The More Things Change...
Or Do They?

Recently, a new book entitled The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History, edited by John C Brereton (1995, Pittsburg University Press) arrived at the Quarterly office. This impressive scholarly work records, through source documents, the controversies surrounding the beginnings of college composition courses. At first glance, the book looked a bit daunting, but as we began to read some of the essays that comprise Origins, we were surprised at how many of the hotly debated issues surrounding composition instruction one hundred years ago have an eerily contemporary ring.

Here we reprint, with permission, a few selections from Origins which illustrate that, in composition instruction, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Note: Please, no angry letters about the virtual exclusion of girls from the concerns of these writers. That’s one thing that has changed.

The Reading/Writing Debate
High school students don’t write enough. This is the conventional wisdom confirmed by Arthur Applebee’s 1984 survey of secondary schools. Ironically, Applebee was telling us nothing new. One hundred years earlier, Charles Francis Adams (grandson of John Quincy Adams) came to the same conclusion after surveying Harvard preparatory schools to determine why Harvard freshman wrote so poorly. He includes in his account one examiner’s experience in a preparatory school:

In the course of the examination of certain schools in the country towns of one of the counties in the immediate vicinity of Boston, the examiner, an official of the State Board of Education, made the usual inquiry of the scholars: “What is the object of the study of English Grammar?” The answer of the scholars was immediate, that it was “the art of reading and writing the English language correctly.” The examiner thereupon told the members of the class in question that he wished them, having then studied grammar for several years, to show what the results of their instruction had been by at once sitting down and writing to him an ordinary letter asking for employment — such a letter as they might, and, indeed, certainly would, be called upon to write at some time in subsequent life.

The teacher of the school promptly interfered, stating that the test was of a most unheard-of character, and that, in justice to himself, he objected to having his scholars subjected to it, “They had not been taught in that way!” In other words, the children in this school had been taught to parse, as it is called, and to repeat after the manner of parrots certain rules as to gender, and the subjects and predicates, and to distinguish orally parts of speech. They had never had any practice to enable them to make use of their knowledge; and so they could not compose a letter of the most ordinary character, or, indeed, express a thought in writing. (p.93) ...

To write English correctly and with ease is something not quickly or easily to be acquired. It is a good deal more difficult to acquire than, for instance, a fair degree of proficiency in the games of baseball or lawn tennis, or than riding on bicycle or sailing a boat, or than skating or swimming. Yet nearly every boy from the academy can do some one at least of these things with ease, and a degree of skill calculated to excite admiration. How is this ability acquired? It certainly is not acquired by studying rules in treatises, or by listening to lectures on curves, equilibrium, buoyancy of bodies or science of pitching and batting. The study
of underlying principles is here discarded in favor of practice; and the practice is not at the rate of an hour in a month, or even an hour in two weeks — the mere suggestion of such a thing would excite derisive surprise — but it is daily and incessant. It is only through similar daily and incessant practice that the degree of facility in writing the mother tongue is acquired which alone enables student or adult to use it as a tool in his work — the way in which it ought to be used in the course of a college career. It is there not an end; it is an instrument. (p. 95) ...

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Of course, not everyone agrees that the practice of writing is the single most important component in learning to write. Stephen Krashen and others have argued that reading plays a larger role in a writer's development, a position reminiscent of a point of view heard 100 years ago. This idea is articulated in the following anonymous 1896 article published in Century Magazine. The author questions the concept of learning to write by writing and argues for an education rich in literary models.

[A] danger which threatens the progress of reform is the supposition, very generally accepted in some high circles, that the pupil, in order to write good English, may profitably neglect literature, if only he steadily write compositions. We are told that the way to become a good writer is to write; this sounds plausible, like many other pretty sayings equally remote from fact. No one thinks that the way to become a good medical practitioner is to practise; that is the method of quacks. The best way, indeed, to become a good writer is to be born of the right sort of parents; this fundamental step having been unaccountably neglected by many children, the instructor has to do what he can with second- or third-class material. Now a wide reader is usually a correct writer; and he has reached the goal in the most delightful manner, without feeling the penalty of Adam. What teacher ever found in his classes a boy who knew his Bible, who enjoyed Shakespeare, and who loved Scott, yet who, with this outfit, wrote illiterate compositions? This youth writes well principally because he has something to say, for reading maketh a full man; and he knows what correct writing is in the same way that he knows his friends — by intimate acquaintance. (p. 240)

Charles Francis Adams doesn't agree. Reading great literature is little help to the neophyte writer, he contends:

