

PUTTING ERROR IN ITS PLACE

I began teaching Basic Writing six years ago by, first of all, doing my homework: aside from reading the popular classics on ghetto life, I found articles about dialect and went to lectures. On the first day of my first class, I presented my students with a list of all the errors they would most likely be making during the semester. In the left margin of this sheet, I had handwritten all the symbols I would be using to indicate their errors in red, and for each one, I supplied sentences with examples of subject-verb agreement mistakes, verb tense inconsistencies, plural *s*'s left off, *etc.*—sentences I had either gleaned from the texts I had been reading or had made up, using Relevant contexts. (In those days, relevant was spelled with a capital R.) By the end of the semester, I was quite satisfied that many of the students had learned, for example, that subjects should agree with verbs, that “John book” circled in red was a problem to do with possession. Students who showed they knew what these errors were got good grades—they passed the tests—and if they continued to slip up in their own writing, I figured it mainly would just take time.

It was only when the special program I was working in established a work-study system where older students could tutor others that I began to learn something about teaching students how to write. I eavesdropped while Tony, whom I had hired to tutor some of my “weaker” students, worked with Deborah on one of her papers in my office. I cannot remember now exactly what they were saying as they looked at the sheet; what I do remember is how they were both attacking it with pleasure—drawing marks across it, writing in, starting anew upside down on the side—because it really didn't say what she meant at all. His saying: “Look, man, this doesn't make sense, to me anyway. I just don't get the scene. And by the way, that was *yesterday*.” “Oh, yeah,” (she sighs, scratching it in) “*-ed*, right?” “Right . . . sure . . . So, go on tell me what you *really* felt when

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he looked at you that way on the bus." "Well . . .," she begins, "I . . ." "So why didn't you say so in the first place? Put it *down*."

(She starts in.) "Good!" I could say that of course Deborah felt more comfortable with another student, and in this case, another Black, and leave it at that. But to do so would be skirting the issue: Tony was teaching writing, not Error.

The novice teacher of remedial writing may never be as misguided as I was, but I believe that most of us even after years of experience in this field still tend to fall back on Error, sometimes as an old friend. This is most likely because here we are on solid ground—for if we are rightfully questioning everything else we are doing, we can never doubt our growing expertise in the recognition of Error. We need only look at the kind of feedback we tend to give our students on their papers—especially when in a hurry. The words circled in vivid color ("blood," as one student puts it), the cop-out comment "awkward" (or "AWK!"), or "This paper is better than the last one, *but . . .*"—all show the penchant we have for teaching the *good* in terms of what it is *not*. And whether we mean it to be so, our students recognize what they already have learned so well: this is what the teacher looks for, this is what writing is all about: The Avoidance of Error. Our students tell us so, in many ways.

Witness Lois, a student whose anxiety runs high, though her writing is superior to most in my class this semester:

I'm sorry my typing is so bad and its' rather messy, I was going to type it agin. But I just couldn't make it (This is why I didn't go to class today) I hope you will take into account my effort and disregard the untidyness.

"What do you do when you sit down to write?" I ask Diane, who is biting the end of her ballpoint, unable to start. "Well, first I figure out what you want me to say, then I try to say it." Merline writes in pencil so light that you can hardly read it. Stan writes pages and pages with never a single indentation, the *-ed* and *-s* endings sometimes there, sometimes not, and all of it joined by commas. He leaves as soon as his hand gets tired or the bell rings, flinging it all at me. David, in an hour's time, writes, rewrites, rewrites and hands in six sentences, in very neat, impeccably neat script. Sam, during a free-writing exercise ("just write, forget grammar, write anything that's in your mind, write until I say stop"), lets it all out:

I am behind in my writing for my English class. I have delt with

my writing in the past but. I think this time it's got the best of me. When it comes to writing I have the right idea in my mind but I am can not put it down on paper. I know how important it is to stay in college and to be able to express your self in writing. I know I have troubles in my writing and in my mind I said I want to overcome these probloms but these is allway something on my mind that stops me from writing.

