

1 How We Got Here, Where We Want to Go

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—Jerry

It is about 1:30 in the afternoon. I am sitting at my computer trying to reconstruct, via my journal, what transpired this morning, day one of our three-week workshop. Already I can see that it will be a difficult task. Leaving aside the trickiness of memory and the disposition to fashion a session to suit my own sense of what ought to have happened, I have to acknowledge from the start that my role during these sessions will be an ambiguous one, shot through with contradictions. As faculty coordinator of our college's writing lab and our summer workshop, I design the workshop agenda, select our readings, and facilitate discussion. At the same time, as a faculty member who also tutors in our writing lab I have a vested interest in the topics that we will discuss. Then, to make matters truly complicated, I am observing, recording, and—now—reconstructing what transpires. I am, in brief, completely implicated in what I am reporting. I make no bones about it: this account will reflect what *I* see and hear, and how I write and think.

But I will also serve as a conduit for the words and thoughts of colleagues. I want to be such right from the start, because in order for readers to care about what it is we say in these weeks, they need to know who we are and how we got here. In interviews, as well as in the workshop itself, I put those questions to my colleagues directly. Each, of course, had applied to become part of the writing lab staff and workshop, but I was interested in relating how and why they became community college teachers in the first place, and what continues to drive them in their work.

I wonder, as I set out to record the stories of my colleagues, whether their accounts are as strangely unpredictable as my own. My own story is anything but linear. When I entered graduate school for the first time, I fully expected to teach at a university. But having been less than successful my first go-round in graduate school, I took the best teaching job I could find (in the late '70s)—a vocational college specializing in training court reporters. There I was, a university-trained white male, teaching grammar, writing, and vocabulary to disadvantaged women of color,

women who were determined to make a career for themselves in court reporting. Most of these students worked their way out of poverty and into a very demanding, yet rewarding, profession.

After a year, I returned to graduate school, still hoping to obtain my Ph.D. and teach at a university. Reality would hit like a ton of bricks when I graduated in the early '80s. There were simply very few full-time jobs in English literature (more specifically, British romanticism) at the university level. After a year of teaching part-time sections, I would eventually land a full-time teaching job clear across the globe, in China, where for a year I taught composition and literature surveys to English-language majors at a provincial university. On returning home, I found myself teaching seventh grade in a rural schoolhouse, a job for which I was terribly misfit. After one year, I finally landed a job teaching full-time at a private university. Ironically, after waiting years for just such a job, I came to the conclusion after two years in it that I wanted the chance to teach a more diverse student population than what I found in my university classes. When I saw an opening at a public community college, I resolved to take the plunge.

Pat, who teaches in our dental hygiene program, had taught at the college part-time for many years, taking time off only to raise a family. While working, she returned to college for her bachelor's and, eventually, her master's degrees. When a full-time job opened up in 1990, she took up the challenge. She says that her own very recent experience in school has motivated her to help her own students:

I had just completed my master's and written paper after paper. I thought maybe I could help somebody else. Maybe I could tell students that it wasn't very long ago that I was in the same boat they are in. . . .

When Pat notes that her experience matches her students' experience, and that this makes her a better teacher, she echoes a refrain of many of her colleagues. One of the most remarkable things about these teachers is how readily they identify with the students they teach, while at the same time recognizing what they can give each of those students. In short, they serve as their students' mentors and, interestingly, their neighbors.

That last point is emphasized by another colleague, Marlene, who suggests that her credibility with her students may have a lot to do with the fact that she lives in New Bedford, the working-class city from which many of her students commute to the college. A former union organizer in a garment factory and a rubber plant, Marlene now teaches history and Western civilization at the college. Long active in political campaigns, Marlene says that her activism has influenced her classroom practice. As she puts it, she adheres to the "possibility of ordinary people becoming

historical actors.” Creating conditions within her classroom to make that happen, Marlene acknowledges, is a struggle. She would like the workshop to give her strategies to achieve the goal of student empowerment. “I just want students to try to figure things out more,” she says, “to seek the great guiding principle: What does this have to do with my life?”

Marlene’s twin theme—that students (and “ordinary people”) can be agents of change and that the subjects that we teach can be deeply meaningful in the lives of our students—resonates with Diane, a member of our nursing program. Diane came to the community college after ten years of hospital-based nursing. Convinced that nurses need both a clinical and a more generalized (and academic) knowledge, she is committed to a broad view of nursing education or, as she put it in an interview, a “blending of reality with idealism.” This view of education has implications for what it takes to be an effective teacher. For Diane, the best kind of teachers are those who have been through the same anxiety about learning as their students. “For myself,” Diane says to the group, “the experience of doing nursing was so frightening, so scary. I could see all the responsibility. That’s very helpful because I can understand where the anxiety is coming from.” What is required is a “generosity of spirit” as well as a reservoir of experience from which to draw. “You would have to have had a variety of emotions [while] sitting in that chair,” she says of the effective teacher. In short, for Diane as for so many of us sitting around the table, to teach means to be engaged—in our subject matter, but also in the learning processes of our students.

