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Letter From the Editor

TO: Readers of the Wisconsin English Journal
RE: The Future of the Journal

I encourage all the voices in our profession to speak; I heartily welcome the college and university and technical school viewpoints, I strongly encourage more secondary ideas, and I especially hope for greater participation from elementary teachers. We all share a love of language and a desire to empower others with its myriad enrichments. I would like to see the Wisconsin English Journal consistently full of professional writing that puts the relevant issues (and maybe even some of the supposedly irrelevant ones) before us to examine, assimilate or reject.

I appreciate the assistance of co-editor Mary Alea, professor of English at UW-Eau Claire, and Tiffany Bethel who will bring valuable added perspective and practical knowledge to the publication. Like my able predecessor, Dr. Tim Hirsch, I hope too that the Journal can be a place where creative dialogues prick us to practice our profession with continued enthusiasm and ever greater expertise. I commend Dr. Hirsch. The Journal must evolve in scope, style, and format, and Tim Hirsch has begun that evolution. I would like to continue it. I look forward to hearing your voices.

Stephen Fisher
Wisconsin English Journal co-editor
English Department
West High School
Wausau, WI 54401

Call for Manuscripts

New Editor Places Call For Manuscripts

I am interested in exploring the possibility of a thematic direction for the Journal; depending on submissions, I may attempt to include and arrange articles on a major theme for each issue. I don't know if that will work, or even if it should work, but I may experiment. To that end, I suggest an initial theme, or "call" for potential submissions:

1) The literary canon—a loaded gun?
   —What should it be?
   —Should it exist at all?
   —What has been the nature and evolution of the canon in your professional lifetime?
   —What canon would your students identify and defend?

Of course, writers may always submit articles on any idea they think may snare the interest of Journal readers; to paraphrase the many tantalizing sweepstakes letters I receive, you don't have to write on the editor's proposed themes to win.

Please send your manuscripts to the above address. Thank you.
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Chisholm Award Winner

Presented by Mary Meiser

As I thought about presenting this award, I mostly fretted: how would I manage to convey the character and accomplishments of this year's recipient? How would I condense a quarter of a century of professionalism into a few hundred words? Then, my mind suddenly made one of those intuitive, if strange, leaps from a newspaper article to the character of the person whom we honor today.

The news article, featuring an archeological find of ancient buffalo bones in the river valley of the same name, south of Eau Claire, spoke of the Wisconsin of bison, of prairie stretching from La Crosse to Green Bay, and of Green Bay itself as grasslands.

It was almost fanciful, this image of Wisconsin as prairie, and it was quickly followed by an image of the men and women who forged the character of the prairie, a romanticized image, perhaps, but one which lingers not only in our literature but also in our reality—because we know people who reflect the vision, the steadfastness, the creativity and the perspective which settled our prairie.

It occurred to me that the recipient of this year's award, born in the Buffalo River Valley and now residing on the edge of Green Bay, was one of those people. Suddenly, I knew I could speak of the recipient of this year's Chisholm Award winner, Mark Heike of Bay Port Senior High School, in the framework of these personal qualities, qualities which have also defined him professionally and for which we honor him today.

Vision and steadfastness are two qualities we associate with the prairie: the ability to scan the horizon, set the goal, and work to achieve it. It made no difference if one worked alone or collaboratively—the planning was thorough. It made no difference if one's efforts went unrecognized—the tasks were done well.

A person with vision and steadfastness was a person upon whom others depended, the lifeblood of the prairie. Mark's career is a testament to vision and steadfastness: in his school district, whether developing new curriculum and new courses, serving as department chair or union leader, Mark could be counted on to plan, carry out, and complete whatever task assigned or needed. In the years leading to presidency of the Wisconsin Council, and in the presidency itself, Mark demonstrated once more his ability to set goals and achieve them, to meld past,
present and future.

Currently, serving as chair of WCTE's professional development committee, Mark concentrates on our future: what do we need, not just to maintain ourselves as professionals, but to flourish as professionals? In these times of reduced resources, finding ways for teachers to maintain their professionalism is a major challenge, one to which Mark has dedicated himself. And one which goes largely unrecognized and unrewarded.

When Wisconsin teachers attend a regional conference and come away knowing they have received good value for the time and money invested, been stimulated by ideas and energized through interactions with other professionals, they owe thanks to Mark and his quiet leadership.

Vision without discipline, without steadfastness, however, ends up a mental exercise. Mark is, without a doubt, steadfast, dependable and responsible to the task at hand, someone to be counted upon. Working without fanfare, as though what is expected is simply one's best effort, is characteristic of Mark.

In his service with the Wisconsin Council, Mark was and continues to be one of those rare people upon whom others can depend. The small but essential detail, the "I-will-call-you-on-Friday" becomes the call on Friday; the "I'll-get-this-in-writing" becomes the rapid summary of notes mailed to committee members. The promises made and kept, the commitments carried through, are for me—and I am certain for all who have worked with Mark—the hallmark of his style, the stamp of his character.

Creativity, an essential component of vision, is another characteristic associated with the prairie spirit. The ability to link the unfamiliar with the familiar, to suggest and to implement new or different ways of thinking and doing are illustrated on Mark's many and varied responsibilities within his school district: as an English department chair; as one who developed the district's first writing lab, first writing assessment, and first advanced placement course. Caring about those students most alienated from English, Mark also developed the district's summer school language arts program for students at risk. Recognizing the lifelong contributions of retiring teachers, Mark initiated a district-wide program to honor them more formally. These efforts, largely unsung, are at the core of professionalism.

Finally, a quality which I am certain has to underlie every prairie spirit in this state; a sense of perspective, with an accompanying sense of humor essential in adapting to whatever a somewhat quixotic world might turn up. Underlying and underscoring Mark's professionalism is a keen sense of humor, a quick wit, the kind of wryness we associate with someone who has surveyed the scene, and found humor where others might find mild despair, especially in the persistent follies of education as bureaucracy.

Whether it is a verbal comment or a neatly drawn symbol on a piece of correspondence, Mark reminds us that we may be taking ourselves and our educational role too seriously. This ability, so needed as we traverse the daily routines which drain us, is a special trait.

I am reminded of a scene in which Mark described an administrative visit to his classroom, a visit with the sole purpose of evaluating his teaching. The administrator's bald head was directly in line with a spider carefully winding its way downward, an event every teenager in the room was anticipating with glee.

Imagine the scene: you are being formally evaluated, the class has its collective attention on a spider, and the evaluator sits quite unaware of the impending drama. Some of us would panic, fear what kind of write-up will follow this inattentive and potentially disruptive class. Mark, however, savored the drama for its humor and thus survived it with a characteristic grace under pressure. Consequently, those of us who have worked with Mark over the years, have come to expect and cherish his ability to make us smile, no matter how solemn our task or formidable our challenge.

These qualities—vision, steadfastness, creativity, and perspective—are Mark Heike. They have served him and our profession well. In recognition of this service, I am honored to present him with our organization's most prestigious award.

Mary Meiser teaches English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.
Poetic Process

Patrick Phair

My father picked green tomatoes
Before the frost;
Under the reptilian vines brown and brittle,
He plundered
The smooth shiny treasures
mired close to the black earth
Wrapped in newsprint
Like glass ornaments of Christmas,
He busheled them
In the cellar safe from pierce of cold.

In January he would emerge
from the basement darkness,
Pull back the wadded paper
of old news and worn words:

Ta Da!

Bulging.

Juicy.

Dripping red he sliced
treasure into wedges,
shared his wealth
in winter kitchen warmth.
Colorado Mountain Promises Cycling Experience . . . and Delivers

RuthAnn Reynen

As we turned for these tortuous (as I was soon to learn) miles, the road narrowed considerably—a warning I ignored. We met one land yacht hugging the middle of the road, apparently afraid of tumbling off the precipitous edge.

As the road narrowed, its surface deteriorated and so did my confidence. The air grew cooler and cooler. The sun disappeared behind the clouds hanging over the peaks, and my hands, clad only in thin rubber rain gloves, began to feel as if rigor mortis had set in.

The Frog and I fell further and further behind The Lear; finally, the cold forced me to stop in order to restore some warmth to my hands. I “flapped” my arms as if I were about to lift off, hoping to bring back the flow of blood. With a small pinhole through the ice in my veins which allowed for some blood circulation, I set off.

Snow started to fall. Had I been riding in more comfort (in a car with a powerful heater), I would have noticed that the area resembled one of those crystal globes filled with “snow” that floats when the...
globe is shaken. But I wasn't comfortable. I was exceedingly cold. I didn't notice.

Furthermore, this paved road turned into pot-hole paradise at every switchback until the summit. With my limited skill, I was trying to defy gravity and keep that bike upright and on the so-called road.

For the last seven miles I had been envisioning the quaint visitor center that I imagined was at the summit. In this vision I was standing in front of a roaring fire with a steaming cup of chocolate clasped in my slowly-thawing hands.

"I flapped my arms as if I were about to lift off, hoping to bring back the flow of blood."

The windowless, doorless, and roofless structure at the top froze my dream. Steve tried to convince me that standing next to what had been an inside wall would warm me—I wasn't sure how—and I began to suspect his motive in suggesting we ride up here.

Because the inside wall wasn't warm, I began to flap my arms again—much to the consternation of some fellow visitors who looked at me as if to say that flapping might not help me fly but it might get me to a place where my mental state could be checked.

By the time I had not warmed up, the snow was flying furiously. It crossed my mind that the road might be slick. As I negotiated the pot-holed parking lot, I had no time to think about the road. The snow flew ever more furiously and I wondered if I would ever see the bottom of this mountain. I wondered what they did with motorcyclists whose hands froze and fell off. When I did reach the road, I looked down and realized I would be riding through an inch of slush. I panicked. I reminded myself that I had two wheels. I panicked again!

Slowly and carefully I crept ahead convinced that at any moment the bike would shoot out from under me and go off the cliff while I would slide in front of an oncoming car whose driver would run over me because the roads were too slick for him to stop. As I looked ahead, my worst fears were realized; a four-wheel-drive truck was facing me in my lane. Behind him was a car whose front wheels were hanging over the edge of the cliff! Due to the road conditions, the driver had not been able to negotiate the nearly 90 degree turn. Fortunately, the driver of the truck was helping get the car back on the road.

I stopped to take stock of the curve and to see if I had the inner strength to negotiate it; secretly I was wondering if the four-wheel-drive truck could manage to rope the frog on his vehicle. I could slide into the cab and turn the heater up. Fat chance. I crept around the curve instead.

Several thousand feet lower, the snow stopped. We reached the beginning of good road, and the lodge. Steve pulled into the parking lot of the lodge. When I pulled up next to him, he asked me if I wanted a mug of hot chocolate.

Some mountains don't need to be climbed. Some questions don't need to be answered.

RuthAnn Reymen is a Language Arts Teacher at Southwest High School in Green Bay, Wisconsin.
Another Small Victory

Gary Jones

A good teacher is often by necessity a rather accomplished thief. Subsequently, when I read of English teacher Jessica Siegel’s autobiographical essay assignment in Samuel G. Freedman’s Small Victories, an excellent account of her success with disadvantaged New York City high school students, I became itchy fingered. While my school is small, rural, and Midwestern, I still find myself taking small victories whenever I find one.

Siegel assigned an autobiographical essay that her students could use as a part of applications for admission to universities or for scholarships. Ninety percent of her non-college prep English students attended college after high school, an enviable ratio.

From the experience gained through years of teaching teenagers and from raising a couple of my own, I know the fate of scholarship/admissions essays. Many students procrastinate writing them. Sometimes because of the priority of other homework, sometimes because of their own adolescence. Consequently, the essays may go unwritten or are slapdash affairs that do not represent students’ best work. The students look bad; the school looks bad, and especially, the English teacher looks bad.

When I told our school’s guidance counselor of my plan to have all of my senior English students, undecided along with college-bound, write the autobiographical essays as a class project, she was delighted. She had frequently experienced frustration at scholarships which went begging for lack of applicants as students never got around to writing the required essays, or at the comments she received from organizations regarding the shabby quality of the essays that were written.

At my request, she located a number of application forms that asked autobiographical questions. At a glance I could see a pattern developing in the type of information required, and easily created a guideline for my students to follow. (Freedman alludes to Siegel’s autobiographical essay assignment in Small Victories, but he does not provide any instructional details.) As I teach my students that old composition chestnut, the five paragraph essay, I used a similar organizational structure for their application writing.

The first paragraph of the essay was to begin with a few sentences discussing the student’s future in a general way, the importance or difficulty of making decisions, for example, and then to end with a thesis statement that makes a specific assertion about the student’s plans for the future.

A specified topic was to be discussed in each of the three middle paragraphs of the essay. Students could choose the order which best satisfied their sense of structure, but were reminded of the importance of using transitions to create a unified essay.

One of the three paragraphs was devoted to the student’s accomplishments both in and out of school. Here was the place to write about extracurricular activities, awards and honors, jobs, and other achievements.

Another paragraph was to outline the student’s plans for the future. Seniors were to be as specific as possible regarding post-high school study and career goals, if necessary, indicating choices still to be made.

The third paragraph was to discuss the influence of a particular person, experience, or issue in the student’s choice of a field of study or career. Often a teacher, a job, or a cause has led a young person to a particular career.

The final paragraph, of course, brings the essay to a close. Whichever technique a student uses for
ending the writing, he or she must speak of the future with optimism, express a willingness to work hard, and convey a personal sense of commitment.

