I simply find composition teaching to be the most challenging and rewarding kind. Indeed, the situation from which I have learned the most was a freshman composition course, the very first one I taught, in the fall of 1958. I am going to burden you with some memories of that experience.

When I arrived at Berkeley from Yale and Princeton, having sailed through graduate school on fellowships without ever facing a class, I was, all unknowingly, a transmitter of what is now called the “current traditional paradigm” of composition teaching. Nevermind that the term had not yet been coined; if it had, I still wouldn’t have heard about it. What occurred was a head-on collision with bright, agreeable, but wary freshmen who weren’t all that much younger than I was, but who didn’t seem to know any of the things about literature and language that I expected them to. They ended by teaching me about fifty percent of everything I now know about composition instruction. Their chief means of doing so was to take my orders very literally and turn in papers that positively demonstrated why I should not have proceeded as I did.

Item: When I emphasized the importance of defining one’s terms, and told my students to look to it in their own work, they came back the following week with papers that defined everything in sight, reducing the once familiar world to unrecognizable gobs of matter and pre-Platonic essence awaiting their turn to be meticulously distinguished from all the others.

Item: When I told them that arguments are won through a preponderance of evidence, they scoured the universe for facts that would support the farfetched or self-evident theses they had chosen, and their papers became arid, droning compilations of those maddeningly pedantic details.

Item: When I decided to teach them logic, and spent two weeks drawing interlocked circles on the blackboard representing syllogisms and enthymemes, they produced stupefyingly irrefutable papers along the following lines: “My major premise is that all freshmen at the University of California, Berkeley, are eager to succeed in life. I am a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley. It therefore follows that I am eager to succeed in life.”

In addition, my composition students advanced my thinking through the questions they ingenuously or sometimes pointedly raised:

Item: When I told them that the party to an argument who sounds most reasonable and precise always wins, they asked me why the Lincoln-esque Adlai Stevenson had just lost two presidential elections to the wool-gathering Dwight D. Eisenhower—a walking run-on sentence—and his escape-artist sidekick, the former owner of Checkers.

Item: When I told them that they had to learn how to argue the pros and cons of gun control and offshore oil
leases and admitting “Red China” to the UN, they simply asked why. Did life after graduation hold in store a sequence of debating tours?

Item: When I told them that good writers always aim at a consistent middle level of diction, some of the sharpest members of the class called my attention to my own reading assignments — essays by D. H. Lawrence, E. B. White, and George Orwell — and asked why I thought they contained so many proscribed colloquialisms. The only reply I could manage was that those weren’t really writers, they were authors — famous stylists who had long since passed out of freshman English and earned the prerogative of trifling with language in unorthodox ways. But the question had given me pause.

Item: When I said that some of their papers were wildly irrelevant to the announced topic or addressed to an inappropriate audience (for example, a fool) or cast in an inappropriate mode (such as the greeting card), and when I added that they would have to do better on their next assignment, they said, “But how were we supposed to know that we were on the wrong track? And how can we do better next time when we will once again be trying from scratch to read your enigmatic mind?” (Except, of course, they didn’t actually use the word “enigmatic.” The same goes for “proscribed colloquialisms” above.)

Item: When I told them that their papers were full of disgraceful errors and that we would have to interrupt the syllabus for an intensive grammar review, they showed me, by a further precipitous decline in every category of performance, that abstract grammatical understanding is (a) much harder to acquire than a fluent writing style, (b) poorly correlated with clear writing, and (c) totally distracting from the mental posture that makes composing a feasible activity.

Item: And finally, whenever for one reason or another I found myself with no preparation time left to draw up a comprehensive scenario for the next class hour, with my questions and the students’ “correct” answers all written out and waiting for the cameras to roll, I noticed that things went inexplicably better. My charges stopped acting like prisoners of war who were determined to divulge nothing beyond name, rank, and serial number. They looked at me with a strange new sympathy and interest, as if their robot teacher had been hauled off to the shop for repair and a human substitute were filling in. And they began exploring texts and issues with me, apparently forgetting for that one hour that I brandished over them the awful weapon of the grade.

