WRITING PROJECTS: CENTERS OF KNOWING

Teaching is a knowing act, and so is writing. Writing teachers need to be knowing persons. Knowing and knowledge are different. Not opposed, but different. A contrast, overdrawn I hope, suggests the distinctions. Universities are repositories of knowledge, where curators hold terminal degrees. Writing projects are centers of knowing, for the teachers who compose them.

How is a writing project a center of knowing? That is a discomforting question even to ask, for knowing is like loving, as any reflection on Genesis reveals. Both acts have their quiet depths, and there is something about each that does not wish to be named. Discomfort turns to obscenity if labels replace acts, as sometimes happens in marriages and in schools.

Curiosity, inquiry, commitment, thought—such things cannot be had simply by asking for them or talking about them. Yet those words denote qualities which seem to arise naturally in a writing project. I'd like to reflect on some three dimensions which I think make those qualities possible.

The first is an attitude toward teachers. Each teacher is presumed to be a well of strength to be tapped, not a void to be exposed and filled. When the subject is writing, and the learner is considered to be a void exposed, the learner cannot be filled but only exploited. That indeed can be a powerful strategy which helps professors appear knowledgeable, while it assures that their students remain ignorant. Knowing writing must be an achievement; it can never be an imposition. We learn writing like we learn other acts, by exercising and extending strengths we already possess. As Cicero says, “The efficacy of the whole of this science, or perhaps I should say pseudo-science, of rhetoric, is not that it wholly originates and engenders something no part of which is already present in our minds, but that it fosters and strengthens things that have already sprung to birth within us.” [De Oratore, II, 1xxxvii, 356.]

Second is a characteristic attitude of teachers in a project, a perception of differences between oneself and one’s colleagues, differences assured by the range of backgrounds and grade levels represented. Perception of differences is essential to knowing; so are perceived commonalities among knowers. Without commonalities, we have no way to hear; without differences, we have no reason to listen. Reflecting on Aristotle, Gadamer says, “Only friends can advise each other” [Truth and Method, p. 288]. A writing project is a circle of advisors.

Writing, a third point which in important senses encompasses the other two, is what a project is about. Writing is the most accurate emblem I know for knowing. What are some of the commonalities? In the first place, knowing of writing, the kind of knowing teachers need, is accessible only to those who practice writing. Quintilian implies as much, in emphasizing the orator’s integrity. The ancients generally share the emphasis when they insist that a teacher of rhetoric must be a model for students. And Gadamer reminds us that “In rhetoric . . . theory is subsequent to that out of which it is abstracted; that is, to praxis” [Philosophical Hermeneutics, p. 21]. In important senses a theory of writing must be created anew by each person who holds it, created through that person’s acts of writing. Moreover, writing, born of a writer’s strengths, is drawn out by differences, among them the differences between a writer and those for whom she writes. As one of my students wrote of writing, “Thought is confession, drawing out the notions that do not dare show themselves” and “Composing is the movement towards truth.” Aristotle wrote, “All deliberation is investigation” [Nicomachean Ethics 1112b]. Writing, it seems to me, is deliberation; writing is inquiring.

Writing and inquiring are in some senses private acts; in others, they are irreducibly social. A writing project is a center of knowing persons, a “community of inquirers” in Polanyi’s phrase. Centers have radii, potentially innumerable ones, reaching far beyond the members of a single project and the insights they can make possible for each other. Today, those concerned with writing compose a remarkably vital and far-flung community, and Fellows of a project deserve to see themselves as members of this larger community, through hearing guest presenters and reading what is being written. And what has been written, also; our community enjoys a rich and ancient tradition.

Teachers who compose a writing project are its center, but as a center of knowing, a project’s periphery is open, to discoveries of commonalities and differences beyond the project itself. Writing extends us across space and time, rendering accessible to us those clashes and confirmations which offer renewing insights and continuing life as knowing persons. This article, an instance of writing from four different perspectives, may be a case in point.

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