After I introduced the writing assignment to my students, explained the structure and development of the essay, and discussed the potential importance of the composition regarding their future, I invited the guidance counselor to class to discuss the project. She reinforced the points I had made and offered additional suggestions. In particular, she helped students brainstorm for appropriate information to include in the accomplishment paragraph of the essay. Perhaps most important, she provided students with additional motivation for writing the essay.

"Each student appeared idealistic, enthusiastic, and accomplished. Apart from the investment each one was making in the future, every young person was also increasing the value of his or her personal stock."

Finally, I explained the mechanics of putting the autobiographical essay to good use. The essay was to be word processed, saved on a computer disk, and submitted to me for a grade, as would be any other writing assignment.

After I returned the essays with grades and editorial suggestions, each student was directed to give me a revised copy which I in turn delivered to the guidance counselor who placed the work in the student’s file.

As the year progresses, each student uses the essay as needed. If necessary, a back-up copy of the writing may be produced and modified for a particular application. Or, only the appropriate paragraphs may be drawn off for different applications. Should a student’s computer disk be lost or damaged, a backup copy is on file at guidance.

The counselor refers to the essays when she writes letters of recommendation for students. And students are encouraged to give a copy of their autobiographical essay to any teacher asked for a letter of recommendation. We all know that a recommendation which includes specific information carries more weight than one which praises a student in a general, generic way.

Both the guidance counselor and I were delighted with the outcome of the assignment. The graduating class that was the first to benefit from the autobiographical writing was not one of the stronger groups to emerge from the hallowed halls of our institution. But their application essays were the strongest.

As the counselor and I read through the writings, in addition to being delighted, we were inspired. Not only did the students who were academically at the top of the class look good, but so did those students who are often lost in the middle. One of those mid-range students wrote of her desire to be a teacher. She told of the inspiration she had received from the second grade teacher for whom she was a student aide, and she recalled her joy as a Sunday school teacher when her pupils came up to her for big hugs.

Another student described the experience of travelling to Mexico as a part of a church group to work with the underprivileged, and her commitment to continuing this work as a career after witnessing firsthand the poverty and suffering that exists in the world.

Still another boy described the wonderment he felt as a small child looking up at the stars at night, and his determination as a young adult to pursue a career in science.

Each student appeared idealistic, enthusiastic, and accomplished. Apart from the investment each one was making in the future, every young person was also increasing the value of his or her personal stock. The introspective process of reviewing past accomplishments and future ideals is psychologically healthy for adolescents who are by nature so troubled with a lack of confidence in themselves.

As I read through the essays, I wished that I had more than grades to award. Oh, that it were within my power to grant them scholarships or to offer them admittance to the colleges of their choice.

But I suspected in many instances that I may have done just that by having them write the essay. Another small victory.

This essay was the first place winner of the Jarvis E. Bush competition. Gary Jones teaches at Gilbralter High School in Fish Creek, Wisconsin.
Better Oral Reports: Don't Read! Postwrite!

Vincent Lopresti

Have you ever sat through an oral report wishing it were over but dreading the next speaker's arrival? No matter how promising the topic, or how dedicated the reporter, you automatically anticipate the worst and are rarely surprised by what follows.

In truth you can't spend much time in academia without suffering through such well intentioned atrocities as the reading of an anemic oral report or an interminable seminal paper. Instructors do their best to devise provocative angles to freshen important subjects and serious students actually relish their research. But monotone deliveries, halting cadences, pained silences—all promise agony because the student talks to the lectern rather than to the class.

Nevertheless, few instructors will deny the value of the seminar exercise. It is usually a student's first major attempt to develop and present a disciplined lecture—and more often than not he ardently wishes to do well. So even when the final product discourages the student, frustrates the instructor and bores the class, the extended oral report continues to assert its usefulness.

This communication breach begins with the presenter's first look at the manuscript: he breaks eye contact with the class and rarely regains it. Even more alienating is the lack of voice contact created by the student reading into the lectern rather than addressing the class. The reader drones on oblivious to his audience.

The simple solution that I employ to the problem eliminates the medium—the printed page, for when the report is not before the student's eyes it can't be read. Consequently, presenters have little choice but to look at and talk to their audience.

The remedy suggested itself after my first deadly long day of oral presentations of research papers. At the time there were 23 students who had just completed three weeks of research on contemporary concerns. The class members were anxious to share results of their genuinely animated research and I ingenuously thought the omens of student enthusi-
asm promised nothing short of a spell binding reporter and a rapt audience. I erred.

With eight-to-ten page research papers in hand students journeyed to the lectern, mechanically read their reports and then fled to their chair. The audience was no happier. Students shuffled, glanced at the clock or proofread their own papers while waiting their turn at the guillotine. And time evaporated as early reporters overstayed their allotments. I then began advising subsequent reporters to trim their presentations—often resulting in truncated reports that ended in the middle with hurried conclusions. It was a mild disaster. When class ended, we were all glad it wasn't any longer.

In subsequent semesters, I streamlined the report session in stages hoping to avoid a recurrence of that first catastrophe. First, time was strictly allocated, then content restricted to major points, and during delivery students were coached for clarity, emphasis and brevity—a reluctant, but necessary teacher intrusion. Reporting became more efficient but no more interesting. The printed page still dominated and the reading still had the unreality of a dress rehearsal rather than a real performance.

By the third year of offering the course, I brought into the oral report Peter Elbow's Freewrite exercise hoping for the spontaneity and vitality that I often experienced when using the freewrite. Like many instructors, I have had successful results using the freewrite as a prewriting exercise to initiate class discussion. But a "post write" was a new application that I hoped would help to stimulate the oral report.

So on report day of the third year, I collected the research papers as soon as students entered the room. Then the class was directed to freewrite for ten minutes accounting for the what, why and wherefore of their freshly finished papers. They were given legal-sized yellow paper and ten minutes to:

1. identify their topic and thesis;
2. explain why they chose it;
3. summarize their findings;
4. contrast them with their initial expectations;
5. conclude by stating the significance of their paper.

To repeat (for emphasis), they were asked to do all of the above in a ten-minute freewrite—without their reports before them. The writing was strictly off the top of their heads. Then they were given the lectern to report their perceptions to the class in not much more and no less than ten minutes.

The result was edifying. The reports came off so rapidly that listeners did not have the opportunity to look at the clock, and only the internally and perpetually bored remained so. One by one the reporters came out from hiding behind the lectern. Having no multi-paged report to hide behind, they saw audience reaction to their one-page fragmented freewrites and began ad libbing to clarify the vague and illustrate the abstract.

Furthermore, in looking their audience in the eye they delivered their remarks in a conversational tone. The usual stiffness that comes from the lectern vanished after the first few sentences. The reports resulted in human communication of digested materials, not regurgitated sources. There was no reading of lengthy quotes or pausing to correct newly discovered typos.

Indeed, the benefit of reporting from such a post write is that once underway, the student finds his hurried jottings little more than cues. He realizes he is on his own and, to his surprise, managing it. From then on the capable student quickly learns to gage the clarity of his presentation from the eyes of his audience, making elaborations and additions as needed to ensure interest and understanding. The audience as well, relaxes and listens to their friend’s remarks. The alien who usually hides behind the lectern has been replaced by a familiar classmate.

In addition to spontaneous delivery, much of the effectiveness of the freewrite stems from the hasty writing to get as much down on paper as possible in the ten minute writing period. The student has no time to debate or evaluate what to put down or how to phrase it. He must turn off his mental editor and allow his stream of consciousness to follow its own channels. What results more often than not is the unconscious retrieval of what the reporter had found most interesting—and what turns out to be most interesting to his classmates.

At first I considered allowing students to keep papers during the freewrite. But on second thought I decided it would be counter productive. Students would constantly refer to them and resort to verbatim copying. It turns out best to collect papers before the freewrites are written. But focusing is needed. To help them focus, students should be given the series of questions noted above in written form to ensure a modicum of structure and a curb to digression. Given clear direction and stringent time limits, students capsule wonders.

The freewrite approach deserves consideration, especially, if you have sat through more than your share of stultifying seminar reports. And you will know the system is working well when the audience spontaneously interrupts reporters to ask for more information or clarification—usually unheard of or instructor-induced in standard seminars. It’s an awesome experience to see a student present a genuine question and the reporter respond with a genuine answer. When this happens all semblance of the seminar being a mere dress rehearsal for the real world vanishes.

Vincent Lopresti teaches in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.
Discovering Romanticism and Classicism in the English Classroom

Sandra Stark

If our students are to develop critical thinking skills and learn to understand literature as an aesthetic and intellectual experience as well as an emotional one, they need guiding concepts. In order to provide them with two crucial literary concepts, I developed a plan for introducing romanticism and classicism to my sophomore British Authors classes. Along the way, I acquired a new understanding of both my students and my own conception of romanticism and classicism. My students not only learned new approaches to literature; they also acquired new ways to look at themselves and their own lives.

I began with an introduction to the notions of inductive and deductive thinking. These are notions already familiar to students although they often don’t consciously know it. By relating deductive thinking to their geometry class and inductive thinking to their science class, I was able to move quickly to a discussion of some of the advantages and disadvantages of each method and also make clear that we are generally doing both at once. This became a foundation for enabling students to become more aware of their own thought process.

Explaining that we were going to work inductively at first, I provided groups of about three to four students with packets of pictures of everyday objects and places (dishes, jewelry, cars, gardens, furniture, watches) as well as one or two fine art reproductions. Each packet contained two pictures of each type of item, one romantic in style and one classical in style. Students were given one sheet of paper containing these directions. “Sort these pictures into two groups. You should feel that the pictures in each group share some similar qualities or traits. For each group, list the qualities or traits you think the pictures share.”

The puzzle-like nature of the activity generated great interest and sometimes great frustration. Many students began sorting by object, i.e. putting the cars together, the furniture, etc. When they realized that wasn’t going to work, they began exploring other approaches, modern vs. older, living vs. non-living, each time moving further away from the “literal” sense (subject matter) of the pictures. Interestingly, the more analytical (“left-brained”) students created categories and then attempted to make the objects fit them while the more “right-brained” students opted for emotional (this picture makes me feel) or visual (neat vs. messy, plain vs. complex) categories.

This activity, because of its mystery, was extremely engaging. In fact, both classes were observed by administrators who lost interest in taking notes and wanted to sort pictures along with the students. Finally, after about 20 minutes of very intense interaction, all groups had assembled piles of pictures which did indeed share characteristics of romantic and classical styles. In order for this part of the plan to work, the pictures have to be carefully chosen. I borrowed through catalogs (especially museum catalogs), specialty magazines and books of art reproductions.

Each packet contained two pictures, one romantic and one classical, of dishes and/or tableware, gardens, cars, clothing, jewelry, watches, furniture, and paintings. More specifically I included dramatic pictures of clothing (flowing scarves, bright colors, 60’s retreads) and paired with trim shirts from L.L.Bean, watches with very simple geometric faces paired with watches whose faces were decorated with flowers, gardens with irregular, “natural” layouts paired with highly geometric formats. I also tested the pictures on semi-willing victims including my husband (an English professor) and two members of our school’s math department.

At this point I asked for a spokesperson for each group to explain what they believed the pictures in each group had in common.
The following list is a synthesis of the reports from two classes.

Group A
angular, geometric
simple, plain
conservative
practical
basic shapes
organized
sense of perfection
few or no flaws
lots of right angles
sleek, cold, modern
ordinary objects
unemotional

Group B
variety and complexity in color and detail
decorated, elaborate details
individual
imaginative
colorful
spontaneous
brought unrest to mind
lots of contrasts
"heard noise in picture"
associated with particular
time period or place
emotional, bold, "artistic"

These lists clearly reflect the strong romantic bias of the American teenager. They perceived classical objects as dull, unemotional, ordinary, cold, conservative while romantic objects were exciting, imaginative, bold, artistic.

At this point I had not yet introduced the terms “romantic” and “classical,” so, in order to maintain the visual approach to the concepts I turned to a two part slide set on romanticism and classicism. This set proceeds deductively, defining terms and then tracing the classic and romantic impulses throughout history. After viewing the introduction of the slide set, which is a summary of the characteristics of romanticism and classicism, I stopped the tape for a discussion of whether the narrator was proceeding inductively or deductively and why.

Students readily perceived the deductive organization and explained that time constraints might be the major reason for choosing this organization. This discussion laid the groundwork for later discussions of the organization of their own writing.

I then asked the students to return to their pictures. Did the terms introduced in the slide presentation describe their sets of pictures? Of course they did. With these ideas in mind the students were much more able to respond to the rest of the slides which traced classicism through Greece, Rome, the medieval period, the Renaissance, and 18th century. (And which afforded an opportunity to reinforce the importance of the world history class they took last year as well as the medieval and renaissance literature we studied this year.)

The slide set poses the question of whether we are living in a classical or romantic period and provides sample slides of modern art for discussion. These always provoke lively commentary because the students now have an analytical tool at their disposal. At this point I asked them to go back to their stacks of pictures. Did they want to shift any from one pile to another? If the group was very accurate in its classification, why? Were any pictures ambiguous? Then we shifted the discussion to the world around us. Is Rufus King High School a romantic or classical building (very problematic, built in the 30's, it has elements of both). Can you describe romantic/classical buildings in Milwaukee? Gardens? Clothing styles? Music? Finally, I asked how a writer would show romantic or classical qualities in literature and we collectively drew up a list of possibilities which represented a hypothesis to be tested as we read the literature.

