THE END IS NOT THE MEANS

In my frustration as a teacher of English, particularly in writing instruction, I was lead to abandon some traditional ideas and to adopt some ideas that were, for me, revolutionary. I came out of college in the early sixties ready to change the world. I knew grammar, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and so on, and I was ready to impart all of this knowledge to my students, and to receive wonderful, insightful papers from them that were flawless. I taught them grammar, and they learned it. They knew the parts of speech, the parts of the sentence, the types of sentences, what a good paragraph should be like, oh, just all those things that I had been told would make students good writers. Of course you’re laughing at me for my idealism and my ignorance, but I was really upset that the writing of my students, no matter how well they seemed to know grammar, was not really very good. What was worse, it wasn’t improving very much. My students could tear sentences and paragraphs to pieces and reassemble them; they could even diagram sentences. But when I gave them a writing assignment, none of what I thought I had taught them appeared in the papers which they wrote.

I continued in this way for five years, fighting my frustration, living through sleepless nights, developing an ulcer, until I decided that I was not cut out to be an English teacher. To move away from English I took an advanced degree in speech and theater, but, liking small schools, I was still forced to teach English. For several more years I endured the English classroom, trying not to worry too much about my shortcomings. Then I changed schools, and my English class load became much more demanding. Something had to give.

That I was using the wrong techniques was easier for me to accept than the idea that maybe I just wasn’t a very good English teacher. If this were true, if my techniques were at fault, then I had to start over. Everything I had believed religiously about English instruction, especially about writing instruction, might have to be abandoned, but I thought I could face that challenge. My only problem was in knowing where to begin.

Then I hit on what I thought was a novel approach (I know now that it wasn’t). Why not examine my own writing; see what I actually did
when I wrote, and see if I couldn't teach that to my students?

What I discovered when I looked at my own process of writing opened my eyes. I now thought I knew why very little of what I had been teaching seemed to carry over into my students' writing. I had been operating on the wrong basic assumptions, or at least I had the basic assumptions about teaching writing the wrong way around. In my own writing I paid very little attention to grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling, and the like until it was time to revise and edit what I had written. Why, then, did I expect my students to do any differently? I reworded my basic assumptions as follows:

1. I cannot teach writing by teaching grammar.
2. I cannot teach writing by teaching sentence structure.
3. I cannot teach writing by teaching paragraph structure.
4. I cannot teach writing by teaching composition structure.
5. I can teach grammar, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and composition structure by teaching writing.

I was progressing, but the implications of what I had done seemed to deny the need to teach any of the items mentioned in the assumptions, and gave me no hints on how writing instruction was to be accomplished. I didn't worry about that because it seemed to me that these four were worthy of study in their own right, and I would teach them on that basis. Later I discovered another justification for continuing to teach these things. In the meantime, I still had no good idea of how to teach writing. My own writing process gave me the answer, leading to a new set of five basic assumptions for the teaching of writing, as follows:

1. Writing is a process and should be taught as a process, not as the production of end products.
2. The writing process probably involves the following stages:
   a. Getting ready to write,
   b. Writing,
   c. Finding an audience,
   d. Rewriting
3. Writing requires motivation.
4. A grade (normal evaluation) may not be the best motivation.
5. Audience approval is a powerful motivator.

I taught from these assumptions for several years, finding some things that worked very well and some that weren't quite so successful. I found that students would write more if they received the right kind of approval, peer approval. I found that students really did as well with such approval as they did by receiving grades. I found that students thrived on having their work "published" on the walls of my room. I found that students, if given the chance to write free of the fear of the grade and the red pen, would gladly write, and that what they wrote would have life and color and sound like them. Finally I found that students became more interested in correctness and form as their skills as writers grew, and that here was my real justification for continuing to teach grammar, sentence structure, etc. The students' knowledge of grammar and the like gave us a common language, understood by both student and teacher, with which to talk about their writing, to discuss what was good and bad and how things could be revised.

I composed my sixth basic assumption.

6. The teaching of grammar and syntax gives the student and teacher a common language with which to discuss writing and revising.

In the summer of 1984 I became a fellow of the Kansas Writing Project. In the books and ideas I was exposed to during the institute, I discovered Dan Kirby, Tom Liner, Ken Macrorie, and others that had been there before me. In their work and their methods I found company. I was not alone. I was not a maverick. I had simply been isolated, not knowing what was going on in the world. The ideas I encountered enabled me to really bring what I had been trying to do to a focus, and assured me that I was on the right road at last.

In Dan Kirby's work particularly I found support for my theories, and I discovered the words which were the keys to the growth of writing skills. This lead to my seventh and last basic assumption for the teaching of writing.

7. Writing improvement comes from the mastery of three basic writing skills:
   a. Fluency,
   b. Form,
   c. Correctness.

In all that I have said there is no desire to preach or to criticize others. This is only my own story of frustration and change, leading to a system and a rationale for the teaching of composition that works for me. I cannot guarantee that any of this will work for another teacher, or that this is the only really effective way to teach writing. I can promise that if you have been frustrated as an English teacher, if you have seriously questioned what you have been doing and how you have done it, you can find food for thought in this approach. I can also promise that this approach is adaptable and as flexible as any teacher could desire.

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