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CREATING COMMUNITIES OF WRITERS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE QUEENS ENGLISH PROJECT

The dust finally seems to be settling from the rush “back to basics.” Yet, despite the promotion of any number of ready-made cure-alls, a fundamental problem remains—many high school and college students lack adequate basic skills. The two largest educational systems in the city of New York offer clear evidence of what is inescapably a *common* problem nationally. The percentage of New York City public school students able to satisfy the State Regents’ Competency Tests has been improving but remains depressingly low; correspondingly, despite a recent slight decrease, well over fifty percent of the City University’s entering class each year continues to require some form of compensatory work in writing, reading, and mathematics. These constraints—and the stark realities that attend them—impinge on nearly every aspect of our students’ lives. But just as the problems of two such vast educational institutions are intertwined, so too are the most promising prospects for lasting solutions. The high schools and colleges in this city—like most of those in the nation—are bound together in ways that those charged with making them work are only beginning to appreciate fully. For slightly more than three years, the Queens English Project has nurtured a

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collaborative effort among high school and college teachers, administrators, *and* students to solve these shared problems.¹

The Queens English Project began with the realization that dealing with underpreparedness at the college level over the past decade had become dangerously institutionalized. Our college, like many others, had been spending ever-increasing amounts of money to improve the basic skills of most of its freshmen. The financial cost was high, but more far-reaching were the costs of the dilution of a first-rate liberal arts education and the decline in faculty morale all too evident on our campus. Sponsored for the first two years by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the Queens English Project proposed to reverse this trend by encouraging college faculty to work collaboratively with their colleagues in the high schools to improve the writing and reading skills of students *before* they entered college.

The project grew out of an informal alliance of college and secondary school English teachers in our county—Common Concerns of English Educators. Formed in 1972, this group meets to exchange significant information and to discuss mutual problems. Working professionally within a nonhierarchical environment on common issues and answers, several members of the Queens College faculty collaborated with colleagues at five “feeder” schools—John Adams, Beach Channel, John Bowne, Grover Cleveland, and Flushing High Schools—to graduate better skilled writers and readers.²

Several major features distinguish the work of the Queens English Project. First, several high school and college faculty participants adapted successful college writing curricula for use in the high schools and then

¹The Queens English Project has been—and continues to be—a collective professional enterprise. We would like to acknowledge the presence of *all* our colleagues' work in this essay, and in particular that of Sandra Schor, Judith Fishman, Janet Brown, and Betsy Kaufman. The project's success has depended on the continued support of our founding group of teachers and administrators: Louis Accera, Melinda Altman, Shirley Budhos, Robert Byrd, Saul Cohen, George Cohn, James Costaris, Eunice Danto, Jean Edison, Beverly Fenig, Carl Field, Eleanor Friedman, Robert Fullilove, Milton Gordon, Virginia Gray, William Hamovitch, Eileen Hudson, Lois Hughson, Jack Jacobsen, Jay Kaplan, Myron Liebrader, Mitchell Levenberg, Aaron Maloff, Maureen McFeeley, Neddy McMills, Esther Meisell, Stephanie Medina, Richard Mikita, Saul Novack, Patricia Owen, Eileen Petruzillo, Nathaniel Quinones, Robert Rappaport, Charles Roemer, Raymond Schaevitz, Sarajeon Sherk, Nathaniel Siegel, Willard Smith, Madeline Staffenell, Marvin Taylor, Steven Tribus, Philip Vitali, Paula Weil, and Dominick Yezzo, as well as the many talented undergraduate tutors who helped make writing pleasurable for so many high school students.

²Queens, like many other colleges, can identify the high schools from which the vast majority of its freshmen have graduated. The Queens English Project began working closely with five such “feeder” high schools.

adjusted college composition courses to fit the improved preparations of entering students.³ In effect, secondary school and college teachers collaboratively developed and implemented a three-year articulated curriculum in writing and reading that began in the high schools and continued through two semesters of required college composition. Second, the project prepared a seminal group of educators—including secondary school and college teachers, administrators, and student peer tutors—to teach this curriculum. Third, participants collaborated in developing practical, working models of programs that distributed the teachers' burden in responding to substantially larger amounts of student writing. At each high school and in the writing program at Queens College, these models included a writing/reading workshop, tutors-in-the-classroom, and a team-teaching program.

Over the past few years, conversations with our high school colleagues have taught us that students, curricula, schedules, and schools may differ radically from neighborhood to neighborhood and from one educational level to another. But in all of them, teachers of English share one need: to identify the skills that are essential in writing, and the methods that will teach them.