The great masters of written expression are no less rare than the great masters of painting or of music — a Milton, an Addison, a Burke or an Emerson would rank in the individuality or choiceness of his work with a Rembrandt, a Titian or a Millet in painting; or a Mozart, a Beethoven or Wagner in music. A school-master, whose business it was to instruct children of from 15 to 18 years of age in the elements of drawing, painting or music, with a view to passing an examination for admittance into some Academy, would naturally devote his time and that of his classes to a severe discipline in the first rudiments of music and draughtsmanship — the practice of the scales and the drawing of straight lines, the flexibility of the muscles, the facility of the fingers and the correctness of ear and eye. But what would be thought of a master who instead of this, exhibited a copy — a good copy, perhaps — of a portrait by Titian or Velasquez, Rubens or Reynolds, or played to his pupils, or took them to hear a composition of Wagner, Mozart or Beethoven — analyzing according to his lights and after his own fashion the masterpieces under consideration, pointing out differences of method and manner, and then, after thus directing the budding intelligence of those who did not yet know really how to draw a line or strike a note and who were not mature enough to have any correct appreciation of what they had seen or heard, should tell them to sit down at their desks and paint a portrait after the manner first of Rembrandt and then of Velasquez, or compose a symphony in the style of Mozart as distinguished from that of Beethoven? Yet, incredible as it seems, this is now done in some of the preparatory schools. (p. 121)

The Student-Centered Classroom circa 1890

Nancie Atwell has helped focus the educational debate over the importance of student choice in learning to write. Many school writing assignments, she argues, are merely exercises that do not inspire young writers to their highest potential. Atwell echoes the argument Gertrude Buck articulated in an 1891 Educational Review article promoting authentic writing in the classroom.
practically and theoretically consistent with genuine writing. The more objective and impersonal the answers given to these questions, the more likely is the criticism to be vital — the student’s judgment of his own writing, not the teacher’s externally imposed estimate of it.

Hence the devices of some ingenious teachers for returning directly to the writer, for comparison with the original experience, the experience which he has actually transmitted to the reader’s mind. For instance, some outdoor scene is described to a friend skillful with the brush, whereupon he paints for the writer a sketch of that same scene as it flashed before his eyes while reading the description. Or, a fellow student, taking the point of view of the reader addressed, gives back to the writer in other language, and possibly in further detail, a verbal account of the image transmitted to his consciousness. Thus the writer may know of a certainty whether or not his communication reached home; and, more than this, often in the process of comparison the source of its failure or success becomes evident. (p. 249)

The Correctness/Content Dilemma
What is the appropriate balance between content and correctness in the writing classroom? Should students spend time completing Daily Oral Language editing exercises or Showing Writing paragraphs? A 1911 Harper’s Monthly article by Thomas Raynesford Lounsbury takes a stand on this still-contemporary issue.

Two themes come up for consideration which though treating of the same subject are marked by a peculiar contrast. One is deformed by errors of various sorts, by the use of locutions which are not permissible in correct speech, by constructions for which the resources of grammar would be tasked in order to find a satisfactory explanation. Yet in spite of these glaring faults the work done is somehow interesting. What is said is said with so much vivacity and occasional felicity that it attracts and holds the attention. Notwithstanding its linguistic lapses, it has fulfilled the first law of writing; it is readable.

The other is correct in the employment of words and in their arrangement. It is everything that it should be from the point of view of grammar and usage. Yet it is somehow so dull that it has upon the reader all the effect of an opiate. Its fairly aggressive tediousness, along with the impossibility of finding particular er-

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Were student response groups invented by educational innovators of the 1960s and 70s, Donald Graves and Donald Murray among them? Maybe not. Buck’s 1891 article goes on to emphasize the importance of students responding to another’s writing.

The genuine occasion for writing, like that for the child’s walking, furnishes its own practical standard for criticism. Did I succeed in reproducing my experience exactly in my friend’s mind? Did he receive from me the sensation I had previously felt? Did he see each event as it had passed before my eyes? Did he think my thought after me? Did he reach my conclusion as I had earlier reached it? Questions such as these furnish the starting point for all that new order of criticism which is held by its advocates to be both
rors to cavil at, irritates the critic. Yet what is he to do? If he tells the brutal truth, he must say to the writer: I find no fault with your use of words or with the construction of your sentences or of your paragraphs; but the fact is you have contrived to take every particle of interest out of an interesting subject. Your essay is pervaded by an overpowering dullness which casts a burden upon the spirits beyond the justifiable limits of human endurance.