(What is that "something" on Sam's mind?)

These students have in common their alienation from writing—writing is a foreign activity. Little in their experience has shown them the significance of written language in their lives—its daily necessity, its possibilities for discovery, its pleasures—or the many purposes to which they can put this kind of language. True, their school experience has drilled them to comply with, if not necessarily to respect, certain pragmatic uses for writing, but the focus has often been the avoidance of Error. The student whose egregious grammatical, syntactical, and proofreading habits place him in English 1 and the student in English 2 or 3 who writes what she figures I want her to say are alike in their distance from the process of writing and their preoccupation with the possibility of wrongdoing. Sam, of course, has an enormous obstacle: he lacks the basic skills required for communication in written standard English, and knows this so well that it "stops me from writing." But Diane is also deprived—she writes brief, vapid, generalized essays, organized simplistically, never reflecting her complicated person, her intelligence, or her desire in spoken dialogue to express her often opinionated views. Sam has an important edge on her: he knows he wants to "put it down on paper."

In a departmental exam, one student was outspoken in his view of the problem:

Is writing easier than talking? I believe it is not because writing has a lot of regulations where talking doesn't have so many. . . . Grammer happens to be something that requires rules and regulations. Grammer includes things such as, noun and verb agreement, when is the proper time to use adjectives and adverbs, and then what punctuation mark is needed at the end of the sentence. English happens to be the worst language to write in because this is the only language which has exception. . . . Spelling is another hardship for many people. English being a rotten language anyway encounters many difficulties because English is derived from many languages and also many words have different spellings in different situations dued to these so-called

exceptions to the exceptions. . . . After one has conquered these mistakes in writing, there is the main problem left which is trying to project one's ideas in writing to another person. . . . In talking the main thing is communication. . . . In talking you can forget a few things and make it up but in writing it is disastrous.

This student is freer than most from the curse he describes—he has taken a clear stance of resigned disgust and calls it all “disastrous”—, but I feel that he is speaking for the rest of them: Writing is a burden; English “grammer” is full of rules, regulations and hardships (“being a rotten language anyway”); the goal is first to *conquer the mistakes*. All would agree: talking is easier, yes, because thank god—and by contrast—in talking, at least, “the main thing is communication.” (In writing, it's not.)

Like this one, our students come to us with a thorough misconception of what writing is all about. Only a rare few say they enjoy it. Some will admit outright that they fear it. When I asked a class to describe how their attitude had changed, if at all, since the beginning of the semester, one wrote: “I guess it's changed. I don't think I'm as afraid as I was before. Maybe that made all the difference.” Another: “I can write more words and ideas than I normally did in the past. I am not scared to write about anything I feel.” Others, as I have suggested, reveal their fear and dislike through the way they do it, rather than what they directly say—*e.g.*, in the refusal to proofread, the anxiety to “find out what you want me to say,” the manic concern with neatness, or conversely, the wish to be unreadable, or to get it all out of the way as fast as possible. At the ages of eighteen or nineteen, they are so engaged to the fear of Error (read that also: “What is Right?” “What do you want me to say?” “What is the Rule?” “Forgive my typing errors.”) that they are incapable of spontaneity or trust in themselves. And lacking these, how can they begin to break through to writing? How can they hope to succeed—or be willing to fail here and there along the way? And where do we come in?

I believe that the students' fixation on Error is equally matched by our own, however well-meaning we be. We must look again at our own attitudes and the images of language and of writing we project in the classrooms and in our offices as we read and mark our students' papers. Yet so often here it is Error, not communication, that is being taught. A case in point: the other day a former student came to my office extremely upset with the first long paper she had written for her present English teacher. I turned each page,

looking at red marks: circled commas (misplaced); carats (word missing); every misspelled word underlined with an occasional re-monstratory remark like "What, Miss X, you've done it *again!*"; and one or two "good points" in the margin. I got to the end of the paper and found an oversized *F* with the brief comment: "Although this paper shows considerable thought and is well-organized, your run-ons and spelling mistakes are *inexcusable.*" This teacher had doubtless thought that by emphasizing errors, he might jolt the student into doing something about them. Needless to say, the effect was the opposite. Rather than emphasizing and so encouraging her performance where it mattered—her thought and her ability to communicate it logically to her reader—he reinforced her pessimism and sense of despair. He was teaching Error, not writing.