As a follow-up assignment, I asked the students to write a short essay in which they describe something romantic or classical in their lives. A rather distressing number held forth in precise detail about the grim, classical qualities of school. Now I don't happen to see classicism as grim, but a brief consideration of the connotations of the words listed for Group A suggests how teenagers feel about it. Perhaps there's a lesson here. Schools need to develop more of the characteristics of romanticism to appeal to the inherently romantic American teenager.

A case in point, I teach some classes in a room which is essentially an old shop with the machines removed. It has been recycled as a theater classroom and comes equipped with decrepit old chairs and couches and rugs and large pillows and other miscellany and lots of room for a set of traditional desks as well. When we move the class from rows of traditional desks to a circle of students sitting in couches, in chairs, at desks, at tables and even on the floor, class becomes much more productive and, paradoxically, discipline becomes a non-existent issue. It may look like chaos but the students feel comfortable and therefore are much more able to focus on the classwork at hand. Students do, however, write about a variety of things beyond school including their rooms (generally romantic messes), the seasons, their houses, and sometimes even their parents (generally classical in the extreme, but not always).

This lesson, which takes about two to three periods, lays the foundation for both the romantic and classical periods of British literature. From the point of view of the teacher, it stimulates both right and left-brain thinking, provides a creative use of cooperative learning, and, most importantly, gives students an opportunity to discover ideas for themselves. But more than that it enables students to begin to develop some sensitivity to the aesthetic impulse of a work of literature and to see the relationship between art and life. And so they take one more step to achieving the sense of power that grows from understanding, and achievement that is the goal of all thoughtful education.

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Creative Learning Through the Use of Writing in Writing, Listening, Reading, Literature, Speaking, and Media

Richard W. Halle

Writing is a powerful means of learning, and students should be given opportunities to use writing to get course material “right with themselves” (Britton 1975) and to create their own “webs of meaning” (Vygotsky 1962).

One of the strongest statements of the need for emphasizing writing to learn comes from Randall Freisinger, who makes a direct connection between documented student inability to handle formal operations and the schools general lack of attention to the value of writing to learn. Freisinger states “cognitive impairment of a significant number of our students is due to schools’ neglect of the learning function of writing”. That means that they are unable to move from concrete thinking to abstract thinking.

When students cannot function at the level of formal operations, they have difficulty discerning cause and effect relationships, comprehending propositional statements, writing convincing arguments, discriminating between observations and inferences, inferences from evidence, analyzing a line of reasoning, visualizing outcomes and drawing analogies.

Middle and secondary education should provide students with a way of thinking, not just a set of facts. Teachers today cannot hope to give students all the information they will need for their lifetime. Much of what students learn in school will be obsolete in a few years.

Recognizing the pre-eminence of thinking over facts means changing ideas about “covering” material in a course (Gere 1985). Many of the teachers involved in the Writing to Learn project came to the conclusion that reading a specific number of chapters was less important than working with a small number of chapters in a way that enables students to make connections with the materials.

Writing is uniquely suited to foster abstract thought. Writing is an extremely focused activity which simultaneously involves hand, eye and brain. Writing one word after the other leads to more coherent and sustained thought than thinking or speaking. The physical limitations imposed on writers makes writing a slow process and this slowness seems to free some parts of the brain for the discoveries so common among writers. (Gere 1985)

The students in my classes the last two years have not had the opportunity to explore their ability through writing. Most of the “basic classes”, I was informed, should be given the same material that regular classes receive. The only difference was the process was slower. The use of more work sheets, fill in the blank sheets, and a variety of workbook sheets were to be used to keep them on task or busy. These sheets, workbooks, material novels, etc., were locked in and never changed from year to year.

Enter another new teacher, who feels writing can accomplish more than any textbook or workbook. I feel writing to learn is the basis for the curriculum that each year should change to meet the needs of the class that arrives each fall. The following quotations only reinforce the writing to learn process that is now a part of most classrooms.

I would certainly have boys practice composition and be constantly employed in that exercise...In boys we cannot demand or even hope for finished eloquence; yet there is more virtue in a rich endowment and noble aspirations and a spirit which in its inexperience yearns to reach the unattainable...Let this age then be bold oft-times, inventive too and prone to delight in its own invention, though they may still be lacking in exactness and clear-cut outline. It is easy to correct exuberance, but barrenness no toil can overcome...this point too is worthwhile to urge, that youthful minds sometimes give way beneath the
weight of correction excessively severe, for they become despondent and grieve and in the end conceive a hatred for their studies and, what is worst of all, in their fear of blundering everywhere, attempt nothing. (Marcus Fabius Quintilian, 91 A.D.)

Movement from the traditional teacher-centered classroom to the student-centered classroom must be gradual. Creative learning through the use of writing is a new process and each class will vary in its ability to grasp the new ideas presented.

The very first idea presented is a personal writing journal. About five minutes each day is set aside to write in a personal journal. The purpose is to encourage the student to explore ideas on paper and develop fluency. During the time the student is writing, I also write in my journal or on the board on the assigned subject. these are subjects they give me, or on some personal matter that I am working through. The first few weeks are very structured with ideas they can write on. Subjects might include:

- Answering a questionnaire that includes:
  - What is your favorite TV show?
  - What is your favorite movie?
  - What is your favorite color?

Additional questionnaires may include questions such as describing your classmates physical appearance, favorite subject or favorite pastime. As time progresses, the questions become more complex and require more writing time. Eventually the journal serves as a source of writing ideas that follow the writing process to the end, and a final draft is handed in.

Writing is a valuable tool to determine how well a student is listening to instructions and information that is being given in class. Listening, as a skill, needs constant development. Early in the year I use a condensed version of Jack London's White Fang. The assignment for my students is to keep a critical listening/literature journal. A modified Cornell journal method is used. Notes are kept on the right hand side of the paper. The left hand margin is used to record questions or comments. After each days reading, questions and comments are discussed. On the final day, I read to the final six paragraphs of the novel. At this point I stop. The final assignment is to write their own ending to the story.

At other times during the year I stress listening through the use of an index card. At the end of a discussion I will have them list the one most important item they learned that day. At this point I know if they have grasped the assignment for that day.

Often the reading of a novel is accompanied by stacks of ditto worksheets. The student is reading for minute details rather than for the enjoyment intended by the author. The reading of Where the Red Fern Grows offers a unique opportunity to create a newspaper about topics presented in the book. After the students have started the book, we brainstorm topics that would make newspaper articles. Articles in the past have included:

- Coon hunting
- Rifles
- Wild game recipes
- Editorials on hunting laws
- Dear Abbey
- Pencil art pictures
- Cartoons
- Travel information
- Interviews with characters
- Ads for various items used
- Hound dogs
- Plants (red fern)
- Family relations
- Raccoons

The final product is put together in a newspaper format or a booklet that is Xeroxed for each student.

Writing to speak offers many opportunities to explore the varied interests of the class. It is a process that also can have many audiences.

One audience can be the class. During the reading of a novel, I often assign one chapter to each student. While everyone reads the entire book, the chapter assignment includes an oral presentation about what happened in that chapter. The class then has a chance to compare their journal notes with what is presented and if there is any confusion, the problem can be cleared up immediately in class discussion.

Tape recordings offer the student another audience. This year the Wisconsin Public Radio offered students the chance to win prizes by writing and producing a radio program in one of the following six categories:

- Original Drama
- Dramatic Adaptation
- Documentary
- Interview
- Musical
- Humor

The two weeks spent in writing, finding music and sound effects, and recording the program was one of the most exciting times in the classroom this year.
Even with all the mistakes, the programs offered a wide range of stories from westerns to a documentary on suicide. The students enjoyed listening to the programs produced by all the groups. They are looking forward to the comments that will be returned with each tape after the judging is done.

The use of the media should include more than media for just entertainment. The use of music, art, movies, and videos should also motivate writing.

Music can motivate students to write. The variety of music used can start from simple circus music and progress to complicated classical music. The selections should also include contemporary music. The directions for the use of music in the classroom are simple:

1. Close your eyes;
2. Listen to the music;
3. Write down whatever visual images come to mind.

After a few days of writing and sharing, I introduce the second phase of the program. The students are given a sheet of action words. These are used to help the visual images become detailed written images. Art can also stimulate writing. The National Gallery in Washington, D.C. will provide copies of great art for fifty cents to a dollar per copy. Using enough copies to allow some choice in each class, I take one larger picture to demonstrate how the artist has used color, movement, and arrangement to focus the attention and flow of the picture. After we have done several of these orally, the students take the picture they have selected and

1. Write about what is happening in the picture or
2. Use the people in the picture and create a dialogue about what is happening in the picture.

Videos can also stimulate ideas. After reading Lord of the Flies, I show the original movie now on video. The visual images of Piggy, Ralph and Jack have a dramatic effect on the students. After viewing the film we write about which character we would have been in the video and how we would have reacted to the society on the island. This exercise leads to real self evaluation of ideas.

The use of writing-to-learn strategies places the student at the center of the teaching-learning process. It is a response-centered classroom. James Britton says that an essential part of the writing process is "explaining the matter to oneself".

In addition, explaining the matter to oneself encourages the student to make connections between the subject and their own life. This assumes that learning takes place only in relation to the learner's environment. It is this environment which provides a structure in which new information can be learned.

The process also requires the student to participate more actively in education than when he merely is required to listen to lectures and discussions, read books, and repeat on tests the information so acquired. It demands the students be aware of their learning, aware of their responses to new material and of how it relates to what they already know. Finally, it requires that they be willing and able to express those responses.

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Recommended Reading


Examining How We Teach English: In Need of a Theoretical Stance

Thomas J. Bucholz

Why consider theory?

Mention theory in teacher training courses or in-service workshops, and you’re likely to receive negative vibrations. “When there are thirty kids in my room, and I don’t have enough books or chairs,” some teachers say, “all the idealistic theories in the world won’t do much for me. Tell me what to do about that, and I’ll listen.” Others add, “With everything that I have to cover to meet the current mandates, and with the mounting pressures to meet competency demands, I have more important things to worry about than theory of teaching.” Still others point out how theories and methods seem to come and go with the seasons, so why should they bother to get excited about them in the first place?

It’s difficult not to sympathize with any of these reactions. There are some basic problems and troublesome situations teachers must face, most of which were imposed upon them, that are not easily resolved. There has also been a vivid history of program hawks, yarning for attention, and the underlying theories supporting their various viewpoints are diverse. Latching on to a working theory might very well seem like stepping into a maze. To make matters even worse, sometimes it’s easy to see through an intensive campaign to promote a theory as nothing more than an aggressive attempt to sell a program. Yes, it’s tempting to tune out when the discussion turns to theoretical principles.

At the same time, however, maybe it’s not so easy to sweep aside a notion that appears to be so fundamentally important, despite the motive for addressing it. With all the attention focused on schools and teaching today, especially in light of less than encouraging reports about progress, perhaps we need to reevaluate our basic assumptions about what we do and how we measure success. Consider for a moment that theory does affect our decision to open up in the classroom or to assert control, to make materials subordinate to engaging in activities or to follow a text, to draw out and use abilities or to push in sequenced skills, our practice has theoretical implications. Perhaps it is just as important to consider why we do something as it is to know ways to go about doing it.

Another reason for considering theory is that it allows for self-assessment of our beliefs and practices by providing a framework from which to view them. That assessment can be very personal and nonthreatening. What do I believe I’m trying to do? What am I doing? Is it working? Self-assessment can lead to an expanded awareness of what others do, a need to find out more via reading, observing, sharing, communicating with others, and ultimately, either assimilating ideas and doing something new or confirming what we have done. Whatever, the process of exploration is healthy.

Knowing the theory we believe in also helps us to plan what we do. Doesn’t it make sense that we should be consistent in our efforts? Can we on one day enter the English classroom as the Liberating Spirit, turn down the lights, play soft music, and get everyone to write poetry of the soul only to follow that up the next day as General Martinet by lecturing on the need for topic sentences with three major supports in paragraphs? It’s contradictory, and the students are the first ones to recognize it. Theory lays the foundation for practice. It gives us justification for doing what we do and helps us to determine how we go about doing it. In a sense, a good theory is very practical.

What do I believe I’m trying to do? What am I doing? Is it working? Perhaps those three questions provide a starting point for considering the theoretical considerations that confront us today. Basically, there are only two primary theories of learning that we need to consider. The first is the transmission theory. Others have used phrases like teacher
centered or material centered, mechanistic, and traditional academic achievement to describe this philosophy of learning. The second is the transaction theory. It has also been labeled organic, romantic, student centered or meaning centered. With both, the fundamental difference involves a view of how people learn.

For a long time, now, we have listened to the cry for “back to the basics” and interpreted it to mean a redoubling of efforts to teach skills, and we have always used tests designed to measure mastery of skills as a benchmark of our success. In other words, we have assumed all along that our theory of what must be learned and our methods of presenting and measuring it have remained a constant. So we tried harder to do it or did more of it. But here are other voices now, calling of change in our fundamental theoretical assumptions, suggesting that “back to the basics” does not simply refer to what we teach, but how we do it and why we do it that way. These voices merit attention.

The Transmissive View of Learning
In his monograph on critical thinking, Allan Neilsen (1989) identifies three basic assumptions about the world that underlie the transmissive view of learning. First, reality is viewed as something objective, tangible, material, measurable. Consequently, feelings, emotions, desires, personal experiences often go unacknowledged as having any influence on how we perceive and understand our knowledge of the world. Second, reality can be broken down into steps and stages, bits and pieces, discrete elements which can be reassembled like building blocks. Third, reality as a whole can be understood by closely examining the parts, the steps and stages, the bits and pieces it is broken into, and thus the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. This view of reality has had a tremendous influence on traditional learning theory and instructional practice.

