Alan C. Purves

TEACHING PEOPLE WHO DON'T WRITE GOOD

ABSTRACT: *In this brief excursus, the writer critiques the metaphors out of which basic writing has emerged and looks jocularly at the new possibilities. He then suggests that with the new technologies of writing, we are all at a novice level and need to rethink what we mean by composition in an age when writing is the manipulation of images in hyperspace.*

When Karen and Trudy asked me to write a piece for their inaugural issue of *JBW* or, as I think of it, the *Journal for (of) Teaching People Who Don't Write Good*, they told me to be amusing. That's a hard assignment. I would rather be direct. The readers may decide whether I am amusing, curmudgeonly, or obtuse.

We have a fairly large number of people coming to colleges and universities who appear to have trouble with the tool that we call writing. The tool is complex. Having trouble writing is like having trouble playing the piano, cooking, or doing carpentry or plumbing. The problem with writing as opposed to those others is that people in institutions of higher education expect students to do it reasonably well. After all, most of the faculty

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and administrators are pretty good at it (or so they think), and they are genuinely surprised to find a student who has trouble with syntax, organization, diction, or tone, much less finding something to say about a supposedly controversial topic that few really care about. Probably teachers in cooking schools and other crafts have the same set of expectations and look with surprise and disdain on those who come into the school at the novice level.

What's wrong with these students that we have to put them in special courses for poor writers? When I first entered the profession, it was thought that there was an anatomical deficiency; we called the course "bonehead English." We attempted to apply various prostheses like grammar. Then we called it "remedial writing," which perpetuated a medical image, and we sought such cures as programmed instruction. (The American Psychiatric Association still lists it as a "disorder.") Then, in the 1970s we called it "basic writing," as if the students missed certain fundamentals and had to enter a kind of boot camp for writers and be treated with some form of "tough love." Some have called it "developmental" as if there was a break in a natural organic process. More recently we might come to think of the students as "rhetorically impaired" or "orthographically challenged." These imply some sort of benign abnormality.

I have argued elsewhere and earlier in this journal that the students whom we have labeled as "rhetorically different" (to put the most charitable construction on their situation), have not been fully clued into the academic writing game, and that all we need to do is apprise them of these rules. But that's like taking them into the kitchen and showing them all the tools and then all the procedures, and telling them to make a linzer torte.

We do not learn cooking that way; we learn it by making certain relatively easy things through mixing and heating, thus learning about simple dishes and sauces, then moving to baking and grilling. We also learn about the appropriateness of tools, the nature and properties of different vegetables and oils and spices, and the aesthetics of the stir-fry or of the presentation of dishes. But learning to make casseroles is not learning to make salads or to do certain kinds of cake decorating, or other forms of pastry. And then there are the ethnic cuisines and the blends, nutrition, and color.

Writing is about as complex as cooking. Yet it has become about as basic. My brother can barely scramble an egg. I am

pretty good at breads and oriental cookery; my wife is a great soup maker and pastry chef. None of us is an expert chef. We'd never make it in a restaurant. But two of our children would. I am a pretty good journey writer. But I lack the artistry or passion of some writers whom I really respect.

I suspect that most of our students are culinarily challenged as they are rhetorically challenged. The problem is that we are often confused about what it is we should teach them. We have spent a lot of time teaching them about planning the menu, assembling the ingredients, and tasting for the herbs and spices, but we have neglected the cooking and serving and presentation of the dish (that's being product-oriented). But our students know where the proof of the pudding is—and it ain't in the preparation. After all, as consumers at McDonalds, they see the product in its paper and styrofoam glory.

When the *Journal of Basic Cooking* [*Writing*] was established, the focus was on nutrition rather than packaging. That is a healthy approach, but it is perhaps a bit narrow. Today we have become aware of a variety of cuisines and approaches to food preparation and we are unsure about where to begin. Should we make Italian, Chinese, or good old meat and potatoes? We also are unsure as to whether we should focus on open-hearth cookery and the cleaver or on food processors and microwaves.

As writing teachers we are unsure of both ends and tools. Let me drop the analogy and stick to my subject.

How are we unsure of ends? We are not clear as to what sorts of writers we want to train (and I use the word advisedly for we do train students most of the time and sometimes we educate them). We are unsure about the genres in which we want them to be proficient and why those genres. We are unsure about whether we are more concerned with the handling of content, of structure, of style and voice, or of various aspects of inscribing. We are unsure of whether we want them to be academic writers or not (even though we are employed by the academy). Do we want them to "invent" the academy or put it on like a costume? Do we know what they want (besides to survive)? Does it matter to us what they want? Do we want to save their souls or simply give them technical prowess to seek their own salvation or damnation? Are we interested in individual performance or the development of community and the effacement of self? And in what ways do we want the self to disappear and reemerge? I would suggest that these are not easy questions to ask nor questions that we should address as ideologues. Rather

we need to engage in a dialogue and seek (at each institution at least) some sort of community understanding.