Are we unwittingly perpetuating attitudes which are a major cause of our students' problems with writing? As we become masters of Error, more and more skillful in this pursuit, it seems that we are very hard put to agree on what good writing is—and this is part of where the trouble lies.

It is doubtful that in the last analysis writing effectiveness can be measured wholly objectively—and those who claim this, I feel, ignore the subtleties involved in what constitutes communication—but it is surely possible to find a middle ground between that extreme and the other, which refuses objectivity altogether. That teachers do apply standards they consider absolute to their students' writing is a fact, yet the vast discrepancy in teachers' standards is legion. At a Basic Writing meeting recently, teachers were asked to be "blind readers" of several papers, to simply place these students on various levels and to justify their choice. Of a group of merely twenty-five or thirty teachers, all with considerable experience in the field, there were those who placed a student's paper in English 3 where others would have put it in English 1. Some teachers focussed on grammar mistakes; others ignored these in favor of logic; others loved style. Yet very few, I think, had they read any of these papers at leisure, would have said: "This is a student who can write, who doesn't need my help."

And if that is so—if teachers generally acknowledge a student's need for help—there must be a means of defining what constitutes writing that is *not* in need of help. What *do* we mean by good writing? Why do we sometimes sense that student X, with the occasional dropped *-ed's* and peculiar word order configurations, might actually make it on his own? What is it about Y's writing, grammatically

competent, neatly organized, that makes us feel she needs at least a semester more? Why do we place a student in English 2 rather than English 1? Why do we decide the English 2 student can skip English 3? We are given decisions like this to make, but can we define our standards for judgment? If we acknowledge that a major problem our students (and we ourselves) have is a fixation on Error, an anxiety about “conquering the mistakes,” what can we do to put Error in its place?

We should begin by a reconsideration of what Error is, for writing, and reaffirm in the process what we mean by *good* writing so that we may instead teach *that*. As I have suggested so far, Error fixation includes the whole range: from what we might call the “details” of the language to the broadest areas—the logic and substance of the whole. So often, that attitude of mind in the student which worries to the point of paralysis about whether or not the grammar is “right” is the same attitude which automatically responds to a teacher’s suggestion with “What do you want me to say? How do you want me to say it?”—attitudes which, of course, mirror the way the student has been taught to view writing.

How do we put Error in its place and so get on to the business of writing? Of course, we must become fully acquainted with the sources of errors of whatever nature in our students’ papers and, if we don’t have it already, build respect in ourselves for the validity of the languages our students are masters of and the cultures they reflect. This knowledge will help us to see Error in a different light and alter the ways in which we deal with it together, our students and we. We should give due respect to the importance of Error for what it is—no more *and* no less. Error is certainly *not* Sin; it is not Crime punishable by *F*. As Orwell once wrote, “Good prose is like a window pane.” Like soot on the pane, Error is something that gets in the way of the clear vision. We know this: we are irritated by misused words and clumsy sentences just as we are by faulty logic or misused facts—and in our reading, by a printer’s mistake. Error on all levels is distracting, annoying, obstructive. Error is inexcusable ultimately, yes, not because it is Wrong *per se*, but because, as Jimmy Breslin once remarked to one writing class to make a wider point: “Look, I wouldn’t be caught dead with a misspelled word! *Who wants to read* a misspelled word? If I couldn’t spell, I’d cut my fingers off!” In plain pragmatic terms, the absence of Error is useful; but when our students take pains to avoid it—by writing short sentences, by sticking to one tense, by writing as little as

possible—I doubt very much that they do so in order to better communicate with a reader, but rather to play safe, to avoid the red marks.