The Queens English Project worked from tested principles to practice a set of five skills known to be, from a writer's point of view, elemental. These skills are:

- Prolific writing, that is, generating and sustaining writing;
- working from a sense of the whole structure of a piece of writing;
- distinguishing between observation and inference, that is, holding off expression of inferences until after many observations are made, so that ideas are well based and original;
- writing both concretely and abstractly;
- re-writing, a skill dear to experienced writers but alien to many who have never tried it because they have never been shown what it is or how to do it.

These elemental skills can be practiced directly and repeatedly. Because they cannot be done wrong, they can grow through use without being measured, ramifying to show the characteristic voice of each writer. We discovered that these five skills could be taught, in the light of principles we

³A detailed description of an earlier version of this college writing program can be found in Marie Ponsot, "Total Immersion," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 1 (Fall/Winter 1976), 31-43.

could define and defend. They were tested over a decade in SEEK, Open Admissions, and writing workshops from basic through advanced. We tried them and found them useful in diverse circumstances: an intensive summer program for underprepared incoming freshmen; matriculated classes for senior citizens; classes as early as the second grade.⁴ This successful experience fit our view of what is elemental: elemental writing skills are those common to all writing, from Shakespeare to ESL writers with short vocabularies.

Participants in the project came together in a weekly two-hour seminar in which we moved inductively through a writing/reading course with a syllabus which eliminated everything but constant practice in writing/reading skills. Our hypothesis was that, since the same basic principles govern all writing and the teaching of writing, they would serve high school and college teachers and students equally and without restriction. If our identification of certain skills as elemental was correct, practicing them would elicit good writing from all writers. These skills would also give play to the situational differences between high school and college classes, and to the important presence of each school's and especially each teacher's style.

Our methods in the seminar and the classroom were inductive. We wanted *all* writers—students and teachers—not only to be moved by the personal experience of writing but also to discover a coherent set of skills in their writing. Those who reflect on their own histories of learning skills usually agree that induction is the method of choice. It is much praised for its power to effect lasting internal change, but it is rarely practiced. Too many external pressures and directives from administrators to teachers make teaching by induction seem difficult. Yet, the kind of attitude induction calls for is possible when teachers trust the deductive framework they already have. Teachers of English have, in their knowledge of literature and love of writing, an ideal deductive framework within which to work. From their knowledge of literary forms, they can derive coherence, system, and energy which—for the sake of induction—they can submerge in the structure of individual assignments, in the incremental practice of elemental skills, and in the conduct of the class.

The principles guiding this project were of two kinds, one about the writing/reading we want to teach and the other about how such teaching

⁴The latter two programs adapted the principles of the former described in the article by Marie Ponsot cited above.

might be done. (By principles we simply mean ideas which have clear implications for actions.)

Principles about Writing/Reading⁵

- Writing is a skill. Writing embodies in language a locus for vision and revision, and so extends a writer's thought. Writing is, in this sense, the natural extension of thinking.
- Reading is a skill inseparable from writing; it makes what has been written accessible. Through it, we intuit the mental structures which efficiently evoke our ideas and their development or support. Like the language itself, literature in its shapes and kinds is an analogue for what the mind can do. Our own writing is such an analogue. Even poor readers can read well what they themselves have written.
- As in any skill (driving a car, blowing glass, doing a jig), much of what constitutes mastery in writing/reading can be learned but not directly taught. Practice draws out what is potential in the learner. Though some potentials of student language, such as expressing experience in their own voices, coming up with original ideas, and finding words for mental life, *cannot* be taught, other potentials, such as the skills discussed below, *can* be taught and will give the unteachable parts a field to grow in.

Principles about Teaching Writing

- Authority over writing belongs to the author. To usurp it wastes teachers' time.
- Great literature is the generative matrix of writing and reading at whatever level they are learned, and provides the teacher's deductive framework for teaching both writing and the study of literature.
 - a. Student writing is the central text on which students first practice close, objective reading, by writing their observations on each other's assignments. These assignments embody whole literary structures such as the fable, the parable, and aphorisms. They practice finding the literary structures in their own papers before using that skill to study great literature.
 - b. Rhetorics, grammars, logics, psychologies—valuable as they

⁵These principles about writing, reading, and teaching these skills are developed fully in Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen, *Beat Not the Poor Desk: Writing—What to Teach, How to Teach It, and Why* (Sharon, Conn.: Boynton/Cook, 1982).

are—are not matrices for writing/reading. They are hypothetical, analytic sets of observations and ideas which define discrete parts of any piece of writing. Speculating about the process of writing produces another such highly informative but yet post-facto set of observations. These sets come after literature is written (and are for critics), not before writing (for writers). Though we do not teach these subjects directly, they give us convenient names for some parts of the work we do.