Jerry, who teaches statistics, takes pride, as we have seen, in bringing to his classroom experiences similar to those of his students. He often draws upon his experience as a full-time worker and full-time student to instruct those students. “I was working fifty hours a week,” he says,

carrying sixteen or seventeen credits all the time, and it was no easy task. So I didn’t have a lot of time to study. But what I did to study was constantly write. . . . I had to write and think about the things we were doing. That was the best tool for me—to be able to organize my thoughts, reflect on what took place, to learn.

Writing can also provide a space in which to explore the relationship between students and the work they do. In his statistics course, Jerry has started to ask students to explore, in a reflective way, some of their anxiety about statistics and about math generally.

Such a view of writing would be shared by many on our team, most especially Peter, our English department representative. A prolific author (he has written two well-received biographies of Hemingway) and an energetic teacher, Peter claims a long association with our college, having started to work here in the late ’60s as a part-time instructor. Although

he has taught at several prestigious colleges and universities, Peter is a local kid who has always been attracted by the opportunity to teach people “from the same neck of the woods” as himself. Hired as a full-time faculty instructor, Peter spent four years at the college before returning to graduate school for his Ph.D. After getting the degree, Peter worked on his first book, supporting himself through part-time employment. The success of that book brought an NEH grant, which, together with more part-time teaching, allowed Peter to write his second book. Peter has returned to our college full-time for a couple of reasons: he has come back to the area in which he has spent so much of his life, and his teaching responsibilities, while heavy, still allow him time to write. For Peter, writing is a passion—both his own writing and the writing that he elicits from his students. “Discover your own voice,” he tells his students, “say your own truths.” He believes in that completely. And it is a message that he knows his community college students need desperately, since for so long they have been told that their work and ideas “don’t matter.”

Kathy, from our ESL department, came to our college (after a stint in the Peace Corps), as a bilingual aide, while working at night for her master’s. Initially interested in social work, and having spent time working for Catholic charities, Kathy had fully intended to enter graduate school in the field, but because of family considerations had found herself in New England and started teaching at the community college without a master’s degree or, as she puts it, “through the back door.” Now that she is a full-time instructor, Kathy is intensely interested in the transition that ESL students experience from the time they take courses with other ESL students to the time when they become mainstreamed academically with native speakers of English. The process is extremely complex for them, Kathy observes. A community might throw up roadblocks to prevent outsiders from becoming full-fledged members. She wonders whether other faculty are doing what has to be done to acculturate not only ESL students but also native speakers into the ways of the academic community.

Interestingly, Carol, who comes from our college’s business and technologies area, sees her role in much the same light, although the community into which she ushers her students is the business or work setting. Carol worries whether her students will enter the workplace knowing what they need to know and achieving the professionalism required. Carol came to our community college after having taught in middle and high school.

To give our discussions a deeper texture and to enhance our own understanding of what it means for our students to write, I suggest that each of us keep a journal of our experiences in the workshop, and periodically share our responses. I immediately sense collective anxiety at the pros-

pect of keeping a journal in the first place. Although many of us ask our students to keep journals in our classrooms, we are more than a little uneasy about the whole business of journal writing in a classroom (and workshop) setting. Kathy, who teaches ESL, says that she uses a journal in her class to promote her students' fluency in English but acknowledges that there are problems with doing so, most notably the journal's lack of structure and focus and the sometimes disturbingly personal nature of journal responses. Still, Kathy finds journals an effective way to get students' feedback on what it is we are asking them to do for us.

Diane, concurring, says that nursing faculty invite students to comment on the work of instructors. "It's helpful," Diane observes, "in terms of clearing the air." But she worries about the ethical implications of having students comment on a course. "Didn't you have a prejudice," she asks Kathy, "when you asked students to respond?" Diane is concerned that as readers we instructors have a vested interest in what students write. And students are fully aware of what faculty want to hear.

All of us who are sitting around the table see the virtue of having students write often and write in a variety of forms. In theory, we are predisposed to having students write in a form that promotes fluency and that can be done in a nonthreatening way. Our first reading, a piece by Toby Fulwiler on journal keeping, has made us think about the ways that journal writing can do some of these things. As Fulwiler notes, journals have long been used as part of field or clinical observations in a variety of disciplines, from biology to anthropology (1987, 2). Given the wide and diverse experience of this workshop group, we have much to say about the virtues and limitations of journal keeping.

