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From the Desk of Toby Fulwiler

WRITING PROBLEMS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

When I design a writing workshop for teachers in different disciplines and grade levels I really want to explore two things. First, I want teachers to learn that writing to inform or persuade others is different from writing to inform or understand oneself. Teaching students to use writing for self-understanding is one of the keys to using writing throughout the curriculum. Second, I try to introduce teachers first-hand to “the composing process” in order to suggest how this process can help teachers assign and evaluate student writing. However, before I introduce these “lessons” I need to understand the expectations of my audience, many of whom have signed up for this workshop because poor spelling is driving them crazy. I need to bridge the distance between the workshop objectives and what they want to know.

The most crucial time at such a writing workshop is the first thirty minutes, when I am trying to introduce myself along with the premises of the workshop and, at the same time, learn something about my audience—who they are, why they are there, and what they know that I don’t. The teachers in the audience, meanwhile, are sizing me up, getting to know each other, and wondering to what extent I will make them uncomfortable, put them on the spot, or teach them anything. I can both move the business of the workshop forward and put everybody at ease by starting with a discussion of the “student writing problems” which most trouble teachers.

This opening session often sets the tone for the remainder of the workshop—whether it be several hours, several days or several weeks—and focuses attention on common concerns. Recently I compared lists of problems posed at three workshops this past year from a) elementary teachers (K-6), b) secondary teachers (7-12), and c) college teachers; I copied these suggestions as the teachers offered them, one at a time, on an overhead projection transparency:

I. WRITING PROBLEMS LISTED BY TEACHERS AT HOUGHTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (1-27-81)

1. writing full sentences
2. punctuating dialogue
3. paragraphing
4. staying with one idea
5. getting a good ending
6. spelling
7. using correct words and grammar
8. interest and attitude toward writing
9. staying on the line
10. vocabulary
11. home background
12. pre-structuring the writing assignment
13. getting started
14. using their own experience
15. re-reading and proofreading
16. summarizing

The elementary-teacher list is characterized by certain mechanical items, for example: “staying on the line,” “spelling” and “punctuating dialogue;” it is also characterized by a concern with the more personal elements of writing: the writer’s “own

(Continued on page 2)
II. WRITING PROBLEMS LISTED BY TEACHERS AT HOUGHTON HIGH SCHOOL (1-26-81)

1. writing complete sentences
2. spelling
3. generalizing
4. penmanship
5. precise thinking
6. reading ability
7. reluctance to write in certain subjects (e.g. math)
8. paraphrasing
9. paragraphing
10. believing that writing is important
11. plagiarism
12. punctuation
13. systematic thinking
14. attitude toward writing

The list by forty high school teachers from a variety of subject areas shares concerns with the elementary teachers, but is particularly characterized by a concern with students’ negative attitudes towards writing: “plagiarism,” believing that writing is important,” and “reluctance to write.” In other words, the fears of the elementary teachers that students would turn off to writing prove well founded; by the time they reach high school many students do not like to write, for whatever reasons. In addition, mechanics continue to be important: “penmanship,” “spelling” and “punctuation.” Finally we might note a concern with “precise and systematic thinking”—which becomes an even more dominant concern on the college list.

III. WRITING PROBLEMS LISTED BY TEACHERS AT MICHIGAN TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY (8-18-80)

1. attitude
2. having something to say
3. faulty reasoning
4. having a thesis
5. understanding what the reader doesn’t understand
6. value of writing
7. rules of writing (spelling, punctuation, etc.)
8. context of writing

(Continued from Page 1)

9. organization
10. revising
11. developing ideas logically
12. writing like they talk
13. coherence (in a whole essay)
14. being concise
15. self-confidence
16. ignorance of conventions
17. sentence errors
18. including irrelevant and digressive information
19. using correct references and sources
20. writing introductions

The list of problems by college teachers might be characterized best by the term “expectations;” these teachers expect correctness, completeness and coherence from their students. In addition, many items on this list have to do with thinking: “faulty reasoning,” “having a thesis,” “understanding the reader;” at the same time, we find a heightened concern for correctness: “rules,” “conventions,” and “references.” While the college teachers recognized that student attitude was a problem, their interest in student writing is generally product-oriented; college students are expected to produce logical, well-written papers.

