teachers and English as a subject. What this story effort achieves in and for student writing is not clear, although it seems obvious that the exercise gets the contempt it so richly deserves. No one kept any of the stories; why would one? They showed only that some student effort had been expended, some class time had been consumed. Once again "process," not product, had been the focus.

In another class the teacher has pairs of students, with one of each pair blindfolded. Those with sight lead those who are blindfolded, as they wander about the building, no doubt so as to "understand" and "feel" how a blind person might. Trying out wheel chairs is also a biggie. After the predictable "wow" responses, it is obvious that the now re-sighted, or newly reambient, students have developed a firm philosophical grasp of the problems facing those who are handicapped, and will now write expert papers. Whether they do, in fact, write better papers is never determined.

In still another class the teacher suddenly whips arounds and shouts an insult, such as "Your mother stinks!" He then

commands the students to "Write what you think and feel!" Any student with self-respect or common sense would probably write something unprintable, but the majority record genteel attempts at what they think this stupe wants. Here again, the process is interesting, or clever, but the product is nugatory, or ignored.

There are countless other gimmicks, ranging from forcing the student to use only present tense, or only adjectives of color, to showing the student a tray full of 14 items, and making him base a paper on them. The reader can name various approaches he has heard of, perhaps even tried. In each the process of writing, or some process that consumes class time and eventually leads to the necessity of writing, is involved. Seldom is the product, what the student actually writes, even cited, much less analyzed and returned with helpful comments. Yet the alleged focus and purpose of teaching writing is to improve what the student writes, not only to anatomize what he does prior to producing the written pieces.

Gimmick approaches seem uninterested in whether or not the student has, in fact, something to say, something to convey of interest or significance, or meaning or information. Gimmick users seem uninterested in whether or not the paper meets conventional standards of grammar and rhetoric, however increasingly lax these may be becoming. The process of producing something, anything, which has been written, for whatever reason, to whatever audience--or none--seems to be the only important matter.

Of course, a student who is reluctant to write, and

inexperienced in writing (and what student isn't these days?) needs to be encouraged in self-expression, and in organizing his thoughts and ideas. He needs to realize that his own experiences are of some significance, and very possibly of interest to others, and that he need not expatiate on the political situation in Iran, or "What I would do if I were on Voyager II," to have something to say.

Allowing the student, however, to write "just anything," and then letting him think that what he has produced is automatically "good," is an example of the Finger-Paint Syndrome: "I did it, ergo it is good!" It is a grave ~~dis~~service to a student to let him think he has written something that is good, when any objective reader would determine that it is not only NOT good, but seems to have no purpose, no content, and no audience. All it shows is that effort has been expended--and sometimes it's another student's effort anyway.

Students who take "creative" writing, or "self-expression" or "personal development" writing courses in sub-college writing, are distressed and appalled when asked to write something with content and meaning, in a form that is grammatically, idiomatically, and rhetorically acceptable. One need no longer bother with hoping for fluency, control, subtlety, or organization.

Many students have been misled by the thought that the process--the steps or antics one goes through to produce something written on paper, so it can be "turned in"--is what is important, that WHAT they write does not matter. The fact of having written is itself important, as in potty-training.

The fact of having labored and produced, not the product, warrants hurrahs, and a good mark.

What a student writes is important, as he will find, once he is out of school. The process by which he writes it is, of course, also important, but too often it becomes the only goal. Teaching is not automatically good when it involves or needs gimmicks, or quaint and cutesy approaches, or delightful games.

The game approach to teaching writing teaches only how to play games, not how to write, and students are cynically successful at playing the games. What should survive, what is important, is what has been written. In real life it is the product, not the process, which is evaluated.