I mention the notion, borrowed from a colleague of mine in the English department, of having students set up a "metatext" in their journals, that is, of asking them to use the journal as a place to reflect on their composing processes and on the written product itself. The journal promotes greater reflection in students and allows them to be more articulate in assessing their own and others' writing.

Jerry, thinking aloud, anticipates using journals as places where his statistics students can explore their anxiety about their subject, setting up a point of reference for later exploration. (As mentioned earlier, he currently has students reflect on their "math anxiety" but in the more formal setting of a graded piece of expository writing.) He sees journals as informal points of entry for his students, a means by which they can connect themselves to a subject that might seem to have little to say to them.

Interestingly, Carol notes that her "co-op" students have as part of their "contract" a requirement to keep a journal. Students enrolled in our college's co-op program split their time between the classroom and the

workplace, applying what they learn in the classroom to what they encounter in the workplace. In their journals, students keep a record of what they observe on the job. They often juxtapose, Carol says, their expectations of what they will find with what they in fact experience at the job site. I like the double-sided nature of the journal (like the “double-entry notebook” that Ann Berthoff has recommended [1987]). Those moments when our assumptions meet up with altogether different outcomes can produce wonderful insights.

Diane says that her students must keep journals in part as records of their patients’ treatments. As such the writing is evaluated according to fairly straightforward medical standards (to determine that the treatment is “safe”). In addition, students must use their journals to note their observations, evaluating their own behavior. This particular use of the journal seems a powerful learning instrument. Just as Carol’s students review previous expectations, so Diane’s students engage in a powerful act of revision.

Although Diane does not touch upon it, one other way journals have been used in the health science area has been “to bridge the gap between concepts of professionalism taught in the classroom and the actual clinical experience” (LeBlond 1982, 12). Pat, who teaches in our dental hygiene program, had brought in the LeBlond article, which encourages the use of journals as a place where the ethical dimensions of patient care can be explored. Given the nature of clinical work, students may find themselves, like Carol’s students, in situations where what they have learned in the academic setting does not neatly apply to the workplace. More specifically, students might face ethical dilemmas that were never broached in the classroom. The journal might provide a safe environment in which to discuss such issues. To use the journal in that way means, of course, that ethical concerns become as suitable a subject in the classroom as traditional patient care.

In addition to the journals, more preliminaries are brought up: We discuss the objectives for the workshop, to get them on the table. Chief among those objectives is to revisit a document on what makes for “good” writing in the disciplines. From the time that our college first received grant monies to set up our writing lab, it has been a major task of each team of faculty tutors to come to some agreement on those qualities that we consider to be important to effective writing. We wanted to do so in part to guide our own work as tutors in the lab. Having a set of criteria to which to refer when we tutor students about their writing would obviously aid us in our job—and help boost the confidence of those among us who teach in other disciplines than English. It would also ensure that members of the staff were all on the same wavelength.

At the same time, such a document might well have an impact on other colleagues' perceptions of writing and on the position taken by the institution generally on the place of writing in the curriculum. We represent all the divisions of the college, and would, presumably, be able to send word back to our areas as to what we came up with. If all of us in the room can agree first that writing plays a crucial role in our students' learning and second that we can identify certain key components of effective writing, then the rest of the college will fall into line—assigning more writing in their courses but even more important showing a greater awareness of how we should all approach the writing that our students do.

The task of this summer's workshop is in part, then, to build on the work of the previous summer, when the first generation of faculty tutors worked to produce broad guidelines that would be useful in guiding the tutoring that we all were doing in the writing lab. This current team will revisit the previously established criteria in an attempt to refine the list but also to add disciplinary perspectives to it, that is, to inquire whether writing differs in significant ways depending on the discipline that generates it. We intend to engage more of what Kenneth Bruffee calls "boundary discourse," that is, a conversation about the differences of language and inquiry that mark off one discipline from another (1993, 64).

From the start, the idea of constructing a list of "primary traits" of "good writing" did not sit comfortably with me, although I knew that there was support for it in that earlier faculty group. I did not want to see this list—as lists so often do—become the chief authority; I did not want to see the complexity of writing reduced to certain enumerated qualities. I also did not want people to lose sight of the situated nature of writing, that is, the various contexts in which writing is done. Writing expresses the constraints of form, of purpose, and of the very discipline that produces it.

The document produced last summer acknowledged the situatedness of writing while at the same time proceeding to tick off important qualities of writing that apply across disciplines and situations. The result was a kind of schizophrenic document that begins with a caveat:

The writing lab staff has come to a consensus about "good writing" which we think establishes usable criteria by which to evaluate the writing that we will read in the lab.