In a school where instruction means transmission of knowledge, obviously, the teacher is the one who transmits. The teacher is the authority on the subject, the arbiter of right and wrong, the task master. Consequently, the student receives the state of knowledge on a topic when and as it is presented. The method of transmission is most often lecture, reading, drill, and measure. When content is complex or difficult to understand, a teacher (or publisher of educational programs) can break that content down into smaller, more easily understood parts or related skills, and students can then be led through an analysis of them. When tests show that skills haven’t been achieved, then more work, often drill with the parts, can be assigned. As Neilsen suggests, this model of learning has the appearance of being efficient, easy to manage, and easy to evaluate.

Let's consider the transmission theory of learning as it might occur in a high school English literature course. To begin, the teacher determines ahead of time what books and plays will be read, basing her/his decision in part on the scope and sequence charts in school curriculum guidelines and also on personal tastes for appropriate titles and authors. Perhaps those titles typically deemed appropriate by other authorities (critics) will most often be selected. A rationale for selecting them might include references to their being good, important, and necessary. For the most part, all the students in the class will read the same titles at the same time and receive the same instruction related to reading.

"With all the attention focused on schools and teaching today, especially in light of less than encouraging reports about progress, perhaps we need to reevaluate our basic assumptions about what we do and how we measure success."

Anticipating problems with understanding literature, a teacher may isolate component parts of the problem to work on, such as symbolism, allusions, oxymoron, rising action, conflict, resolution. Such elements might be identified and defined by the teacher, and then students might be asked to find more examples and eventually be quizzed or tested on the terms. When it comes to interpreting pieces of literature, say poetry for example, it might be a matter of moving line by line, looking for poetic devices and explaining references. Meaning is often explained, perhaps with reference to established interpretations, and divergence is limited. Then grasp of meaning is tested, with the teacher acknowledging and rewarding correct interpretations, and the next predetermined task is assigned.

At the lower levels, an English or language class using transmissive orientation might make much use of a handbook or workbook. Drill exercises are common, as students work with identifying elements of a sentence, for example, or parts of speech. Homework, in the form of worksheets or exercises, is assigned to increase the amount of drill and justified as being necessary to increase academic achievement. Periodically, standardized or criterion-referenced tests are administered to measure achievement, and the tests themselves adhere to the transmissive approach by measuring the component parts emphasized in programmatic materials.
The Transactive View of Learning

Diametrically opposed to the transmissive view of learning, with its focus on teachers and materials, is the transactive view, focusing on learners and learning. Assumptions about the nature of reality differ considerably between the transmissive and transactive views of learning. From the transactive point of view, as Nielsen (1989) points out, the world is seen much more subjectively as an ever-changing organism rather than as an inert and static mechanism. He likens it to a stream of energy, constantly progressing onward, and we are a part of the stream, inextricably tied up in it. Knowledge is not absolute and immutable but relative and temporary. A stream of energy cannot be divided into parts to be examined individually, for that destroys the nature of its reality. The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

In a classroom based on transaction, a teacher is collaborator involved with the students in a discovery process of making meaning. Because learners and learning are the focus of attention rather than teachers and materials, learning becomes a matter of constructing personal knowledge, not receiving conventional wisdom. In the transactive classroom, inquiry replaces lecture, teaching and drill as the method for learning. Making meaning through inquiry involves a transaction influenced by many variables, among them, perhaps central to them, the learner's experiences, feelings, needs. And all meaning is grounded in authentic context.

"What do I believe I'm trying to do? What am I doing? Is it working? Ultimately, we must come back to these three questions. They directly concern our personal view of learning."

In a transactive English class not all materials and lessons are preselected and planned in advance. Rather, considerable input for planning and selecting is sought from the students along the way. Each learner is viewed as unique, dependent of different experiences and learning styles. Because not everyone will be expected to do the same thing at the same time and to receive the same instruction related to it, many choices are allowed. In this classroom, students might opt to read popular trade books as well as or instead of basals or traditional titles. The teacher knows that learning to appreciate and evaluate what we read is an ability that must come from within, not a mandate dictated by others.

Instead of passing on the state of knowledge about reading literature, the teacher encourages development of an individual's ability to question, discriminate, discover, and affirm things on her/his own.

The teacher is a patient facilitator, making conditions right for learning, but allowing it to happen in its own due course. Rather than emphasizing finished products, correct answers, achievement test scores, importance is placed on the process of doing things and making meaning, and meaning is always viewed as variable. Divergence is acknowledged and even rewarded when it presents new ways to approach and solve problems. The sequences, steps and stages, bits and pieces learning, drill and practice, are replaced by engagement in projects with viable contexts and relevance. Thus, in this classroom, learning about language and literacy is accomplished by and while engaging in authentic language and literacy activities. There is no time or need to drill or memorize bits and pieces.

Reactions to the Theories

Because the transactive approach does not have the same long tradition of practice in our schools as does transmissive education, criticism of it is rather amorphous. From a teacher's point of view it is criticized as too demanding, requiring diversification, on the spot organization, unique record keeping strategies. Some point to the seemingly loose organization as lacking discipline and structure. By abandoning skill drills, achievement testing, and mastery of correct responses, and at the same time allowing for infusion of personal experience, feelings, and needs, the approach has also been labeled anti-intellectual. Others call it a fad or a reincarnation of some already discarded method of teaching. For the most part, however, these reactions seem to address the surface level features only, not the basic theoretical underpinnings that concern how people learn.

On the other hand, the transmission theory of learning has come under deliberate, organized attack in the last decade. With its focus on learning subskills or component parts, determined and presented by the teacher or program, it has been blamed for ignoring critical thinking, problem solving, and meaning making capabilities that are so necessary for informed adults. Frank Smith (1983) claims that the information-transmission approach has worked directly against the interests of literacy. He calls it information shunting, where students might become reasonably good at writing, for example, if they are told what exactly to do, when, and how much, or at quoting the views of others, but they are unconvincing at constructing a personal point of view or at arguing for or against the views of others. The approach establishes complete dependence on authority, and compliance with the authority's point of view.

Louise Rosenblatt (1980), in an article cleverly titled
"What Facts Does This Poem Teach You," also objects to the approach. Concerned especially with reading literature, she distinguishes between efferent and aesthetic responses that seem to be at odds with each other. The transmission approach encourages an efferent response, one that looks for important concepts or ideas to remember, objective facts, verifiable techniques. It ignores, in its analytical format, the purely aesthetic, personal, emotional reaction that is so natural and that makes reading so enjoyable. Kids develop an aesthetic response years before school begins, as their parents read to them at home. Then when formal instruction in reading begins, that fundamental strength often atrophies as more tedious analysis is demanded and only convergent reactions get rewarded. Thus, unfortunately, a poem, however moving, becomes only so many facts to learn, something that can be summed up on a worksheet.

Constance Weaver (1990) maintains that learning is more meaningful and enduring when students are actively involved in meaning-making rather than in the passive process of filling in blanks, taking notes at a lecture, or repeating information on a test. Such transmissive strategies have repeatedly been demonstrated to lack transfer quality. Being able to do well on bits and pieces, like review exercises, does not assure being able to do well with actual whole processes. Allan Neilsen (1989) condemns the approach as one where students learn to reply to others not only for the answers but also the questions and warns that it is fundamentally inadequate and potentially dangerous for the kind of citizenry we hope to have.

The transmissive view of learning is also criticized as unexciting, an approach that trivializes education. With its emphasis on drill activities and its extensive use of worksheets and end of chapter exercises, it has often been labeled the "drill and kill" method. Students begin rather early to say that English is dull and boring in school. When the only motivation for doing something is a grade and a vague promise that what they do will be needed at some time in the future, as Neilsen points out, relevance is obscure and interest wanes. Schools operating under the transmission theory of learning, complete with its apparent assembly line approach, are often referred to as factories. The criticism, scathing as it might appear, is gaining widespread momentum and becoming influential as a voice that will be reckoned with.

Foundations of the Theories

Those who promote the transactive concept of learning have reexamined and restated basic learning theory. What they promote (Edelsky, Altwerger and Flores 1991; Goodman 1986; Neilsen, 1989; Newman 1985; Smith 1975, 1985, 1988; Weaver 1990) has its foundation in developmental and cognitive psychology as well as psycholinguistic research into language acquisition and language development. Such research reveals that learning is a social process, collaborative and interactive. We learn best when we share our efforts, not when we compete with one another. Optimum conditions for learning occur when learners become actively and directly involved in authentic activities. We learn about language by using language to accomplish activities, not by analyzing it. Real purposes for learning something, rather than decontextualized exercises, provide the impetus for learning and account for the internalization of knowledge. In addition, learning is a matter of risking guesses, creating personal hypotheses and testing them out, making mistakes and subsequently modifying the hypotheses, not memorizing correct answers. The transactive concept is not memorizing correct answers. The transactive concept is not anti-intellectual, then, but purely intellectual.

The way the human brain functions, the way we learn, is as much a biological phenomenon as walking or eating and digesting food. It is a constant, whereas methods of instruction, materials, and the learning environment are variables. We have insight into how it works when we observe infants learning language or learning to read at home. That natural process of learning is at the foundation of the
In contrast, the transmissive view has its foundations in behavioristic psychology that relates learning to the external control of events. Basically, the notion assumes a blank mind or vessel in need of filling. Learning is achieved through a careful conditioning of stimuli and rewards imposed upon the learner. The experimentation used to justify B.F. Skinner's behaviorist views utilized pigeons, rats and other animals, not children. The monumental leap of faith is that kids learn language, an ability no animal has, the same way as caged rats are trained to achieve some desired goal. Today, programmatic materials, mastery learning, and achievement testing justify their validity on fundamentally behaviorist views of learning.

Is There Middle Ground?

Perhaps, not wanting to say something is either all black or all white, some people might look for middle ground. Is it possible to subscribe to both theories? After all, eclecticism is commonplace when it comes to selecting materials, interacting with others in different ways, and providing multiple options for completing tasks.

Edelsky, Altwerger and Flores (1991) argue strongly that at the level of deep underlying beliefs, there is no room for eclecticism. As they point out, claiming to be eclectic could very well mean holding one underlying theoretical position even if it is unacknowledged and unexamined, then borrowing practices from another conflicting position, and unwittingly, yet inevitably, distorting them to fit the original position. For example, we may take an idea we like, say sentence combining (a technique used to stimulate intuitive capabilities in composition), and use it to our own ends, say to combine sentences so that they produce appositive phrases, and ultimately wind up claiming that sentence combining and learning to identify grammatical structures using that technique are theoretically compatible activities. Is this a valid claim?

As Edelsky et al. point out, the theoretical assumption that learning consists of mastering isolated skills contradicts a theory that says learning is not a matter of mastering those skills. Can we believe that reality is an ever changing organism and at the same time an inert and static mechanism? Can an activity be student centered when it's teacher centered? Is there middle ground between such basic contradictions? It seems that the transmissive and transactional theories of learning are not related like colors of a spectrum, where onehue blends into another. Perhaps the relationship is more like two sides of a coin where it's either heads or tails, but not both.

Taking a Stand

What do I believe I'm trying to do? What am I doing? Is it working? Ultimately, we must come back to these three questions. They directly concern our personal view of learning. What do I believe about fundamental learning theory? Does this theory guide my practices? Are my students becoming the kind of individuals schools ought to nurture? The time seems right for self-examination not only of what we do, but also how and why. Despite whatever resistance emerges from within or from around us, if we hope to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, we must begin at the drawing board by affirming our basic theory of learning. That is where we must take a stand.

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Suggested Reading


Notes on the Poetics of Compassion

Edward L. Risden

Several years ago I was rereading A.E. Housman’s poems and was struck especially by a particular passage in “On Wenlock Edge.” The speaker in the poem is standing on a ridge watching a storm blow up over a wood and a river. He thinks back to the time when a Roman soldier may have stood just where he is standing, looking out over the same scene, feeling the same cold, knowing the same loneliness. The narrator observes:

Then, ’twas before my time, the Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare:
The blood that warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

That stanza has become a source of meditation for me and has directed my thought about poetry and compassion.

A key to poetry for me is that it alters one’s way of perceiving or provides a new slant on one’s perception (to a large degree, one might say that much of poetry is about perception). In “On the Wenlock Edge” the narrator leaps across centuries to share a perception with one long dead:

There, like the wind through the woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then ’twas the Roman, not ’tis I.

The narrator experiences a linked perception with another human being, a consanguinity (perhaps he has some Roman blood, himself a remnant of the Roman settlements in Britain), an atemporal mental and emotional tie—and the poet makes the moment of that inter-personal experience conscious in the poem.

In the poem two people have the same experience ages apart. The second recognizes that he is not the first person to feel as he does. As the reader approaches the poem, a third re-creates, shares the experience, makes conscious that he is not the only person to have felt so, to have experienced so, to have so perceived a moment or the scent that precipitates the perception. This experience I would like to call compassion. I believe that, though one’s experience of it in poems often remains unconscious, compassion stands at the very center of how poetry works. Occasionally, the poet even foregrounds the experience of compassion, as Housman does, by exhibiting her own awareness while making the reader aware of the act or instance of two people sharing a perception.

Compassion I read as co-passion: Sharing or experiencing the same mental and emotional state. T.S. Eliot’s term objective correlative—a poetic pattern that invokes in the reader a desired response without specifically naming an emotion that an author wishes to arouse within the reader rather than share with the reader—second hand rather than first hand—the intent seeming more distantly manipulative than personal or interpersonal. Compassion requires a breakdown of the barriers among poet, narrator, character, and reader to create the perception of a shared thought or emotion—for a moment one finds himself inside another’s perception rather than drawn toward it.