How are we unsure of means? Obviously means follow ends. But there are some instances in which the means become important to consider. Let us take the example of the computer. When we begin using the computer in writing instruction, do we explore with students the fact that they are engaged in working with a multiauthor hypertext? They are there to enter their draft, let's say, but then they need to realize that within the chips are other "authors": a formatter, a speller, a grammarian, an organizer, a production specialist. They can also access a data base, perhaps, or use graphics or sound in their production. They can work with all of these, do their part, and then say, "O.K., Ms. Speller, you have a go at it." They are already doing collaborative writing. They can bring in another human too, if they are networked, or even if they bring their disk to another person. The writer with the computer is never alone. How does using these power tools alter writers, change the nature of writing, and of the text, or change the ways in which novices and experts understand these matters? Should writers trust their invisible colleagues?

Another set of means we tend to dismiss, but which electronic technology has brought to our attention, is the process of writing. The traditional terminology of planning, drafting, revising, and editing may no longer be appropriate, or may need to be reconstrued. The fact of the stored text on the diskette means that we may leave it at any time and return to it endlessly. The program takes us back to the beginning of the text each time. We are thus invited to begin again or to revise what we have written before we go on to the next part. We are also never sure when we have completed a draft. We are never sure whether the segment we wrote today will go in one composition only or be reused as a part of another. The very finite nature of the book or the text has disappeared. We are like the painter returning to the studio rather than like the musician returning to the score or the cook returning to the kitchen to prepare yet another meal. But that analogy is not truly appropriate either. Today's finished portrait is tomorrow's sketch. Space and time are rearranged in the new configuration of text and hypertext. Do we have a pedagogy that helps us deal with this new sense of text and change and completion?

How do we help students who are both scared of texts and unsure of the new machinery? What are the best ways of help-

ing students work through the cycle of production of a finished text? How do we get them to work out their own modus operandi? We are ourselves too new as members of this electronic world, a world which is changing as we move from idea to finished text. The worlds of hypermedia and electronic bulletin boards are changing the nature of composition before our very senses. The forms of texts and the forms of text production are in flux. How can we know what is "basic" or where to begin with students?

Perhaps we should think of ourselves as introducing students to a technology, a program. Let me illustrate. In 1993, I taught a new course in general education on the history of literacy. What was new about it was that the students were given as their textbook a disk in the hypertext program, Storyspace™. The program had about 200 spaces with topics and references in them, from which students had to construct their text. Several students thought they could approach the course the way they approached other courses, cutting classes and then pulling an "all-nighter" to finish the assignments. They failed. Interestingly, some of them blamed the machine, much as neoliterates blame their glasses or texts. Other students began systematically learning the program so that they could use it to do the assignment, and they learned how to work with each other to share its 200 spaces.

The point is that these students were in much the same sort of predicament that many of our "students who don't write good" find themselves—the state of trying to figure out the technique as they also try to learn the theory or the content. Perhaps we should see students as needing to consider both the models of academic working and the tools for making those models real.

Having written that, I see that it is a banal statement, and at the same time a difficult one, for it does not tell us where to begin. Writing on the computer, even more blatantly than earlier forms of writing, involves the manipulation of images. It is an act of visual composition and arrangement. We do not manipulate words (things with meaning), or graphemes (signs of things with meaning), as much as we manipulate segments of space (which contain graphemic signs of things with meaning). Our manipulation takes place in space (not on a page or a sheet of paper or a scroll), but on a simulacrum of space. We manipulate intangibles; eventually they may become tangible.

Students can become fairly adept at this kind of composi-

tion, but it is a new composition, one that deals with arrangement and playful arrangement as much as with the generation of language for ideas. It is one to which many of us are newcomers, and we are trying to work with our students as teachers must have done with students who were learning writing in the days of incunabula. They still practiced monastic copying when that was no longer the problem that writers faced. It took about two hundred years for people to realize that copying was not composition. Now we must realize that "writing" is not composition.

Composition is manipulation of images for a rhetorical effect. The images are not only the traditional graphemes, punctuation marks, and paragraphs; they are type faces, illustrations, images, sound effects, a complex arrangement of digitized information. In this world, we are all neophytes. Some artists and a few rhetoricians have been looking at the manipulation of images for the past thirty years. However, our lead in teaching composition may well come from the concrete poets, the makers of comic books, and the designers of Las Vegas, as well as from rhetoricians such as Richard Lanham and Christopher Alexander.

Basic writing, writing for the rhetorically challenged, writing for people who don't write good, these are all possible themes for this journal, but I would suggest that *JBW* break ground by renaming itself the *Journal for Imagining Composition*.