To generalize, among the items mentioned at all levels of writing instruction are “spelling,” “thinking” and “motivation.” (This is true for a dozen other workshops I’ve conducted with interdisciplinary faculty over the past several years.) Though similar items appear at all grade levels, it is apparent that “spelling,” as a writing problem, is quite different from “thinking,” and both differ significantly from “motivation.”

“Spelling,” for example, is an orthographic problem peculiar to writing: it is not an issue in speaking—not the same, for example, as “mispronunciation.” In this sense “spelling” is not necessarily related to the writer’s maturity. I.Q., wisdom, or knowledge. At the same time, spelling is perhaps the most noticeable and easily identifiable error in writing. Teachers often talk about “poor writing” when they mean, in fact, “poor spelling”—and while spelling errors often accompany poor writing, they are not a necessary corollary of it.

“Thinking” also occurs on each list, in different words, manifested by various deficiencies in logic, development, organization, and precision. Unlike “spelling” or “punctuation,” “thinking” cannot be cured by a set of drills, rules, or workbook exercises. In the elementary grades teachers introduce “the complete sentence,” training children to recognize complete “units of thought;” at higher grade levels, teachers teach “the paragraph,” a more developed unit of thought. High school and college teachers most often teach “thinking” by assigning units of composition
longer than the paragraph (essay test, research paper, laboratory report), which demand logic, organization and support until a rhetorically complete case is made to an audience.

"Motivation," or its absence, is as pervasive, complex and difficult to solve as any writing problem; it does not show up as a distinct trait on any given paper: you cannot point with certainty to a word or passage, as you can with spelling or logic, and say "That’s wrong. That’s poor motivation."

Identifying motivation as a problem is not the same as detecting it specifically on a paper; teachers who mention this problem "see" it in a number of ways: sloppy penmanship, frequent misspelling, illogical thinking, inattention to detail, abundant cliches and generalizations, and so forth. In other words, poor motivation manifests itself in a variety of more specific problems.

Looking for some differences on the lists, we can make these generalizations: First, certain problems are more definitely "age-related" than others; we can expect "staying on the line" and "penmanship" to clear up through simple maturity and regular practice—though penmanship continues to haunt certain individuals (me) forever. Other problems surface only later, when new demands are placed on student writers—the ability to "use correct references and sources," for instance.

Second, the lists reveal the extent to which teachers use different language to describe similar problems, a probable cause of some confusion among students. For example, one college teacher talks about "faulty reasoning," a second about "developing ideas logically" and a third, "coherence," while high school teachers mention "systematic" and "precise" thinking and elementary teachers "staying with one idea." We may infer, from the different terms on these lists, similar differences when teachers comment on student papers. Not all students understand when one teacher calls a problem a "comma splice" while another calls the same error "punctuation" and still another calls it "awkward." Or when one teacher tells a student he needs "to outline," a second that he needs "better transitions," while a third prescribes "topic sentences" to cure the same problem. This can be especially confusing to student writers who are not confident about writing skills in the first place; they soon come to believe that all writing instruction is arbitrary and subjective.

To conclude this introductory session of a writing workshop, I ask the teachers to condense the long list of problems they have generated into fewer, more general categories to give the group, finally, a common vocabulary and a better understanding of the real differences among categories. After this effort—to combine for example "spelling," "punctuating" and "staying on the line" into one category "mechanics"—most teachers become aware of both the diversity and complexity of writing problems and seldom, henceforth, prescribe simple solutions (e.g., "grammar drills") for all such problems. The following list reproduced from a recent college workshop is typical of the kind developed by most groups:

1. Attitude
2. Mechanical skills (spelling, punctuation)
3. Organizational skills (how to piece it together)
4. Style (conventions appropriate to task and audience)
5. Reasoning ability (thinking, logic)
6. Knowledge (something to write about)

This briefer list, while it doesn’t cover every single item on the longer lists, organizes areas of concern so workshop participants can better understand them. Looking at such a list visually highlights the problem categories and makes them easier to discuss and perhaps solve. Actual solution, of course, will be the business of later workshops. The dialogue has begun.

Biographical note: Toby Fulwiler co-directs the Copper Country Writing Project with Bruce Petersen and Randy Freisinger in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Toby is Assistant Head and Director of Writing Programs in the Humanities Department of Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI. He was appointed to the Advisory Board of the NWP in 1981.