William Wordsworth’s definition of poetry—the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion recollected in tranquillity—also approaches compassion. Wordsworth’s idea, though, suggests that the original thought or emotion occurs within the poet and that the act of writing the poem as the emotion renews itself later re-creates the mental/emotional complex that the poet originally experienced. In such a case, the co-(com-)passion occurs solely within the author: the author brings the conditions of the original experience back to mind and in a state of heightened emotion re-establishes the power of the original awareness or perception.

One might be tempted to view Wordsworth’s definition as characteristic of the romantic’s focusing inward, but one of the finest examples of poetic compassion that I can recall appears in “Tintern Abbey,” the narrator returns to a site on the banks of the Wye to view a setting that has long remained in his mind to please and comfort him. Now,
The picture of the mind revives again;  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
For future years.

At this point in the poem the narrator has moved from past experience to a sense of future recollection of both past and present perceptions. But the narrator is not limited to an awareness of the effects of his perception on himself. He next considers that his own reaction to the scene and his own perceptions of it are no more meditative where they were once wildly joyous. Then his awareness passes from his own perception of the scene to the perception of his companion:

For thou art with me here upon the banks  
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend  
My dear, dear Friend; and in they voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures the shooting light  
Of my wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once....

The narrator finds himself observing his sister as she experiences exactly what he experienced upon viewing the scene five years before. He shares this perception with her—that he recognizes that she sees as he saw—and delights that

Nor wilt thou then forget,  
That after many wanderings, many years  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake.

This complicated chain of shared perceptions and feelings moves then from the narrator's recognition of his sister's co-passion to his making her aware of that recognition, to his giving her to understand that the scene (and his perception of the scene) means much more to him because she has experienced it with him. They share a gift that each has given the other: the sheer pleasure of the moment of perception, the moment of compassion—a great moment in the literature of compassion.

The most helpful term I have run across along these lines is J. Hillis Miller's intersubjectivity. Miller argues that the reader of a novel engages himself with another mind "to reexperience from inside the feelings and thoughts of that mind." Thus a novel allows the "interpenetrating" of minds: "not isolated consciousness... not consciousness face to face with God in meditation, but consciousness of the consciousness of others—this is the primary focus of fiction."

Perhaps the same thrust—a link with and understanding of the author's consciousness—propels the reader of a long poem. But with a lyric, I think the epiphany involves not comprehension of and movement within an author's consciousness, but a more concentrated inter subjective moment—a link with an author through a shared perception, through an image, within the fleeting moment. The lyric, because of its brevity, may offer no more... and the tantalizing evanescence of the shared moment produces a poignance so human because of its brevity that the momentary link is all the more startling, all the more effective, and the more addicting. The active, sympathetic reader once experiencing the intersubjective moment will continue to seek it afterwards, will learn to seek it in poetry and in life, will learn a key to compassion—to feeling with, more than understanding, more than sympathy: empathy, because of the shared experience.

Because of the length of a novel, the experience of the empathetic/compassionate moment diffuses temporally and spatially. The reader engages in the author's motive consciousness, or in the creation or unfolding of a character; the reader experiences the world of the text as it moves narratively through time and space. The drama, if well-written, allows the viewer to identify with or engage in character or characters as they are physically presented without the discursive or expository links present in the novel. Thus, if the playwright succeeds, she presents a long string of intersubjective moments—playwright and audience member become each character, shifting perspectives, shifting perception. Playwright and playgoer live intersubjectively for the duration of the play. But, like the novel, because the play makes such great temporal and spatial demands on the reader's ability to compassionately with the author and with many characters, the drama lacks the concentration on the single moment possible in the lyric. The lyric focuses the intersubjective moment on one place, one time, one emotion one way of perceiving, dramatically, like theater, but to "an invisible audience" that listens

Not to the play, but to itself, expressed  
In an emotion as of two people, as of two  
Emotions becoming one.

(Williams Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry"

I would eliminate the "as of," because the audience listens first to the play, then it itself. The lyric may create a dramatic character, as do Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River poems, E.A. Robinson's Tilbury Town poems, or such single poems as Sylvia Plath's horrifying "Lady Lazarus." Such dramatic poems require some degree of intersubjectivity for the poet effectively to create characters, but they do not necessarily make use of the self-reflexive step on which I wish to focus in this essay.

The lyric poem depends on compassion. It may be able to re-create the moment of intersubjective epiphany if it is successful; it may not. But in the lyric, more that in any other genre, the ground is firmer for the potential for that empathetic moment, because the reader has fewer distractions from the
point of focus, and she may then wander about that moment, it, through it to re-experience it, consider it, without the moment being immediately subordinated to the subsequent progress of the story.

Walt Whitman's "CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY" is perhaps the grandmother of compassion poems. It breaks inter subjective boundaries from the first stanza on:

On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross/ returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose./ And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are /more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

Though others may be "curious," the narrator breaks down interpersonal walls; he sees his "impalpable sustenance" disintegrated, then "every / one disintegrated yet part of the scheme. / The similitudes of the past and those of the future." He wills the empathetic experience, linking past and future consciousness with present: in fifty years, a hundred years, "others will see. will enjoy the sunset." For

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence, just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so [I felt,] and later, [What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you.]

The narrative voice demands the fusion of reader and poet, all generations past, all to come, in the symbolic perception of the ebb and flood of the water, in the spiritual perception of mutual humanity. The poem is all-inclusive. We are all leaves of grass, yet all inextricably linked. We need only look to compassionate, to "furnish [our] parts toward the soul."

Whitman habitually seeks an extended, almost an eternal, compassion. The compassion of the lyric is more often the epiphany of the moment, not the extended epiphany of the narrative that calls one to live within the progressing world of the text. Of course, novelist or dramatist may employ or seek to employ the epiphany of the moment; therein, I argue, they adopt or incorporate the lyric form. I believe that compassion within the single moment, experience, perception, image or image-sequence distinguishes and defines the genre lyric. I find no reason to believe that the writer working in any other genre cannot temporarily adopt the lyric mode. As Jacques Derria Points out in "The Law of Genre," we constantly mix genres, cannot help it—no form can appear in pure form, because formal limitation are imposed on a work afterwards by the critic more that during the creative process by the artist.

Likewise, a lyric may contain more than one intersubjective moment, especially a long, sweeping lyric that attempts to address many forms or variations of perception. I would argue that such a lyric pushes toward another genre or diffuses itself from what lyrics do best, unless each intersubjective moment produces the same awareness, perception, or understanding. Compassion is complex, difficult to achieve—the greatness of the lyric as a form or genre is that it provides the perfect form for the epiphany of the moment, for author and reader to compassionate within a single experience of a single character, within even a single scene or image.

I do not wish to argue extensively genre questions in this essay, but rather to point to the possibility for an achievement of compassion in poetry, especially in the lyric form. I believe that the genetic stuff of lyrics is compassion. Because of the immense diversity of lyric poetry, to all of which is self-conscious, one might list innumerable poems wherein he believed himself to have achieved the moment of compassion. In our favorite poems, we often believe we have achieved oneness with the author or at least a momentary awareness of the unity of our perceptions. One finds such moments for himself. A simpler method for getting at more definable moments of compassion involves finding representative poems in which the author points out that moment at which she achieves compassion, when the author's consciousness mingles with that of the character (and invites the reader to do the same, as in the above examples from Housman and Wordsworth), when the author focuses the moment by bringing it to conscious statement.

Gerard Manley Hopkins provides an example of compassion in "Spring and Fall." The narrator asks a child,

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
He knows that

as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by....

He knows what she will come to see later in life, and he knows what she sees now, for he has experienced the same feelings himself. when he was younger,

What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
because he knows what we feel when we become aware of decay and death, and that the feeling and what we dread are both inevitable:

It is the blight that man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

What Margaret feels, the narrator has felt and feels, and we all feel. The fall with its signs of winter induces thoughts that we must age and die. The poet's using Margaret "a young child," with whom to experience that recognition is particularly effective because being young, she is probably experiencing the sense of the transience of life for the first time. As in the grove "unleaving," the first meeting with mortality inevitably shakes one to the roots.

A second Hopkins example appears in "Felix
Randal.” A priest grieves the death of a parishioner to whom he had tendered “our sweet reprieve and ransom.”

This seeing the sick endears them to us, too it endears. The narrator recognizes that tending to his flock not only endears his parishioners to him, but endears him to them as well—his service results in mutual love and affection. The grief the narrator experiences at Felix Randal’s death is greater because the blacksmith loved him also. He has not simply lost one of his charges. The compassion lies in mutual affection, mutual loss.

Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting” describes the ghostly compassion of a soldier.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel....

The narrator sees sleepers strewn about;
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in his eyes.
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless...
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

The narrator appeals to the other,
“here is no cause to mourn.”
“none,” said that other, “Save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also.”

Finally, the other reveals himself:
“I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed....
Let us sleep now....”

The narrator finds compassion in an unlikely place—from the enemy he killed on the battle field. Their compassion, mutual in the frown of the killer at the instant of killing, becomes mutual again as they meet in hell to sleep out eternity.

Robert Frost’s “Two Tramps in Mud Time” depicts a man happily splitting logs in his yard until two poor men appear who want to do the work for him for pay. They, in fact, feel it to be their right to do so:
Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would full my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man’s work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.

The narrator does not say for certain if he gave up the job to the strangers; he follows with the comment,
Only where love and need are one...
Is the deed ever really done....

The strangers appreciate his love of the work: “Hit them hard!” one says. One may assume that the narrator will have given in to need rather than his own love, but that is not my point here. Both the narrator and the strangers know and appreciate what each other is thinking, though the strangers and the narrator have different goals in mind. Frost typically does not resolve such difficulties, but the compassion is there, the immediacy of mutual understanding.

William Stafford pushes the boundaries of compassion on “Traveling in the Dark.” The poem begins,
Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.
It is usually best to roll them into the canyon”
that road is narrow; to swerve might make more
dead.

The narrator steps out of his car and finds that the dead doe was nearly ready to give birth—he can feel the warm fawn inside her. He pauses, wondering what to do:
I thought hard for all of us—my only swerving—
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

I don’t know if the narrator had run into the deer. Clearly he feels for the deer to the degree that he links the dead deer with possible human deaths that the deer’s body might cause—the “more dead” of line four. The narrator cannot get inside an animal’s head to compassionate, even if she were alive, but he does compassionate with his companions. The last two lines show that they feel the same way about the doe and the fawn, but the narrator swerves from his duty only briefly—in that moment of mutual regret with his passengers—before doing what duty

Artwork by Kristy Deets
dictates: removing the deer from the road so that it will not cause an accident and additional death. Etheridge Knight’s “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane” deals with a compelling problem:

Hard Rock was “known not to take no shit
From nobody,” and he had the scars to prove it,
but,

The WORD was that Hard Rock wasn’t a mean nigger /Anymore, that the doctors had bored a hole in his head, /Cut out part of his brain, and
shot electricity /Throughout the rest.

Hard Rock

had been our Destroyer, the doer of things/We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do, /Had cut grooves too deeply across our backs.
The man who had been the convicts’ symbol of resistance, their vicarious opportunity to hit back, has had a frontal lobotomy. Vicarious resistance, even vicarious violence, is a form of compassion if one can join with the mind of the man committing the act. But the seat of the convicts’ compassion has been removed:

We discovered that it took Hard Rock
Exactly 3 minutes to tell you his first name,
and he no longer fights back against insults and oppression. They can no longer get inside Hard Rock’s mind to compassionate, for he hasn’t a whole mind left. And he, as they, can no longer resist. Frightening.

The moment of compassion itself is often frightening, because one must give up something of himself to mingle with the consciousness of another. It can be dangerous for the poet, difficult to achieve, and the attempt to find it often results in a groping uncertainty. Robert Hass, writing about form, finds in Randall Jarrell’s “The Sphinx’s Riddle to Oedipus” a “characteristic stance of his poems, to be slightly outside the process [of finding a rhythm] sympathizing with someone else, soldiers in the early work, lonely women in the later work.” Part of the lyric poet’s role is to try, though he fail in the attempt, to sympathize and then to empathize. And failure may be as well the reader’s or the critic’s failure to perceive as the writer’s to capture the perception.

I foresee several objections to my proposal. One: the poet is compassionating with characters, not with human beings. But characters begin with human beings; the poet translates human compassions into his characters. Plus, the artist’s goal is, having made the reader aware of the moment of compassion in the poem, to establish compassion then between herself and the reader. Two: the whole idea is romantic at best, mystical at worst—it has no grounding in objectivity. But the desire to write poetry to begin with is a desire to communicate, to meld minds. And yes, the process is mystical to a degree. Appreciation of poetry is not objectifiable, nor is religious faith, yet one may aspire to them and find great joy in them. Three: mustn’t one claim they have determined the intention of the author to be able to compassionately with his thoughts and feelings? Poets writing to exhibit the compassionate moment hope to communicate it—they seek the link of author, character, and reader. Compassion is their goal; that the reader will or can find it in any given instance is not an immi-
gible fact. The important part of the equation is the seeking, because where we seek diligently and well, as in most human endeavors, we often find. The result can be glorious—one must judge it to determine if it is worth the seeking.