The CCCC position paper of last year (“Students’ Right to Their Own Language”) states:

Perhaps the most serious difficulty facing non-standard dialect speakers in developing writing ability derives from their exaggerated concern for the *least* serious aspects of writing. If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write.¹

The statement correctly identifies the students’ “exaggerated concern” and implicitly, our *own* exaggerated concern, but in suggesting that such matters as spelling, punctuation and usage are not serious and that teachers should focus instead on content, it distorts the problem. The problem is not an “either/or,” “correctness” vs. “content” issue. The problem is, rather, that in our teaching of spelling, punctuation, usage, we are going about it the wrong way; that in our teaching of other important aspects—sentence complexity, paragraph logic, or essay organization—we tend to teach negatively; and sometimes, too, when we focus on content, we are as authoritarian in our expectations as we are in our handing out of prescripts for the way to learn the so-called “least serious aspects.” Typically, teachers who reject the teaching of “the least serious aspects” rush off to teach “content,” feeling that such challenging topics as “abortion,” “capital punishment” or “Watergate” will really turn the student on to communicating—or if these topics don’t, by the way, they *should*. Yet, were we to pick up pencil and paper and sit down to write on these topics, we might find them as interesting as the proverbial “What did you do on your summer vacation?” Any of them may or may not be interesting to a student; what is so often deadly dull about all of them, for a writing course in search of subject matter, is that, out of context, they are false topics and too often taught with as much singleminded expectation of “right thinking” as are the “less serious matters” like subordination or -s on the verb.

When we are not teaching the language in terms of its pitfalls, we are often reinforcing in other ways the student’s sense that writing

¹“Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” *College Composition and Communication*, Special Issue, 25 (Fall 1974), p. 8.

has little to do with the communication of his or her thought to someone else. Setting ourselves up as the source of Right, by implication, we confirm the student's sense that whatever his or her offering, it must be short of the mark, if not Wrong. Positive remarks on a paper, or in the classroom, are so often to be found in subordinate clauses or overshadowed by "buts" ("Although such and such is good, . . .") ("That was an interesting remark, but . . ."). "Try harder" means "Not good enough." And we become, of course, the model for what is. I needn't spend much time here pointing out that there still do exist teachers who carry on dialogues with themselves in a classroom ("What is the topic sentence of this paragraph?"—with rising inflection, a pause, some furrowed brows, silence—"As usual, the topic sentence of this paragraph is at the beginning, and it is . . ."—falling inflection, pause, some relieved looks, more silence. "And how is it developed?" *Etc.*). This is an extreme, but it can be argued that what passes for "Socratic" teaching is often a much more subtle variation of the same thing. We are agile, clever and bright—artful dodgers—, but as we manipulate our class discussions, we are usually teaching the avoidance of Error: in this case, "What do I have in mind that I want you to say?"

This holds true as much for a lesson in syntax as for a discussion of the latest scandal in the *News*, Ralph Ellison's *Prologue*, or a student's description of someone she saw on the bus. Scene: I write a student sentence on the board. "Well, now," I say with a smile, "and what do we have here? Let's read it together." There is probably not a student in the class who doesn't instantly translate my words as, "What does she think of this? And if she's written it on the board, that means it's Wrong, and I wonder what it is she has in mind that's Right." We all bandy about alternatives for a while, Stan and Lois and Tony all coming up with very good ones and good explanations for them (usually safely phrased as a question: "Wouldn't it be better if the student had added a such-and-such?") No one else in the class says anything, but (I say to myself) they are all at least listening to, witnessing, the process of discovery. And in the friendly, open atmosphere of "let's hear from anyone," when Diane provides an unacceptable solution, fraught with new problems, what can Ms. Halsted say (if she wants to get to where she's going by the end of the hour) but: "Hmmmmm, yes, well, that's an interesting possibility, but . . .," and Diane also smiles and decides wisely to keep her mouth shut from now on.

