THE NEW NINETY-MINUTE PERIOD

by Lorraine Perkins

Faced with teaching Freshman Composition in ninety-minute periods during a five-week college summer session, I realized that my traditional methods developed for a quarterly class during the 1960's and 1970's weren't going to work. But after initial panic, I saw that the long period offered a chance to explore new methods and be as eclectic as I chose. The resulting class turned out to be fun.

Following the advice of Dr. Michael True, Assumption College, who emphasizes that language should first be heard, I began each period by reading a short poem or, as the course progress, part of a student's writing. When one shy boy said, "That's the first time anyone read something I wrote," I learned how significant this reading was to students.

Then we began the composing part of our period, and students enjoyed my compromise between journal writing and free writing. Knowing that they had little time out of class, I had them write in a journal for ten minutes during the class, using Peter Elbow's free-writing techniques.[1] However, I guided the content by providing a different stimulus each day. For instance, one day I gave each a peanut; on others I showed things such as a kite, a flag, a cartoon. Each time they were asked to describe the thing closely, then react to it, telling what it made them think. Once I blew bubbles, and I even demonstrated a yo-yo--feebly, but it elicited a remarkable free-form poem from one young man. Playing a whale song evoked forceful, vivid writing expressing fear and horror. These ungraded journals, along with the weekly essays, provided lively weekend reading for me.

The fun of free-writing was followed by serious business: a brief quiz on the assigned reading for the day. Archaic as giving quizzes in a comp class may seem, the quizzes served three purposes: an impetus for the students to do the reading, a reward for those who scored well (the total point count equaled the grade of one essay), and a jumping-off place for

the discussion of whatever ideas the reading dealt with.[2]

By the end of discussion, students needed some body movement, so I arranged various maneuvers; students needed a change from the old "stay-in-your-own-place" atmosphere. The movement was also necessary because each writing assignment included group sharing about topics and theses, about plans, and about editing rough drafts. No longer was helping one another considered cheating. The movement and grouping also had a hidden motive: to get the students to know each other and gain a sense of audience. The short five-week course allowed little time for this kind of learning, so I did what I could to let them see that they wrote to communicate, not just to earn a grade.

At times the groups included simply three students seated next to each other in a row; at other times, they would number off with all ones becoming a group, and so on. Occasionally, I'd have each half stand, face the other, and move to the opposite side of the room to gain a different perspective before forming groups. (Have you ever noticed how different a room "feels" from another viewpoint?)

Back at their desks, students faced the realities of editing. Fifteen years ago, teaching standard grammar and punctuation might have dominated the class period. Now, influenced by many studies, I showed students that the process of composing is special and different from that of editing, that the latter requires certain skills which can be learned, step by step. As I used the overhead projector freely (another change, and one that saved class time), they learned to polish their own rough drafts and to critique their classmates' papers. Having them do this saved my weekend time, for I was no longer reading first drafts.

As part of my eclectic approach, I kept the rhetorical modes as a solid base for essay assignments; after all, some traditions can stand. Students were creative and effective within this framework, in part, I believe, because they felt both relaxed and stimulated by the varied happenings in class. Other projects were squeezed in, too; for instance, some asked

for help in writing letters of application, not normally a part of our freshman comp. I brought in help-wanted ads, and with guidance, students responded by writing applications that emphasized their own strengths while following accepted forms.

One last change from years past was that in spite of the short session, we took two days off from classroom work at midterm and had individual conferences. I had learned through my work in the Writing Skills Center that the classroom hour was not the only time for teaching, and though each student's conference was necessarily brief, it was focused and thus productive.

All in all, the class was a satisfying experience for me, and the course evaluations by students showed, I'm happy to say, that most of them had enjoyed the course as much as I had.

NOTES

[1]Peter Elbow's book Writing With Power (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) has a thorough discussion of his methods.

[2]I found that the text by Morton A. Miller Reading and Writing Short Essays (New York: Random House, 1980) contained teaching material written so that students could learn by reading without class discussion. The many, varied short essays given as examples suited our time constraints well.

THE CONFERENCE FOR STUDENT WRITERS CELEBRATES ITS TENTH BIRTHDAY IN 1984

by Jane Rice

Except within the established framework of MCTE and NTCE, few of the writing teachers who created The Conference for Student Writers had the experience in interschool cooperation so familiar to debate and athletic coaches. Only two teachers