Further, one might argue for different definitions of compassion. One might argue for poems with political, religious, or social goals as compassionate because they seek to promote improvement of the human condition. I agree—but that is a different form of compassion. It appears often and powerfully in poetry, designed to direct an audience to a change in behavior or to be more compassionate as in William Blake’s “Holy Thursday,” or to encourage us to be aware of the desirability of racial pride and the disgrace of racial prejudice in Richard Wright’s “I Have Seen Black Hands.” I argue for compassion not as a constraint, but as an opportunity.

Compassion in poetry, as Miller points our regarding intersubjectivity in fiction, comes about from our need to transcend boundaries, to fill the gap between consciousness, to be less alone in the world. Compassion in poetry makes the link between personalities, through sharing perceptions, that we often find difficult if not impossible to make. Compassion in poetry reaches a warm hand into the void of loneliness, doubt and isolation that keeps us apart as discrete human beings, that make us perhaps overly discreet with our own loneliness, when what we need to find is that other hand groping in the darkness.

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Beyond Hatchet: Wilderness Survival Literature For Upper Elementary, Middle Level, and High School Students

Elizabeth A. Poe and Caroline G. Majak

Brian Robeson survived fifty-four days in the Canadian wilderness. His story, told by Gary Paulsen in Hatchet, has been read and enjoyed by millions of upper elementary, middle level, and high school students. It has won numerous honors and is frequently recommended as literature for reluctant readers. What makes a book like Hatchet so popular?

First and foremost, Hatchet is a compelling story. Almost immediately, readers are transported to the forests of Canada via an ill-fated airplane ride with thirteen-year-old Brian. Left with only a hatchet, no food or shelter, Brian must be resourceful. He cannot survive unless he uses his own skills. As is typical of many outdoor adventure stories, Brian must overcome a number of obstacles. He must contend with wild animals such as a mother moose protecting her calf, a pesky porcupine, and swarms of blood-thirsty mosquitoes. He must also endure treacherous rainstorms and the burning rays of the sun. On the emotional side, he must cope with fear and boredom.

And like any good adventure story, Hatchet has suspense. Is the pilot really dead? How will Brian manage without food or shelter? If he finds food, will he have to eat it without cooking it? Are there other people nearby? Will the searchers find Brian in time? The answers are rarely obvious, and throughout the entire story, readers are routing for Brian, cheering him on, hoping he will solve yet another problem as he faces and overcomes unusual circumstances.

But Hatchet is not just an adventure story; it is also a story of discovery. Brian’s lessons are many. Not only does he learn to survive in the Canadian wilderness, but, equally important, he also learns about himself and how to cope with life beyond the wilderness. Because they can identify with Brian, readers find themselves just as concerned with Brian’s introspective journey as they are involved with his battle against the harsh elements of nature. Thus Paulsen’s Hatchet combines an intriguing storyline, a character to whom students can relate, and insight into the complexities of life, making Hatchet an appealing book for upper elementary through high school readers.

Hatchet is one example of the popular genre of survival literature. Survival literature appeals to many readers because they can readily identify with characters in these books. Preteens and teens may wonder about their personal ability to survive in the “real” world. Even though they are quite excited about moving from almost total dependence upon adults toward self-sufficiency, they are, at the same time, uncertain about their abilities to succeed. These ambiguous feelings can be rather unsettling. In general, the growing away from parental supervision leaves many adolescents feeling that they are entering an alien world; a world that requires them to take risks, make decisions, and adjust to numerous unknowns. When characters who are near the age of the reader develop self-confidence as a result of struggling against nature, they provide reassurance for the reader.

Self-discovery is another important element of survival literature. Who am I? What will I become? are questions adolescents ponder. Although adolescents are moving from the absolutes of right and wrong, they frequently want the security that existed when life for them was more simple. Self-discovery is an important aspect of survival. Characters discover their strengths, their weaknesses, and their fears. They learn that all of these comprise who they are. They discover that they are capable of building upon their personal strengths, accepting their weaknesses, and conquering their fears. Thus, characters frequently grow as a result of their survival experience.
A third reason for the popularity of this genre is that reading survival novels allows readers to vicariously experience risk-taking and problem-solving situations. Although faced with perilous and often difficult tasks, characters are successful in achieving against the odds. This success is a result of ingenuity, persistence, and reasoning skills. Through these books, readers realize that success is measured in a number of ways. Success can be learning to live off the land after an airplane crash, surviving a white water river raft trip, or navigating a boat through tumultuous storms. Success is not measured by age, money, physical appearance, or grades—things they may have previously considered important. But instead, success is measured by achieving against formidable odds. The success of characters in survival literature provides inspiration, hope, and reassurance for many readers.

Students who have read and enjoyed *Hatchet* may want to read other books in which characters survive when pitted against the unpredictable forces of nature. Fortunately, there are many such stories from which they can choose. By popular demand, Paulsen has written a sequel to *Hatchet* which he titled *The River*.

In *The River* Brian Robeson has been convinced that by returning to the Canadian wilderness he can help the United States government. This time he goes with Derek Holtzer, a government psychologist who will observe him and take notes on his survival strategies. Given all types of assurances and appropriate survival gear, Brian and Derek return to the wilderness. But Brian objects to having too much and convinces the pilot to take the equipment back with him. Brian and Derek quickly establish a strong working relationship: Brian is the mentor while Derek is the researcher. Everything progresses fairly well, actually too well for Brian who has doubts about this contrived survival experience, when a storm hits. When Derek is struck by lightning and comatized, Brian’s thoughts rapidly shift from being a participant in an experiment to trying to save Derek’s life. In order to do this, he must make a raft and navigate a nearby river. Once again his intelligence and stamina enable him to survive a wilderness ordeal, and he succeeds in delivering Derek to Brannock’s Trading Post where he receives the help he needs.

Another survival story that takes place on a river is *Downriver* by Will Hobbs. In this novel, troubled teenagers are sent to Discovery Unlimited, an outdoor program in southwestern Colorado. Self-proclaimed Hoods-in-the-Woods, the group members are supposed to engage in self-discovery and develop self-confidence as they participate in hiking, mountain climbing, and white water rafting experiences. Disturbed by her father’s relationship with his girlfriend, Jessie agrees to participate in Discovery Unlimited for nine weeks during the summer before her sophomore year in high school.

After some initial activities, Al, the adult team leader, plans to take the group to the San Juan River for rafting. But Jessie and her friends decide to abandon Al and navigate the white water rapids of the Grand Canyon with out a permit or a river map. Troy functions as the leader of this rebellious group until the others learn to distrust him and decide to leave him behind. Bailing water, scouting the rapids, and camping on the beaches, Jessie and the others survive their dangerous journey. Although they are in trouble when they eventually encounter the park rangers, they have learned to trust each other when making difficult decisions. They have also developed personal strength and gained insights into their relationships with adults. Jessie discovers she has strong convictions which she can defend, and that she has a true friend in Star.

Readers who enjoy the way *Downriver* combines an exciting white water adventure story with details of a young woman’s introspective thoughts might want to read *No Way Out* by Ivy Ruckman. In Ruckman’s story, nineteen-year-old Amy, her fiancé Rick, and Amy’s little brother Ben are hiking the Zion Narrows in Utah. The trio soon joins forces with sixteen-year-old Clyde who is hiking solo.

After a while they catch up with Rick’s neighbor, fourteen-year-old Neal Dwyer whose parents have gone on ahead. They also meet Steve and Audrey who are camping nearby. When a flash flood rages through the canyon, this group, many of whom are new acquaintances, works together to help each other survive this natural disaster. Steve and Audrey, the most experienced canyon hikers, take on leadership roles and later generously share their food and equipment with the others.

Amy gains respect for them and all the other members of the group as they struggle and support each other—all except Rick that is. Rick’s attitude and self-centeredness surprise her, and she discovers that marriage to him may not be what she wants after all. When they are finally rescued, they emerge as changed individuals.

Like Hobbs’ *Downriver*, Ruckman’s fast-paced adventure story emphasizes the need to work together in a crisis and the bonds that can be formed or broken during disastrous situations. Tony Laporte in *Harry Mazer’s Snow Bound* learns a similar lesson.

Angry at his parents, Tony rushes off with their car even though he is only fifteen and without a driver’s license. Cindy Reichert, a loner, is hitchhiking in a snowstorm when Tony pulls over and picks her up. Mismatched companions, Tony and Cindy argue constantly. When Tony tries to take a shortcut, he...
makes a wrong turn, loses control of the car, and strands them in a remote field somewhere in the middle of the Snow Belt in upstate New York. Their fighting continues for several days as they try to decide what to do in a wrecked car in the midst of a blizzard. Finally Tony leaves to try to find help. He discovers a cabin, breaks in, and spends three nights before returning to help Cindy. Meanwhile, Cindy keeps warm with a little fire she starts in the car.

"Survival Literature appeals to many readers because they can readily identify with the characters in these books."

After Tony returns with food and blankets, they detach the car hood to use as a sled and try to find the cabin. The two continue to fight about how to handle the situation. On the tenth day, Tony breaks his leg. Tony and Cindy try to make it alone, but soon realize their only hope of survival lies in sticking together. Eleven days after they became stranded, they reach a farmhouse.

Cindy and Tony are transformed by their experience. When she is alone in the car for three days, Cindy vows not to be so aloof and critical of others. Tony's change does not occur until the tenth day when Cindy rescues him from wild dogs. Knowing she saved his life makes him realize he has been selfish and hateful, not only toward her, but toward his family as well. Cindy and Tony have gained insight into themselves and their relationships with others. The ordeal has changed them forever.

Several characters in H. C. Lugur's The Elephant Tree undergo changes similar to Tony and Cindy's. Ninth grader Dave Starr, in trouble at school for irregular attendance, agrees to attend a big brother/outward bound type program rather than be sent to Juvenile Court. Dave and five other ninth graders are supposed to spend four days working on their problems while camping in the California desert with Pop, the group counselor, and Ted, a college student.

Dave and Louie, another group member, realize they are enemies from the start because they attend rival high schools which have had trouble with gang activities. The two immediately begin verbal and physical sparring. When Louie steals the keys to Ted's jeep, the other boys pressure Dave into going for a night ride with him. Louie does not stay on the jeep road and wrecks to jeep.

Dave and Louie take off in the night, trying to return to camp, but they lose their way. The two initially respond to the situation with physical violence and verbal abuse toward one another. In the daylight, they wander aimlessly without water until they finally find a shallow cave made by a boulder at the foot of a rocky hill. The boys continue to hate each other, but each of them realizes he does not want the other to die, and they begin to watch out for each other. When a flash flood strikes, Louie saves Dave's life. After two days Pop and Ted spot the clothes Dave spread out to dry on an elephant tree and the boys are rescued.

Dave emerges from his desert survival experience with memories of what it is like to endure the desert's extreme weather changes, to be scared and lonely, and to almost starve. But he also gains a friend and insight into the necessary interdependence we all share. The message here is clear, and the story will still appeal to many readers even though this book is presently out of print.

Robby White's Deathwatch also takes place in California desert. Ben, a college student, agrees to serve as a guide for business man Madec who is hunting bighorn sheep. Madec, whom Ben considers dangerous with a gun, accidentally shoots and kills an old prospector. When Ben insists on taking the man's body to the sheriff rather than protect Madec by leaving it for the vultures, Madec forces Ben to strip to his undershorts and try to survive in a desert valley which is thirty-five miles across and surrounded on all sides by a mountain range. The nearest road is forty-five miles away, the nearest town sixty miles. Madec has the jeep, food, water, binoculars with which to watch Ben as he attempts his escape, and the guns to shoot at him if he seems successful. Ben must use his knowledge of the desert, rock climbing skills, raw instincts, and cunning if he is to survive in this deadly game of cat and mouse.

"Students who have read and enjoyed Hatchet may want to read other books in which characters survive when pitted against the unpredictable forces of nature."

Dogsong by Gary Paulsen, takes place at the other end of the geographical spectrum—the arctic. In an attempt to understand his restlessness, Russel Suskitt heeds his father's advice and goes to live with Oogruk, one of the elders in their Eskimo village. Oogruk tells Russel about some of the Eskimo traditions that have been lost due to the missionaries and their teachings. For instance, many Eskimo people quit singing and dancing because the mission-
aries told them these practices would land them in hell. Oogruk tells Russel that at one time everyone had a song; in fact, everyone was a song. According to Oogruk, “When we gave up our songs because we feared hell, we gave up our insides as well. If we lived the way we used to live, mebbe the songs would come back.” Russel takes on the challenge of living the way his people used to live.

Gradually, Russel learns some of the basics of handling a dog team and hunting. When Oogruk thinks it is time, he asks Russel to take him to hunt seals. At the edge of the sea, Oogruk commands Russel to leave him to die on the ice. Oogruk tells Russel that if he wishes to become a man, he must go to the north and run his dogs as long as he can. During his journey, Russel dreams about a man taking a large beast. He also dreams of a woman and two children starving. As Russel travels, his dreams mesh with reality when he discovers Nancy, a pregnant girl partially buried in the snow. In order to save her, he must find food. The kill is a giant polar bear. Surviving the run through the arctic as well as saving Nancy’s life gives purpose to Russel’s life. He has found his song.

*Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George works nicely as a companion novel to *Dogsong*. This is the Newbery Award winning story of Miyax a thirteen-year-old Eskimo girl who runs away from Daniel, her husband of an arranged marriage, who exercised his “husbandly rights” against Miyax’s will. Miyax, whose English name is Julie, intends to walk to Point Hope, board a supply ship on which she would work as a laundress or dishwasher, and travel to San Francisco and live with her pen pal Amy. She takes with her only her backpack, needles to mend clothes, matches, her sleeping skin, a ground cloth, two knives, a pot, and about a week’s worth of food. But Miyax soon finds herself lost in the Alaskan wilderness. Trained for survival by her father Kapugen, Miyax builds herself shelter, but food is scarce. Remembering Kapugen’s stories of wolf packs taking in humans, Miyax learns the ways of the Arctic wolves, and eventually is accepted by a pack.

