WRITING AND THE TEACHING OF THINKING SKILLS

Twenty-two teachers affiliated with the South Coast Writing Project met recently for an informal colloquium on writing and the teaching of thinking skills. The meeting was called in response to the current widespread interest throughout the educational community in teaching thinking skills as they constitute an identifiable set of skills to which a program of instruction might be directed. As a group we began with some skepticism about the validity of any such program, although we all shared the belief that as writing teachers our principal task is to teach students to improve the quality of their thinking. Moreover, most of us already tended to build our writing classes around a set of assignments roughly based on James Moffett’s discourse typology which classifies discourse types according to the degree to which they demand increasingly mature or more abstract kinds of thinking. Several of us had also been impressed by the utility of a collection of writing lessons developed at the UC Irvine Writing Project carefully designed to engage students with intellectual problems at the various levels of thinking identified by Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives.

After two and a half hours of discussion, we found that we had arrived at a sense of considerable clarity on a number of difficult problems related to the teaching of thinking and that we could agree on at least six axioms which we felt should guide instructors who would teach thinking in the context of a composition class. I want to summarize our shared conclusions here so that teachers beyond our group might join and perhaps benefit from our continuing collegial conversation.

Our discussion yielded general agreement that as a collegial community we remained suspicious of attempts to identify and teach any set of intellectual strategies or repertoire of behaviors that might be identified as “thinking skills.” We felt that the idea of a “thinking skill” is a pseudo-concept which misrepresents and trivializes the authentic intellectual activity that we call “thinking.” As a group we embraced Dewey’s dictum that “There is no method for thinking; thinking is the method.”

Our skepticism about a skills approach to teaching thinking does not mean, of course, that we don’t want to direct our teaching to enhancing the quality of thinking that our students engage in. We do believe that we can describe qualitative differences in thought and that such descriptions as we are accustomed to using are adequate to characterize advances in thinking. This is to say that we have a responsibility as teachers to foster more mature, more complex, more discriminating, more critical, and more penetrating thought on the part of our students. We agreed further that in composition classes our teaching is most likely to foster such advances in the thinking of our students when it is informed by the following set of axioms or principles for teachers of writing.

1. Teachers must try to recognize and acknowledge exemplary thinking in the discourse of students whenever it occurs. Students need to be provided with many opportunities for discourse on a variety of topics without necessarily being directed toward certain kinds of thinking. Our responsibility as teachers is to appreciatively call their attention to instances where they are doing their best thinking.

2. Thinking is learned as a social activity. All thinking implies an auditor or respondent or collaborator. Thinking is fostered through opportunities for exchanging and responding to ideas in conversations, discussions, writing-response groups, editing pairs and so on. A student is most likely to make advances in his or her thinking through direct interaction with engaged peers as well as with more mature thinkers.

3. Teachers must respond respectfully and thoughtfully to student thinking. A student is likely to begin feeling respect for his own thinking when a teacher invests himself in responding seriously to the student’s thoughts. If a student sees that his own thinking matters to a thoughtful auditor, he may become inclined—for the sake of his reader—to pay more attention to shaping and clarifying his thought and making sure that he means what he says. This principle also implies that a teacher must not reward thoughtless, irresponsible discourse by treating it as if it represented the fruit of serious thought.

4. Advances in thinking are most likely to occur when thinking is directed to solving authentic problems. Composition teachers must encourage students to write about problems that they experience as their own in their attempts to understand texts or investigate issues. Inauthentic problems are likely to yield inauthentic thinking—which is to say, some substitute for thinking. We should accept no substitutes.

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5. Thinking can be modelled. Students can learn to think from the examples of teachers and peers. Students are likely to learn to think more efficaciously about any subject by seeing their teachers (and advanced fellow-students) engaged in the kind of thinking that instruction would promote. This means that teachers must provide students with more than finished lectures or essays which represent the products of thinking. Instructors must be willing to confront new and difficult intellectual problems in class and to think them through with and in front of their students, modelling the difficulties and frustrations as well as the satisfactions attendant upon making advances in thought.

Every teacher of composition must recognize further that his own oral discourse in the classroom will eventually serve as a model for the kind of written discourse that his students are learning to produce. Most undergraduate English majors learn to write literary papers without ever reading one. Their model for discourse is the speech of their English professors and of their own most articulate colleagues.

6. Thinking is a function of character. To promote critical, creative, insightful thinking teachers must teach in a way that models and fosters in their students the intellectual virtues of risk-taking, a willingness to suspend closure, a tolerance for uncertainty, and a respect for truth. These attributes define the larger virtue of intellectual courage, which is ultimately what is required for a student to engage productively in any difficult thinking task.

Sheridan Blau is the Director of the South Coast Writing Project, University of California, Santa Barbara.