("What do you do when you sit down to write a paper?" "I figure

out what you want me to say, and then I try to say it.”)

The so-called non-traditional teacher who wants to make sure that this classroom is a democracy where “It is not I who am right; your answer is just as good as mine as long as you can back it up” is so often lying. It is I who am right. My evidence is always stronger and in the end, I always win. Few students are unaware that there is a hidden agenda, and in this scene, classes become guessing games; “dialogue” is a matter of carrying on the game in an atmosphere of tease. It is a good class, for teacher and students alike, if finally someone provides an answer to the riddles and if, for the teacher, anyway, there’s been quite a lot of tension, excitement, along the way (with at least fifty percent participation).

But we all know that this is not what writing is all about: writing does not mean the prating of someone else’s views any more than it means the avoidance of errors. In encouraging students to focus on what the teacher has in mind, we reinforce the student’s basic assumption: if he/she is not careful, he/she will do or say something wrong. The risk of Error will remain the fixed point, the main preoccupation. We must instead put Error in its place by shifting our own and our students’ perspective away from where the student’s work or thought falls *short* to where it genuinely succeeds.

When *does* it succeed? What is good writing? I suspect that no matter what we do in conference and in the classroom, we probably judge our students’ papers no more by the objective interest or import of the subject matter than we do by the absence of errors—these are weighty factors, but factors only. I suspect we judge their writing by whether or not, as we read the first paragraph or two, we find ourselves interested in *whatever* it is the student is trying to say. Too many errors get very much in the way of course; and an opener like “Humbleness is a virtue, everyone has heard this saying at one time or another there lifetime” frankly gets in *my* way, but not chiefly because of the run-on, the spelling, or the missing word. *Is this really Philip talking? Who is he talking to? I really can’t believe he cares.* We read on, and our interest is sustained or it is not. This writer is saying something to me, or, somehow, he is not.

The focus of a writing course should be communication. A student we judge to be well on the way to good writing shows basic awareness of what it is all about: there is a sensed audience and a point of view to be expressed, involving thought and demonstration. It is this basic awareness that we should develop in the class, in conference, in reading their papers. At all times, we should provide our students

with an experience where no matter what the material, they are encouraged to discover their individual points of view and are given the chance to see that these are worthy of attention, that others are listening, and that there are effective ways to communicate them in writing. And by focussing on this, we will help our students to understand, and even enjoy, the process of writing.

In conferences, or in our “silent” comments on our students’ papers, we should create a dialogue which makes clear that the word, the sentence, or the organization of the essay are all simply ways of getting across what the student has in mind to say to *someone else*. If we are dealing with the “least serious aspects,” let us in our emphasis show our students that errors are important for only one reason: they interrupt the flow between writer and reader. Thus, when the student-tutor Tony saw a dropped *-ed*, he pointed it out to Deborah almost as an aside, in the context of “didn’t this all happen yesterday?” His emphasis was on meaning, rather than the rules. A dangler ‘misleads, muddles, sometimes amuses; that it doesn’t stand next to the word it modifies is not the main issue at all. That group of sentences has me going in three directions at once! What is your main point? (Not: “There is no topic sentence; you need conjunctions.”)

In this dialogue, we function not as “Teacher” and therefore Right, as our students tend to think, but as interested, skeptical and close readers who want to know what our students have to say. Because we have more resources and experience, we can help to figure out how something can be said more effectively. To project this novel view, for our students, is very important. If they could eventually internalize this “intelligent reader” voice we speak with, they would not so often be saying to us, “When *you* read it and ask me those questions, I see what you mean. . . .”

But to talk here about the refinements of writing is starting, perhaps, at the end, rather than the beginning. We meet in conference with our students, usually, *after* the fact—when it is the time to proofread what’s on paper, to refine, to rewrite, to think of the final product. Before this, our students must have gone through all the various aspects that make up the writing process—a process, which, as we have already said, they have little or no love for and scarce practice in doing.