Besides learning to live with the wolves, Miyax learns about herself and renews her appreciation for the richness of her Eskimo heritage. After many months in the wilderness, she is reunited with her father in the Eskimo village of Kangik where he is recognized as a leader because he is intelligent, fearless, and full of love.

Miyax’s ability to enlist the aid of wild animals is reminiscent of the true story of Karana as told by Scott O’Dell in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. When the Aleuts cause trouble by coming to an island off the coast of California in search of otter skins, the people of the island decide to leave. While on a boat ready to take them away, Karana, discovers that her younger brother is still on the island. Fearing for his safety, Karana returns to the island only to be left by the ship. Shortly after she adjusts to being left, her brother is killed by a pack of wild dogs. Karana vows to kill the wild dogs. However, she eventually tames one of them, Rontu, and for many years he is her only constant companion. In addition, she makes temporary pets out of some birds and a sea otter.

"The popularity of this genre speaks to readers' interest in stories which provide hope, inspiration, and insight within the context of an adventure which demands courage, fortitude, and intelligence."

Throughout the long ordeal, Karana learns to make weapons, a skill traditionally considered taboo for women. She outsmarts the wild dogs by sleeping atop a rock until she can build a home with a fence around it, and she makes a cave her second home just in case she needs another refuge. She eventually befriends an Aleutian girl. Karana endures physical pain as well as lonelines during the eighteen years she lived alone, yet she uses her intellect and her sensitivity to living things in order to survive.

Another true story of survival is *Lost on a Mountain in Maine*, written by Donn Fender as told to Joseph B. Eagan. Twelve-year-old Donn becomes separated from his hiking party in the rugged mountains of Maine. He attempts to rejoin his father and brother on a mountain pass, but the fog moves in and blurs his vision, and he gets lost. The jagged boulders and the cold weather are formidable obstacles for Donn. During the nine days that he is lost, he must also combat mosquitoes, avoid deer and bears, and remove bloodsuckers from his body. Hunger and sore feet are constant challenges. Donn’s hopes of finding food are disappointed when the camp he discovers turns out to be uninhabited. When an airplane circles overhead, its pilot does not see him. Donn realizes that he must find his own way out, rather than hope to be discovered. Eventually, he sees a telephone wire which he follows to an occupied cabin. The people in the cabin inform his parents that he has been found. Throughout the ordeal Donn constantly expresses his faith in God.

Although not based on one true incident, Gary Paulsen’s *The Voyage of the Frog* certainly reads like it is based on a true experience. In this action-packed adventure story, fourteen-year-old David Alspeth must fulfill his late Uncle Owen’s final wish and
scatter his ashes at sea, where no land can be seen. Owen wants David to make his journey alone on his sailboat, which he bequeathed to David. After completing his task, David is returning home when he gets caught in a storm. When the storm abates, David finds himself alone about 300 miles from home. In addition to the storm, he and the sailboat also survive three hours of being bashed by sharks. Hunger, thirst, and boredom are additional challenges David faces during his ordeal on the ocean before he eventually returns to the California shore. During his arduous task, David works through his grief about his uncle’s death. He realizes that his uncle’s legacy is more than just a sailboat.

In The Island Keeper by Harry Mazer, sixteen-year-old Cleo Murphy also engages in self-discovery as well as showing admirable cunning and courage as she survives seven months alone on Duck Island. Planning to stay in her wealthy family’s unused cabin, Cleo runs away from her overly critical grandmother and preoccupied father. But, the cabin has burned and Cleo must shelter herself in a cave and eat fish and wild plants. By the end of the summer, Cleo is transformed from a fat, overprotected, dependent, rich teenager into a slim, strong, self-reliant young woman. Healed and nurtured by the natural forces of Duck Island, Cleo feels equal to the task of facing her grandmother and father. But, her canoe has been smashed by a falling tree, and she must remain on the island until the lake freezes.

The next months on Duck Island show Cleo the harsh, uncaring forces of nature and teach her even more about her own capabilities. She struggles to reinforce her shelter against the snow, kills a deer for its meat and skin, and eventually walks five miles over the frozen lake to the mainland. Gaunt and exhausted, Cleo emerges form the island with deep-rooted respect for nature and true confidence in her survival skills. Although the gulf between herself and her family has widened, she is now able to accept them for what they are and take charge of her own life.*

These books are a representative sample of literature appropriate for upper elementary, middle level, and high school students which deal with wilderness survival. Of course there are many more survival books for students to enjoy, and many of these deal with survival in other types of situations. The popularity of this genre speaks to readers’ interest in stories which provide hope, inspiration, and insight within the context of an adventure which demands courage, fortitude, and intelligence. Whether we as educators use books of this type in thematic units in classrooms or place them on library shelves for independent reading, it is important that we make survival literature available for our students.

*Comments about The Island Keeper first appeared in the Now that you asked. . . . column of the Winter 1989 (16.2, p. 46) issue of The Alan Review. The column was co-authored by Ruth Cline and Elizabeth Foe.

Recommended Reading


Paulsen, Gary. The Voyage of the Frog. New York: Orchard/Franklin Watts, 1989. (Dell, 1990.)


Teaching the Golden Notebook to Extension Students

Jane Betts

There's nothing like real, live students. I first became involved in teaching The Golden Notebook to non-traditional students through an opportunity to write an independent study course for the University of Wisconsin Extension. The course was to be for one credit only and was to include three novels. In my course booklet I scheduled The Golden Notebook between Martha Quest and Briefing for a Descent into Hell. Since the format of these extension booklets called for three novels, I had decided to use the realistic novel about an African girlhood first as an introduction to Lessing, the all-encompassing Golden Notebook as the central portion of this triptych, and Briefing both as a reinforcement and taking-off place to Lessing's mysticism and concern with "inner space." I emphasized in the booklet that Lessing did not see herself as a feminist writer, that she was an intellectual writer with a world view who over the years had gone from a kind of naturalistic writing to a mystical, psychological writing that recently sounded like the genre of science fiction. The three novels really were a bit much to expect a student to read independently for one credit, but the course was accepted, and writing the booklet led me to Lessing research and to the formation of charts, diagrams, biographical notes, criticism, questions, and paper topics. The course was to be graded by correspondence teachers in Madison. I was paid for creating the course and turned the copyrights over to Madison Extension.

Two years later, in 1980, I decided that I wanted to try out the course myself to experience some student reaction to it. It was offered as part of a series of three evening courses on women writers, all of which had been initiated as correspondence course booklets and all of which now had to gain the approval of our own English Department at Eau Claire before we could offer them. Students could take one course for one credit or all three for three credits. The Lessing course came last, after Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf courses and, as such, obviously were regarded as a Women's Study course. Although the enrollment for the Lessing course was smaller than that in the other two courses — perhaps because students were less familiar with her than with the other two authors or perhaps because the Lessing course came last — seven very diverse people faithfully attended the five nights of the course.

There was a retired faculty member who was an ardent feminist. I hadn't known her before the course but she had donated all her collection of feminist literature, even newspaper clippings, to the college library and a women's study room had been named in her honor. She proved to be a very valuable ally in the class.

Then there was a middle-aged woman, a wife and mother, charming and self-educated, who returned for a degree and was particularly interested in writing fiction and poetry. She was an active liberal in politics and several years later I was to see her at a Democratic fund raiser, where she was gaunt with terminal cancer. She was full of the enjoyment of life during the course and took to The Golden Notebook with great understanding. She wrote a very impressionistic paper about the Lessing mindset. It was almost poetry. I remember telling her that it wasn't a scholarly paper, that if she were going to graduate school she'd need to write another kind of paper, but the paper, I said, was great for our purposes.

There were four young women in the course. Two were regular students and two were extension students only. There was one brilliant English major and one very young, naive senior who was taking the course for General Studies credit. The English major found the course to be what she had expected and was capable of discussing profundities of The Golden Notebook and its structure with the older women. It did not bother her to think of "nice" women as promiscuous or sweet young people as incestuous.

For the naive senior, however, these things in the book were abhorrent. The midwestern town I taught in is very conservative in many respects. Therefore I
felt I had to be careful to offer a kind of apologia for Lessing’s early commitment to Communism. Perhaps the start of my career in the McCarthy era had more to do with the need for this apologia than the student’s fears. The students were, on the whole, far less interested in the issue of Communism than in the issue of morality. I hadn’t expected them to be troubled by promiscuity in the ’80s but sometimes I forget that young people, especially those who have been protected, can still be shocked at what older people and so-called nice people do and feel.

At any rate, this naïve senior, a resident of the city, showed real distress at one of our sessions. She was almost in tears over the incest episode in the African (black) note book and the promiscuous sexuality expressed in the final notebook. She didn’t want to believe in the reality of these things among “nice” people, especially intelligent women. I realized too that she had been staring at me for a while before her outburst. Fortunately, the retired faculty member came to Lessing’s defense by saying “You look in any closet in these proper [local] homes and you’ll find a skeleton.” The young girl accepted this view somewhat reluctantly but with more grace than if her teacher had made the remark. After all, the older faculty member had lived in this quiet place for years.

The other two young women, part-time students, were not nearly as involved with the book or the course as the first four. One was really not equipped to delve into the intricacies of The Golden Notebook. For that reason, I was glad that we started the course with Martha Quest. This young lady could really relate to the simpler book and wrote a paper, at one of the suggestions in my booklet, on the symbolism in the clothing in Martha Quest. The paper was somewhat pedestrian, but she stayed with the class and was able to write a final essay exam on The Golden Notebook. I found out later that she worked full-time in a fashionable young women’s clothing store in the mall. She greeted me very cheerfully when I went in there to buy a belt.

The other young extension student was in advanced pregnancy during the course. She told me that her mother was paying for the course while she was waiting out her pregnancy. She was, of course, particularly interested in the honesty with which Lessing related the relationships between mothers and children in this book. I had a feeling that her own mother was not well off, but had paid for this course as a gesture of sisterhood.

The one young man in the course was an auditor and said almost nothing during the class. I couldn’t tell if he was “cowed” by being the only male in the class or if he considered himself to be a spy on feminists. He was an editor on the school newspaper, and I kept expecting some great rebuttal to come out in newsprint, but none was forthcoming. He was perhaps more interested in the Communist and racial aspects of the book than the others were. He was particularly attentive to the first informative session of the class.

On the first evening students had not yet read anything, so I did most of the talking and we read the short story “Lucy Grange” aloud. I started with biographical material on Lessing and showed slides of Lessing at several ages taken from Lessing texts and the newsletters, and of urban and rural shots of Rhodesia from older books on African geography. I also had an overhead map of Africa and discussed the geography and history of Rhodesia and Zimbabwe briefly. (I feel that students can use all the geographical help we can muster these days.) I explained to the students about the revoking of Lessing’s citizenship in Rhodesia and talked about the terrible conditions of the blacks in Salisbury during her girlhood. This opening certainly helped them with the African notebook later.

I introduced as well a number of vocabulary words that Lessing uses in her African stories and the African section of her novels. Both “Lucy Grange” and Martha Quest helped to understand terms like “Afrikaans,” “mealie,” and “Kafir.”

The Golden Notebook took up most of our time after the first evening, though the students were assigned to read Martha Quest for the second session. I decided that the students were barely keeping up with the reading so I dropped the requirement to read Briefing and limited its class study time to one hour after the final exam on the last evening. One older woman in the group had read Briefing and wanted some help with interpreting it; some young students barely got through the first two books by

Jane Betts and her grandchild
the last week. Since some were lagging behind in the reading it was difficult to get them to discuss anything.

I could talk about the *Golden Notebook* as early in the course as the second evening by giving students an outline of important general considerations in Lessing. I divided considerations into these categories: (1) important for women (2) important for politics and a world view (3) important for psychological honesty and a view of the irrational (4) important for religious or mystical dimension of experience and (5) important for devising original forms and using derived forms in new ways. Under each of these topics I gave students things to look for. I also told them what each of the notebooks emphasized.

I used some aids to help myself in keeping the discussion going on evening three. I found it difficult to keep track of where various passages appeared in this complex work, so I had gone through various themes such as writing (writer’s block), compartmentalization in modern society, mental illness, sex wars, disappointment in Communism, children and time, as well as various symbols and recurring images, and jotted down the page number where each of these passages occurred. Another very practical thing I did was to put tab indexes on my book in colors to correlate with the colors of the notebooks. I also had tabs to denote where sections of the outer narrative began each time.

I brought the students into the course by having each one responsible for one of the notebooks or a section of the outer narrative. By the fourth night students had papers on some specific aspect of *Martha Quest* or one notebook of *The Golden Notebook* as well. Students read these papers aloud and we discussed them, along with such things as Stalinism versus Trotskyism, noves as metaphor, existentialism, Freud and Jung, and women’s roles.

On that last and fifth evening, we discussed the final golden notebook and reviewed themes and the overall form of the book. We talked about infinite regression demonstrated by the picture of the girl on the Morton’s salt box holding a salt box with her picture on it holding a salt box *ad infinitum* and the mobius circle of infinity. Then we had a final examination with essay questions, first on a choice of general feminist or political topics and then with a choice of writing a shorter answer on one of the notebooks. Students could leave when they had finished, for a break. After the break, we topped off the courses by discussing *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and I explained Lessing’s commitment to Sufism and her use of materials from R.D. Laing.