I am sure you will recognize that the implicit lessons of all these experiences are conclusions that composition researchers have reached, through more laborious and careful means, in the years between then and now. Though neither my students nor I could have been aware of the fact, they were introducing me to the so-called composition revolution — the momentous and welcome shift from product to process, from instructor as punitive god to instructor as supportive facilitator, from writing as makework projects to writing as introduction to disciplinary styles of thought and reasoning, and from language as the plain or painted vehicle of thought to language as imaginative exploration, heuristic tool, and means of self-realization.

I don’t claim that I transformed my teaching style in the course of one semester, or that even today I couldn’t use further sensitizing to the actual needs and capabilities of young writers. But I do claim that I took my zest for teaching directly from that first encounter with freshman English, with all of its unnerving but illuminating setbacks, its ultimately cordial relations with my long-suffering young friends, and its revelation that teaching, which I had conclusively demonstrated not to be a science, must indeed be an art.

Afterword

Art Peterson has dug up these reminiscences of mine from 1986 and asked whether I would allow them to be republished. How could I refuse? One doesn’t snub a legendary teacher, a fine editor, and a friend who also happens to be one’s brother-in-law!

As some readers will know, I have recently taken an interest in the theory of human memory, a topic of passionate and socially important debate. My own memory of the CCTE meeting at which these observations were delivered is indistinct, as befits an experience that resembled many others. But memory researchers tell us that if we “rehearse” an incident, turning it into the stuff of anecdote, we are less likely to forget it. For that reason, no doubt, one feature of my address to the CCTE in Arlington, Texas, still stands out.

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The conference official who introduced me, I recall, ended by asking Jesus to bless both my speech and the repast that was to follow it. As one of the world’s few lapsed Unitarians, and as someone who has striven earnestly to hew to the secular path, I found that benediction vaguely alarming—somewhat like the murmur of distant tom-toms. “Toto,” I reflected silently, “I don’t think we’re in Berkeley anymore.” An hour later, amid the clatter of dishes being bused, the saturnine conferee on my left leaned over and confided, “Better he should have blessed the chicken.”

Of course, 1958 is even farther down memory lane than 1986. I think that my recollections of my very first teaching experience are true in spirit, if not in every detail. But they now have about them a kind of accidental wistfulness, stemming not from nostalgia for those anxious days but from the sheer quaintness of my belief, still flickering in the eighties, that ladder faculty members in English departments possessing Ph.D. programs ought to conceive of themselves as teachers of composition. I still cherish that belief, but a combination of cold economic realities and continuing “professionalization” has changed all that, not only at Berkeley but just about everywhere. It’s a rotten shame.

My statements of 1986 have, for me now, an especially ironic ring because I would shortly be caught up in bureaucratic duties—graduate chair and then department chair—that, until my retirement in 1994, limited my access to any classrooms, much less to writing courses. I did, however, subsequently conduct an experiment that still strikes me as worthwhile, lecturing about composition to large classes of freshmen while supervising their section leaders. Once we realized, through trial and error, that the ideal size of such a class was closer to 100 than the initial 200 students, it proved a great success for all three parties—especially for the graduate instructors who would thereafter be on their own. Is there a model here that could help university faculties to stave off total abandonment of their freshman writers? I would like to think so.

For too long this has been our national testing program! And these Report Cards to Congress, to school boards, and to the general public have been one reason why Americans now have doubts about how well our schools are teaching students what they need to know.

But there have been a few brighter spots. I always felt that the University of California’s old Subject A test was a fair test. It was a timed test, but the time given to students was a full three hours, plenty of time for student writers to reveal what they were capable of doing in a fair test of their writing: (1) time to read a given passage and select the most likely prompt, (2) time to think about what could be written and how it might be best presented, (3) a generous amount of time still left to write a thoughtful essay, (4) and after the first draft was written, time to read it over carefully and make any needed corrections or revisions before (5) having the time to write a clean final copy. And these entering freshmen all knew that this particular test was important to their future, with the prospect of having to take the Subject A class or not standing in the balance. High school students, on the other hand, taking NAEP or any other imposed writing test know very well that such tests do not affect their grades and the results will mean nothing whatsoever to their future.

I also thought California’s CAP test of a few years back had one particularly excellent feature: because students statewide were asked to do a great variety of types of writing—every student in any given class could have been writing to a different prompt—there could be no way to prepare students for this test except to make sure that they wrote a lot and wrote to a lot of different kinds of topics to different audiences and for different purposes. Wonderful! If testing does influence curriculum, here at least was one test that could lead to something worthwhile.