We must do all we can to make that process meaningful, workable. Generally, we tend to stress writing as a finished product, forgetting what William Stafford, the poet, has expressed well: “A writer is

not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them."² If this is so for all writers, we must rethink much of what many of us do to set off the writing process. Is it really valid, for example, to urge that students take notes, organize these into an outline, into a topic outline, into a sentence outline, *before* starting to write? "How can I know what I think 'til I see what I say?" our students so justly complain, echoing Forster's neat phrase. We seldom give as much importance to the draft copies our students write—if we allow them—as we do to the final product, and in dismissing the draft as a mechanical step, we force the student to picture only some abstract "perfect paper," by which standard any of his or her productions must fall into Error's grasp. A near impossible task, for anyone, usually provides a good incentive to lose interest, if not give up, in anticipation of failure.

"I must be willing to fail," Stafford goes on. "If I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me, or even slow me much."³ Stafford might well be talking for the free-writing advocates (e.g. MacRorie, Elbow) who contend persuasively that most of us in the classroom go about teaching/learning how to write backwards. Peter Elbow traces the progression of his paralysis as a writer, until in graduate school, which involved "deciding to try *very hard* and plan my writing *very carefully* . . . I finally reached the point where I could not write at all."⁴) He discovered what should be obvious to us all—that the obsession with the final product, the "high standards" we have had imposed on us and have internalized for ourselves, is what leads ultimately to serious writing block. More importantly, it is a sure way to close off avenues to discovering what it is you have to say. "Writing is a way to end up thinking

²William Stafford, "A Way of Writing," *Field*, Spring, 1970, p. 10.

³*Ibid.* By standards, here, Stafford specifies that he does not mean spelling, punctuation, etc. (details of "correctness" which he feels will "become mechanical for anyone who writes for a while"); he means "what many people would consider 'important' standards, such matters as social significance, positive values, consistency, etc." For the purposes of my argument here, I would include *both* "correctness" and "significance" or "consistency" as standards which must be set aside for the moment in this stage of writing.

⁴Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford, 1973), p. 17.

something you couldn't have started out thinking."⁵ Elbow suggests a reverse: start writing, write and write without stopping, do not think, do not pause, do not criticize for a while. . . . *Later* for the critical eye, later for the editing, the organizing, the skills—the “standards.”

Students go giddy at the happy notion that they can write about anything without looking back, that when they can't think of anything to write, they have to write something anyway. Free writing, at its freest, helps to restore the spontaneity and confidence that have been so successfully killed by Error-consciousness—to be replaced by the archenemies of writing: fear, caution, resentment, boredom. Returning to Sam, from whose free-written paper I quoted at the beginning of this article: for the first time in the semester he wrote steadily, two full pages. “I am can not put it down on paper,” he wrote. “Sam,” I said afterwards, “you just did.”

I have found that teaching students to write freely, helping them to temporarily exorcise the censor in them, is in itself a project that takes time, but it is valid and fruitful. Not only does it help to put Error where it belongs (in this case, later), and so free the student to discover private thought; it becomes a way of teaching students that writing is also a “public” endeavour. As students and teacher share each other's writings (perhaps we have all taken off from the same general topic), we discover *not* that “Sam writes better/worse than I do” but we all think differently on this same subject. Free-writing is non-competitive: it produces many different, but equally valid and interesting points of view and ways of expressing them. We all begin to listen to each other and to discuss ways these first outspillings might be later developed into something more focussed, perhaps, more easily accessible to another, a reader.

In the classroom, there must be opportunity for the airing of many points of view. Students must want to express themselves and will do so only if they feel that each of them has a point of view valid to be expressed. If the class centers around what the teacher wants the students to know about something “out there,” then the student feels, of course, that his or her writing should be at the very best a reflection of what the teacher has in mind about “that.” If instead, the focus is on discovering what “I” have to say, on listening to what someone else says, how another reacts, what is said to reinforce

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 15.

the idea and how, how the other responds, etc., then the kinds of questions, the voices, the dialogue that goes on privately in our heads as we write with an audience in mind, are being experienced directly and out loud for the benefit of all.