The course had a very happy ending. The women apparently felt close to one another, for they talked about holding reunions of the class from time to time. *The Golden Notebook*, in particular, seemed to have emotional reverberations for the group after we broke up as a class. My only regrets about the experience were that I never organized a reunion and that I had not done enough to bring the young man into the discussions.

The student who had been so turned off by Lessing’s morality (or lack of it) wrote to me a year later saying she was rereading Lessing now that she was “out in the world,” and had a new more mature appreciation of her. This may partly have been the influence of a young man she met in the library who was taking a Lessing novel from the shelves just as she was.

The coming together of a small group of people of various ages, interests, and backgrounds to read a book so intense with emotion and so honest about the dark and often mysteriously beautiful side of human nature was a unique experience for us all. It helped me grow as a teacher. I believe it gave the students a heightened awareness of who they were too. Students were not always comfortable with Lessing, but in their heart of hearts they knew she was telling them something out of a deep experience of life.

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Why I Hate to Write: Confessions of a College English Teacher

Laurie Fitzgerald

I hate to write, and I am afraid to show what I’ve written to others. Whenever someone says “I enjoy writing,” or “I get great emotional satisfaction, intellectual excitement, and spiritual regeneration from the act of writing,” I cringe in disbelief. Surely, I think to myself, such a person couldn’t possibly know the first thing about writing. Such a person couldn’t be a good writer. I used to believe that all good writers hated to write. I lived by that credo for many years while working as a technical writer and while writing my dissertation. Lately, however, I’ve begun to wonder whether writing really has to be as painful as it is for me.

Most of the time, I disguise my hatred and fear quite successfully. Every semester, I teach at least two, sometimes three writing courses. To motivate my students, I become a booster for writing. I try to help them overcome their fears and loathing. Most of them have had unpleasant experiences with writing in the past, so I write supportive, enthusiastic comments in the margins of their essays and exams. I get a vicarious thrill out of their successes. I enjoy helping students find topics that they care passionately about and then coaching them through successive drafts. Each year, I become more and more convinced that effective writing has everything to do with self-esteem and personal and professional success. By helping people to become better writers, I think, I am helping them to become happier, more successful people.

And all the while, I’m living with my ugly secret. I hate to write. I am afraid to publish my work. The thought of writing a paper for a conference or an article for publication fills me with dread. My psoriasis flares up. I get depressed. I consider changing jobs. Maybe working as a clerk at Walmart would be a more fulfilling existence, I think to myself; I’ll miss my students, but I won’t have to write.

For years now, I’ve been trying to conquer my problem. Even though I believe that most good writers hate to write, my hatred sometimes prevents me from writing at all. Clearly, the most intimidating aspect of writing is the way it exposes you—that is, if, unlike politicians and executives of big corporations, you actually try to say something. People will know what you’re thinking and judge you accordingly. Even worse, they will find that you have broken grammatical rules that you didn’t know existed. Some brilliant person will discover that you don’t really know the proper use (or is it “usage”? of “enormity” or “comprise.” When I read my students’ writing, I never stop being surprised by how much it reveals about them—their intellectual abilities, their personalities, their world views, their biases. It amazes me to think that I have such insight into others’ souls. And I’m terrified to think my writing might give other people the same power over me.

Sometimes I wonder if I have anything to say anyway, especially when I contemplate all the scholarly writing I’m supposed to be doing in order to get tenure. At the beginning of a writing project, I am afraid that that I will never know enough about the topic to be able to write about it. Therefore, I ransack libraries and bookstores to find out what everyone else in the world has said. (Finding the topic is less of a problem, fortunately—and I usually enjoy ransacking libraries and bookstores, when I’m not thinking about how I don’t have time enough to read all the books and articles I’m so desperately gathering.)

This fear of not ever knowing enough about a subject is really hard to shake, for as everyone knows, it is almost impossible to keep up with new publications in even the smallest sub-specialty. Fortunately, however, the research process usually reaches a critical point at which I realize (and maybe
I'm deluding myself—but delusion is often a form of self-preservation) that none of these other writers really have that much to say, or that they’re all saying the same thing in different words. Usually they are reaffirming, with some qualifications of course, a received opinion that no one had questioned until about twenty years ago when someone tried to revolutionize the field for long enough to publish a few books and get tenure.

After doing all this research, I often feel that I know something about the topic, but by this time all my ideas seem to be old hat. I begin to think that I, like many of the “experts” I have just consulted, have nothing new to say.

"Each year, I become more and more convinced that effective writing has everything to do with self-esteem and personal and professional success."

Academic writing too often cloaks the old or the banal in new jargon and ever more intimidatingly convoluted prose styles. None of us would ever encourage our students to write like this, would we? Sometimes I wonder if those of us who teach writing courses aren’t permanently excluded from publishing our work in certain prestigious academic journals because we feel dutybound to practice what we preach in our classroom.

This point brings me to yet another aspect of my hatred of writing—the fear that I don’t write complexly and obscurely (or badly) enough to get published. This is a fear that several of my colleagues have also expressed, which is remarkable, because usually we all pretend to each other that we enjoy writing, write a great deal, and have many options for publishing our work. Since graduate school, Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* has been my Bible. Now I’m afraid that editors of scholarly journals will regard my writing as hopelessly simple-minded and trite. Of course I rage and gnash my teeth at all the badly written academic books I must read to keep up, however superficially, with my field. But books like these are being published, and my only guess is that most people in academia are too intimidated to say (and write) what they think, which would be expressed something like this: “We don’t know what all the jargon menas. Please have pity on your readers. Please try to inform us rather than to bully us with the pretense that you not only understand Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, but that you’ve actually incorporated their jargon into your active vocabulary.”

Don’t get me wrong. People are writing good academic books and people are saying new, useful things. Scholars and critics are creating challenging new theories and providing enlightening new perspectives on literary history. New ideas require new modes of expression, new terms. So here lurks another fear: I’m afraid I can never emulate the scholarly writers I really admire. I’m afraid that inevitably I will succumb to the trendy and the modish and if I am fortunate enough to publish my work, it will contribute nothing worthwhile to scholarly Palookaville. At least, however, I will have been published, which is all that seems to matter to administrators and tenure and renewal committees.

Occasionally I console myself with the thought that many very great writers have expressed similar thoughts. (Didn’t I just say that everything has been said before?) In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf describes her hero’s attempt to become a writer:

*Anyone moderately familiar with the rigours of composition will not need to be told the story in detail; how he wrote and it seemed good; read it and it seemed vile; corrected and tore up; cut out; put in; was in ecstasy; in despair; had his good nights and bad mornings; snatched at ideas and lost them; saw his book plain before him and it vanished; acted his people’s parts as he ate; mouthed them as he walked; now cried; now preferred the heroic and pompous; next the plain and simple; now the tales of Tempe; then the fields of Kent and Cornwall; and could not decide whether he was the greatest genius or the greatest fool in the world.* (82)

[Laurie Fitzgerald]

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Orlando, it should be noted, works on the same poem for over 300 years before it is ready for publication.

Searching for inspiration, I bought a copy of Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*. The blurb on the back of the book states that Ueland followed two rules in her life: "to tell the truth, and not to do anything that she didn't want to do." Since writing is so unpleasant for me, I really would rather do anything else than write. What would Ueland say to that? *I have to write even when I don't want to.* It is a mandate of my profession. As a scholar and critic, I need to find out what I want to say and how to say it. Unlike Virginia Woolf's Orlando, unfortunately, I don't have three hundred years to get my work into print.

As I continued to read Ueland's book, however, I found some helpful suggestions, and I realized that all of my problems with writing really boil down to one thing: fear of criticism. Ueland says that she hates critics. She writes: "Know that if you have a kind of cultured know-it-all in yourself who takes pleasure in pointing out what is not book, in discriminating, reasoning and comparing, you are bound under a knave. I wish that you could be delivered." A bit later she says, "Compare the tenderness of great artists with the attitude of critics toward other men" (172).

Maybe I have stumbled upon a solution. Why not treat my own writing with the same loving kindness I lavish on my students' work? I'm not quite sure how to do this just yet. My whole career as a writer has been driven by the need to develop an inner critic as rigorous as all the teachers I tried so desperately to please. Some tentative suggestions do come to mind, however. Writing becomes more enjoyable (and more effective), according to Ueland, when we write about what we love. I already knew this; I try to prove this point to my students all the time. Here I see a possible clue, for, as I've stated above, I really don't have a lot of respect for a great deal of writing done by academics. I don't want to write that way. So, following Ueland's advice, I must write about what I care about in a style I believe in, tell the truth as I see it, and write more often. Above all, Ueland advocates a fearless confidence: say what you think, and don't be a coward, don't apologize. And even if you don't believe in what you've written a year later, she still advises confidence and courage: "It is so conceited and timid to be ashamed of one's mistakes. Of course they are mistakes. Go on to the next" (178).

I haven't had a chance to try out my theory yet (other than to produce this essay) since I've only just come up with it. I do see a ray of hope, however. And I'm certainly not going to throw out my copy of *The Elements of Style*.

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**Recommended Reading**


When the Teacher of English Feels Time-Warped

Winifred Morgan

Billy had a good story to tell, more or less. And it is pretty much true. But just because he came to the gate smelling of roses and mustard gas and a little unsteady from time-tripping, he’s never gotten credit. They thought he was drunk!

Ever since Dresden, Billy’s had this problem with coming unstuck in time. Usually he goes to Tralfamadore or Utica or Dresden, but sometimes something (like the orange and black strips on the concrete when he’s driving down a lonely road) unzips him entirely. That’s how he got to Inverness. The storm was bad that night. At first Billy thought he was back in the meat locker. But then a flash of lightning showed him the birds’ nests in the stone walls and reeking like roses and mustard gas. It smelled bad, but it wasn’t any meat locker.

A big fella dressed in crumpled aluminum foil was creeping down the hall groping, grabbing at the air in front of him and muttering to himself about drops and gouts of blood. Billy felt relieved when the telephone rang and the big fella went off to answer it. Showed he wasn’t too far gone.

A little later a thin, nervous little dame creeped in, and (even though she talked to herself too) Billy was going to ask her what was going on. But then the Reynolds Wrap guy came back, and Billy didn’t trust him. Billy guessed the guy had a problem with insomnia. So it goes. That would explain his wandering about a smelly castle in the dark. The guy must’ve stumbled and cut himself. His hands were a mess. You’d think he’d know better than to carry knives by their blades. Then the dame took the knives and went off. Dumb! She must’ve been just as clumsy because she came back with blood all over. So it goes. At least she got rid of those sharp knives.

Some people never learn. Poor old Edgar Derby told Billy something like that once. Billy told Valencia, and she said, “Um.”

Billy blinked and he was back in Inverness. The torches glowed orange streaks in the black corridor. Someone was making an awful racket at the gate. Billy went to open it, made sort of a game or it. Funny as hell. But the guys at the gate kept yelling, first at him, then at everyone. The noise got so bad that Billy split. The birds’ nest in the wall still smelled. The birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, “Poo-tee-weet?”

Anyway, Billy could see that no one would ever buy this story, so he concentrated on the big one about the bombing of Dresden. Billy always knew it would sell. Even if it took twenty years, it would make him rich and famous.

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Review: "The Unquiet Earth" by Denise Giardina

Jerry Hauser

"The Unquiet Earth" squirms with family afflictions. It's a novel describing promises and betrayals to West Virginia miners and kin. But readers will intensely feel the sorrows—perhaps even feel stricken by what corrupt owners, venal bosses, and nature can throw at a group of courageous fiction characters.

Dillon Freeman and Rachael Honaker are the main players as the tale opens. They live near mining towns with names like Justice, and Jenkinjones. They love each other as tender adolescents and first cousins, yet go their separate ways, Dillon to World War II and Rachael to a hospital nursing school.

Upon return to Blackberry Creek, Rachael marries an avaricious company clerk and Dillon hires into mine Number Thirteen. But they stay in love secretly and a daughter, Jackie, is born. She will shape the second half of the novel—a chronicle of open war between the haves and have-nots.

Dillon grows older but more intense for mine worker justice, leading strikes and blowing up a bridge. He does penitentiary time, then returns to Blackberry Creek and tenderly nurtures Jackie who doesn't know he is her real father. Rachael may have meant to tell her, but dies unexpectedly (for the reader) in an intensely gripping death scene.

It's already the sixties when a youthful Jesuit priest, Tom Kolwiecki, arrives at Blackberry Creek, a WESTA volunteer. He becomes a mine worker advocate and Jackie falls in love with him. But he's consecrated to God and will not topple into a carnal affair. Instead he flees to assist campesinos in Honduras.

The Catholic Church fails to keep Jackie and Tom apart. They reunite in Washington D.C., then again in Blackberry Creek. Jackie becomes the crusading editor of a local newspaper and Tom tries to reinstate moral concern without much success.

The novel ends with the bursting of a company dam and wave of water, higher than telephone poles, crashing down the valley. Dillon and Tom are killed and Jackie takes refuge as a copy editor with a Pittsburgh newspaper.

This novel is more that a portal for watching characters love and torment each other. It is a creative narrative where we enter events described in unique character voices. With the flood, we become participants in the terror through active voice perceptions of Jackie, Dillon, Tom, and other players.

"The Unquiet Earth" is strong scrapple for good dialogues. Use it in high school and college classrooms. It won't be repackaged for television; it's too good. You must read it or lose it forever.

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David Schaafsma, UW-Madison, Madison, WI 53706
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Jean Stebbins-Mueller, Clovis Grove School, Menasha, WI 54952
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