

Response

PAMELA B. CHILDERS

Joan has introduced some interesting new ways of teaching writing through the language of architecture. Her discussion stimulates my interest in its applications, and I like it for several reasons.

- As Joan describes it, she and Dick wanted to “create a bridge from the concrete, physical, visual, graphic world to an abstract, intangible, textual, imaginative one.” Isn’t this one of the very problems we so often face as writers ourselves? As teachers of writing we embrace anything that will encourage students to *picture* what they want to say or give it some reality other than our frequently abstract prompt. Through tangible metaphors our students may begin to *see* a concept and talk about it in a different way.

- Just this morning, my husband Malcolm and I were trying to decide how to write the outline for our workshop with Michael Fatali, a professional photographer. Michael sees through a large-format camera lens in ways that I can only imagine when I look at his spectacular prints. We needed to describe our roles as collaborating workshop leaders to him as clearly as possible. I took a pen and drew three lines that rose and fell, indicating our responsibilities from day one to day five. Our roles would be unique but also connected, overlapping, and interwoven in some places during the workshop. Our friend would understand this visual representation. Now I could explain what I was trying to say because I had also made it clear to myself. I was trying out what Joan suggests in this chapter. Now I want to use it with my students before they begin their next writing assignment.

- *Using another language, the language of architecture in this case, provides a metaphoric way of talking about writing.* A research paper, like a building, has a definite structure. I would even guess that writing, like building, involves certain “building codes” that an “inspector” must check during each step of the process. Maybe using this metaphor with research papers would solve many of the problems with this dreaded unit in junior English classes.

Just this past week one of my colleagues in the history depart-

ment came to me with a list of deadlines for the class research paper and asked me to explain the MLA research format and research techniques on the Internet. Now that I think about it, I will describe the research process as building a structure. My assistant and I will supervise the construction site and check students' work to see that it meets the building requirements. I'm eager to see what happens, especially regarding deadlines!

Think of the possibilities with other subjects. For example, Mike Lancaster's biology students are creating classroom-size models of organelles of a cell as conceptual works of art. Each organelle will be described in a guidebook for the classroom cell. From photography to graphs in precalculus to mapped-out battles in history, we can borrow metaphors to use in teaching writing. If we are speaking of English literature, don't we read Keats' poem, "Ode to a Nightingale," and compare the bird's song to a poem and the bird to the poet? How is a poem like the song of the nightingale? We are drawing on sound, not just sight. Having students use language from another discipline to create a workable metaphor for their writing might prove quite challenging because it requires careful observation and concentration and forces them to focus on details as they have never done before.

Of course, these metaphors do not have to derive from specific disciplines. Students could also draw a model to help them work their way through the writing process. With current technology, they could even take a virtual trip through their model. Today one of my peer tutors wrote in his journal that he was a kite, and the school gave him more string each year till the end of his senior year when the school would let go. He would have to succeed or fail on his own; what the school was trying to teach him was how to fly.

▪ *Since many of us team teach courses with teachers in other disciplines, I think it is important to draw on the content of those subjects in teaching writing.* Joan and Dick combined resources to develop a new way of approaching a subject and of teaching writing. "The process draws together the physical and visual world of the students with the abstract textual world of the classroom, making them *see* the writing process," Joan says.

Recently one of my colleagues said she was surprised that her students could find little research material on Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*. She wanted them to become familiar with researching on the Internet, but she also wanted them to be able to identify and organize key ideas in what they had found and present them in a written form that demonstrated their knowledge of the novel. She came up with the idea of having the students create home pages for the novel on Microsoft FrontPage or AOL Press (Internet software). Each student would create his own home page and save it on a disk. Then the class

would look at all the home pages on a large projector connected to the computer. This would enable the teacher and the class to learn about the material available together, and what is authentic, important, and relevant from the plethora of material available on the Internet. She could talk about organization, presentation, citations, and many other aspects of writing literary criticism and research papers. The words and the visuals used on the home pages would have to interact to communicate clear messages. The more I think about this assignment, the more I see a home page or web page as a new metaphor for a piece of writing. The links to other sites would be the specific details (examples), while the page itself would have to present a clear message (thesis) to the reader. With trained help on creating home pages using Internet software, teacher and students would become coplearners in the process. Anyone who has ever collaborated on a writing project understands how important this metaphor can be.

▪ *There is no clear formula for writing the perfect paper, just as there is no clear formula for designing a perfect structure.* There are certain requirements for both, but creativity and originality, as well as audience, also have something to say in the matter! Whether we're talking about traditional forms like the five-paragraph theme or process writing that addresses real-world audiences, our students need some sense of how to meet their goals. Joan calls attention to the gap between the way students coming to college have been taught to write (or how they perceive they have been taught) and "how they need to write now."

Year after year, we hear the same question, "How long does it have to be?" when we give a writing assignment. We also deal in varying degrees with the issue of content versus form (mechanics of grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, spelling, and so on). Secondary teachers, like our college colleagues, face the same problems. Students who have never moved beyond traditional writing are not particularly strong writers. In many cases, teachers have provided the traditional model and that's what students tend to see as the *only* one that works. As more secondary teachers in other subjects value creativity in writing and thinking, students will become more adept at handling a variety of writing styles.

Students who are good writers must also learn to take risks with their writing and not settle for what is comfortable and easy. This year a senior I have known for several years came to the writing center to improve his writing. When I asked him why he was there, he said, "I know the formula for getting an A in English, but now I want to learn how to be a good writer." After I got up off the floor, I managed to reply, "Well, let's look at what you're doing and see how you can take some risks with your writing." He went on to spend a month working

on a top-notch college essay that helped him with early decision at his favorite college. He has also written some colorful, exciting papers that resemble Joan's CVA metaphor!

- *Joan offers some real classroom activities for the secondary level with the footprint ideas to begin discussions of writing.* As she states, "unless we bring students to an understanding of how they think about writing and about constructing texts, we will find it difficult to move them toward a more mature writing that exhibits critical thinking."

- *Finally, as teachers we must be willing to try such collaborative efforts and to test the possibilities of using visual, concrete, tangible metaphors for teaching writing.* The ones Joan has offered enable writers to begin constructing texts that fulfill the purpose of the writer and the expectations of the reader.

Postscript

Joan makes a clear distinction between the traditional museum and the CVA as metaphors for traditional essays and for pieces that apply a complete writing process. I would like to go a step further. The purpose of the two structures differs. The old building is insular: the world is viewed through the art on the wall, so there is no need for windows. The new building, a visual arts center, focuses on teaching art by viewing the world through large windows. The structure is designed to open up space for creation and creativity.