To this the hapless student may reply: I have given you all the information you asked for. You find no fault with the correctness of the way in which it has been conveyed. What more can I do; what more would you have me do? It is a perfectly just protest against the criticism received. No fair answer can be made to it under the conditions given. For we have reached here an ultimate fact. Nothing more can be said than that one piece with all its blunders is interesting because it is written in an interesting manner; the other, free as it is from grammatical or rhetorical errors, is dull beyond description because something is lacking, the want of which we feel but cannot exactly describe, at least in terms palatable to the writer. The difference between the two pieces is due to the presence in the one and to the absence in the other of a trace of that alchemical power of style which in its perfection can transmute the base matter of common thought and incident into the gold of literary achievement. Manifestly this is something which cannot be imparted by direct instruction. Wherever it comes from, it assuredly does not come from judicious criticism. It gets, indeed, little help from any criticism whether judicious or injudicious. (p. 273)

The Compulsory Composition Debate
Disagreement on the subject of compulsory composition began with the onset of such classes in the late 1800s, as Lounsbury illustrates here:

A university which should set out to make all its students musicians or mathematicians or architects or engineers or painters without taking into consideration their several tastes or capacities will deservedly incur both censure and ridicule. Yet this is exactly what all of them set out to do in the art of composition. Certain persons there are who both before and after graduation have no disposition to write. Why can they not be left undisturbed in this ideally desirable condition of voluntary abstention? The world is not suffering from a penury of manuscripts or of books. Here, therefore, individuality of choice comes properly into play. The elective system has been at times praised, and at times overpraised. Similarly it has been disapproved and undervalued. But if there be warrant for it on the score of reason, it ought to find its fullest and most satisfactory justification in the matter of English composition. Yet this is the one place where it is not tolerated at all. Even the great champion of the system [Charles Eliot], who advocated the utmost liberty of choice in about everything else, drew the line here. He, too, insisted that upon this particular educational altar every student should be immolated as a victim. (p.282) ...

On the subject of required English composition, I am a stout, unabashed, and thorough skeptic. And although the majority is still against me, I am in good company. Professor Child read and corrected themes at Harvard for about forty years: at the end of the time,
it was his fervent belief that not only was the work unprocurable to the student, but that in many cases it was injurious. That it is always injurious to the instructor, when it is intermperately indulged, is certain. When I was an instructor at Harvard, I one day met Professor Child in the yard. He stopped a moment and asked me what kind of work I was doing. I said, "Reading themes." He put his hand affectionately on my shoulder, and remarked with that wonderful smile of his, in which kindness was mingled with the regret of forty years, "Don't spoil your youth."

**The Frustrations of Teaching Composition**

Writing teachers boxed into traditional composition teaching often grumble about the "paper load," grading mountains of compulsory student essays on topics that the students did not choose and know very little about. A 1912 article by William Lyons Phelps colorfully describes his frustrating experience teaching college composition:

After spending a year in graduate study at Harvard, I was appointed by President Eliot Instructor in English, an honour of which I have always been proud. I observed a curious fact. Men who had been graduated from Harvard, had studied in the graduate school, had topped this by some years of research in Europe were spending nine-tenths of their time doing what? Reading undergraduate required themes and correcting in red ink spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing. Why such mighty labour of preparation to perform work that could be done exactly as well by any young school-teacher? Some of the instructors were permitted to give one hour a week of teaching in English Literature, others did nothing but read themes. I read and marked over seven hundred themes a week — most of them were short themes, but some were not. Whenever I entered my room I was greeted by the huge pile of themes on the table, awaiting my attention. I read very few books the whole year — there was no time. I never went to bed before midnight. If I were sick for two or three days, a substitute had to be found, for it was only by steady daily reading that I could keep pace with the manuscripts pouring in like flood, threatening to engulf me every day. ...

But [for] the highest respect and admiration for my colleagues, nothing on earth would have induced me to continue such brain-fogging toil another year. I do not know that I should have been invited to do so, for I accepted another situation without asking. The curious thing is, that I then believed in the efficacy of the system. I said to myself: "This is worse than coal-heaving. This is nerve-destroying, a torture to soul and body. But it is necessary. Someone must do it. Why not I? But not I, any longer." (Phelps, p. 287)

Lounsbury's 1911 Harper's Monthly article expresses similar sentiments:

Under the compulsory system now prevailing the task of reading and correcting themes is one of deadly dullness. Men who are really fitted to perform the work properly are exceedingly rare; and when found they will not persist in carrying on this most distasteful of occupations, unless compelled by necessity. It is consequently looked upon as merely stepping-stone to something else.

We are indeed frequently assured by those who have been themselves careful never to try this sort of work that the state of mind just indicated is all wrong; that the reading and correcting of themes is one of noblest occupations to which the human mind can devote itself. Occasionally men of letters have been found to express themselves as pained and shocked that the land does not swarm with instructors who burning with eagerness to lead young and growing minds into the paths of pure and lofty expression, which these callow youth are supposed to be anxious to tread. Nothing more delightful could well be conceived than to round up this whole body of sorrowing souls and compel each and every one of them to prepare upon short notice essays upon subjects which they know nothing about and in which they have not the slightest interest; for this is the very thing which our institutions of learning are persistently asking, not of trained writers who presumably possess some ideas of their own, but of raw and immature minds which are supplied with little knowledge and are but slightly addicted to reflection. These literary extollers of our present methods would rise up from the experiment wiser men, and probably a good deal sadder. (p.270)

*Contemplating the contemporary flavor of these excerpts, we too are a little wiser and sadder.*

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