Free writing is only one of the many ways that have been described elsewhere for restructuring what happens in the classroom so as to shift the emphasis from the teacher to the student, from emulating a model to tangling directly with the problems inherent to communication. I will only briefly mention some options: as much as possible, *let students teach each other*, by running class discussions, by being listeners and commentators, readers and evaluators of each others' work. By so doing, they all become aware of audience and discover first hand what standards for effective communication are. (We may be vague when asked to spell out our standards, but our students seldom are. Usually kind and generous, they are still very frank when it comes to asking key questions such as "Look, man, why didn't you say so?" "You didn't finish that sentence and made me go on reading, so I had to go back and read it all over again.")

Groups: A student who is part of a group working together to present something to the rest of the class can suddenly discover that without him or her some input is lacking, and that the putting over, to the others, is a project important in itself. Groups for teaching grammar, groups for presenting concepts, for analyzing a reading, groups for acting out argument (put Antigone on trial?)—students are involved without being told what they are supposed to be doing in defining a point of view, presenting it, communicating clearly to a willing and critical audience.

Media: Slides and films heighten individual perception, a key to good writing, and they do more than that: they provide a direct shortcut to the teaching of the equality of point of view, the subjectivity of inference, the necessity for substantiation and the need to persuade. Too, when students produce their own, they become involved in thinking processes fundamental to written composition: a student who made a collage as a pre-writing project for a definition of Justice discovered, as she explained to the class, that she had found many aspects she hadn't realized she could talk about, and that in making it, one of her most difficult tasks was which pictures to select and how to arrange them to achieve the focus she wanted so that they could see what she had to say.

These various possibilities imply a departure from what either our students or we have known as the traditional English class. For

our students, if all goes well, they mean an opportunity which many have never experienced before to discover that genuine communication does not end at the door of the classroom and that writing is a significant and absorbing part of it.

If all goes well. For ourselves as teachers, the departure is problematical, by no means easy. It means breaking long-entrenched habits of thought about what we are there for and how to proceed. What seems to be a "turning over" of authority, the opening up of the classroom (to let the students in?) is threatening. Genuine dialogue means listening and respecting the unexpected. Groups mean not only careful planning but a lot of noise, seeming chaos. Letting students run discussions means having to bite your tongue to keep quiet. Media means machines and *their* quirks. Freewriting means permitting the sentence fragment, doubting the perfected paragraph, for the moment. All of this takes such a lot of time that seems time wasted, if not violated, by our old standards. It is small consolation that in shifting the center, we free ourselves of the burden of feeling we must control every word in a lesson hour from beginning to end. Opening the class up to allow for dialogue means seeing our role as teachers differently and taking on a different kind of responsibility. It is much more difficult to be a guide than a director, a catalyst than a determiner, to suggest than to dictate. In this new situation, we must find ways to provide structure in such a way that, rather than giving students only an illusion of freedom and exploration, we create a framework which in fact allows our students to freely explore and produce. Only in this context will writing become meaningful to them.

We are teaching courses designated as skills courses. We are told to make up in four months or eight or twelve for twelve years of schooling which have failed to meet our students' various needs, else they wouldn't be with us. If we see our task as primarily something that must be done quickly, we are in danger of not doing it at all. There is no short-cut to teaching writing, and in my view, "skills" cannot be considered separate from all the factors that make up the process. This is particularly true for our students whose negative attitudes about writing are nearly insuperable obstacles. A student who does not want to learn something will not, and so our main concern must be to convince our students that writing—with all its components, including acceptable forms—is more than worth the effort. This can only be done where we make clear what it is for, by giving them opportunity to sense that what they have to say

is worth listening to, that others are there, and the work involved in putting it in writing opens up new possibilities for communication. If we can do this, we may also find ourselves learning much more than we ever could about our students, their language, and, incidentally, ourselves.