A consensus as to "what makes for good writing" should begin with this qualifier: *writing is contextual*. By that we mean that writing depends on the disciplinary context and situation in which it is done. Each discipline does have a distinct set of assumptions about the way knowledge is made and expressed. A student who writes an essay for an English literature course may be ruled by conventions and assumptions quite unlike those that guide the student writing for a history course.

Nevertheless, we have come to a conclusion on those qualities in writing that cut across areas of expertise and knowledge. We would like these to be considered “primary traits,” usable criteria by which to evaluate the many kinds of writing that may come our way.

The document proceeds to identify five broad categories with which to evaluate a piece of writing, accompanied by a brief description:

Perspective: Competent writing must have a strongly stated perspective (this may include what writing teachers call “voice” but could also be described as a point of view) and purpose.

Audience: If effective communication is to take place, writing must show some sense of the rhetorical situation (the needs of the audience but also the demands of the form of the writing and the purpose).

Evidence: If the intent is to persuade the reader, good writing must marshal evidence or support.

Logic: Good writing must have an internal logic and coherence from the localized unit of the paragraph to the structure of the entire work.

Correctness: Good writing displays a control of language and tone: grammar, punctuation, and spelling are generally “correct.”

As we review the document, we plan to consider the ways in which a discipline might construct or shape any or all of these traits. Is “perspective,” for example, so simple a matter when we factor in the expectations of a particular discipline, a discipline that might privilege an “objective” stance? Might “evidence” differ according to the disciplinary lens through which we view it? Might each discipline carry its own distinctive “logic”?

In addition to considering the “situatedness” of our traits, we intend to scrutinize the traits on their own terms. What is “perspective” anyway? And what does it have to do with voice, point of view, and purpose? How do form and purpose shape considerations of audience? Is evidence useful only when the intent is to persuade? Or can it come into play with writing whose purpose is different? How do we talk about evidence, for example, in a narrative or expressive piece?

These questions will be dealt with down the road, when we revisit the traits and rethink the conventions of our own disciplines. But one matter relating to the list will not wait, it seems, and that is the issue of “correctness.” Carol, from our business technologies area, questions the use of quotation marks around the word, sensing—quite rightly—that it downplays the relative importance of correct grammar and mechanics. She considers such skills absolutely essential to the work that her students do in the classroom and will do in the workplace. She is appalled by her students’ inability to edit their writing, and to demonstrate such skills in any of their courses. “Our students have a hard time transferring their learning from one class to another,” she says: “I teach spelling and punc-

tuation in my typing class and they can't write a paper for me in my management class using the same rules."

Chris, who in addition to teaching in the psychology department serves as the writing lab's learning skills specialist, observes that those students are simply not learning those skills. They may be memorizing the rules but they are not allowed to apply them. I add that it makes the most sense to embed editing practice within the composing process, and to give students ample opportunity to apply their editing skills on their own writing. Then they will really learn such skills.

Invariably, this discussion leads us to a truly thorny question: Assuming—as we must at the community college—that many of our students come to us without mastery of language skills, whose responsibility should it be to teach them those skills? Should they be taught in our basic English course? Or in our one required composition course? I beg those questions and ask the group these instead, enlarging the scope to include writing skills generally:

Should [writing skills] be taught in a class other than English? Should they be taught in any course in which writing is required? If the student is spending some time writing in the courses, should that history teacher, or that nursing teacher, spend some time talking about writing?

The discussion has obviously shifted from a consideration of basic language skills to the much larger question of whose responsibility it is to promote our students' writing generally. Marlene responds by asking Diane, "You're teaching nursing (not writing), right?" Diane can hardly disagree, assuming the separation that Marlene makes between the subject that Diane teaches and the language skills that her students ought to be demonstrating.

In part, the issue has to do with the question of whether all of us at the community college have a shared responsibility to improve our students' writing or whether that should remain solely the responsibility and expertise of the English department. Obviously a sound argument can be made, and Carol more than once has implied this, that the English department ought to take up this task. Certainly, it is a reasonable assumption that, at the very least, students should receive training as editors in their writing courses.

I complicate matters, however, by asking whether there might not be a connection between the tasks we ask of those students and their difficulty with expression. In other words, as they struggle to master our subject's concepts, might students' language skills also be affected—given the connectedness between words and ideas? Might their problems with expression be at least in part due to their inexperience with academic and

disciplinary conventions? That question brings us back to one of the tasks before this group, namely, to reflect on the nature of the skills that we expect our students to have when they leave our courses, and our obligations to be explicit as to the expertise we expect of them—explicit to ourselves as well as to our students.