- Writing/reading together creates a strong sense of community. In writing/reading classes, we write and read to each other all the time. Shared work expands the minds of the members of the group, for we internalize something of each other's temperaments and mental skills.
- We learn skills through incremental repetition—doing work which exercises them, identifying what has been done well, and practicing again to extend these skills.
- Learners are motivated to go on practicing when they sense a new degree of skill as they work. Success energizes from within and gives rise to voluntary practice which is self-disciplined and appropriate. The ability to repeat success is perhaps the clearest measure of competency.
- Pleasure eases the work it rises from. In writing/reading, we count on that pleasure which is the natural reward for accomplishment. We avoid spoiling pleasure, and expect it to be enhanced, by following our principles.

In the project's faculty seminar, these ideas came together to indicate what should be taught and why. Underpinning our concrete experiences with students in the classes we were teaching, the principles also prompted individual teachers to invent a variety of new procedures. Since they are abstract, these principles proliferate into many different concrete strategies fitted to students' needs and to particular teaching styles. They make possible classes in which the dynamic element is not the teacher or even the students, but rather the work both do with language. Such a climate favors shared respect for the value, seriousness, and possibility of writing and reading well.

These principles were spelled out and discussed only after the seminar group had worked through them as a writing/reading class. The last half-hour of the weekly two-hour sessions was reserved for discovering, in the writing/reading we had just done, the underlying theory. The syllabus for the first hour and a half was that of a real writing/reading workshop. It differed from a syllabus used in basic writing classes only in the level of

work produced by the participants. In all instances, the instructor did the same writing/reading as other members.

The aim of the syllabus used in the faculty seminar, as in the basic writing course, was to provide a writing/reading course which would begin where everyone was able to produce something, and to proceed through practice in what we regard as the five teachable skills—to the point where everyone wrote expository essays.

In the faculty seminar, we practiced these skills, often simultaneously, all the time. We wrote strong, dominating literary structures that cannot be missed—like the fable, composed of two polar structures, the concrete narrative capped by an abstract moral in the form of an aphorism. We rewrote sentences many times. We wrote a version of the parable, a domestic variety using memories of much-told family stories (not autobiography, which we find inadaptable for all but sophisticated writers). After experiencing in fables the sound and effect of abstract sentences, we practiced deriving abstractions from our family parables, and moved with that into writing shapely little essays, beginning with abstract paragraphs, developed in the middle by family stories, and ended with a paragraph derived from the preceding two parts.

Whatever we composed, we read aloud. Our initial efforts to write with a new structure were read to the entire group; later drafts were read to small groups. After each reading, we all quickly wrote as many observations as we could in three minutes, then read our observations—excluding inferences as much as possible—to the author. Each session depended to some extent on a four-part work-rhythm: write, read, write observations, read them. All five elemental skills were introduced in the first two sessions of the seminar; the rest was development.

We took advantage of the fact that we were a class of approximately twenty. When a class is a community of active writers who practice being of definite service to each other, the scope of each writer is powerfully enlarged. Exercise of the elemental skills creates such community quickly. Moreover, high school teachers are particularly adept at imagining ways to put the rhythm of induction to work in their own classes, once they experience it for themselves. Perhaps that is because hostility and idleness (which sometimes create tension in high schools and cannot anywhere be banned or policed away) diminish where the lively, productive rhythm of inductive teaching keeps everyone engaged.

The syllabus for the seminar called for a great deal of writing in and out of class, since we define a writer as a person who writes. Our productivity gave us a chance to explore ways in which our methods may afford some

relief to teachers burdened with too many students. In high schools, even more than in colleges, teachers meet so many writers that they cannot assign and respond to all of their writing every day. Even once a week is a strain. Our methods helped students write enough without drowning their instructors. They all rely more on preventing than on remedying error. We discovered:

- Organized papers are more likely when the assignment is structure oriented rather than topic oriented.
- Instead of studying an entire large landscape of any grammar, it is better to focus on those few elements which affect literary quality and structure: governing pronoun, governing tense, the formal shapes of sentences. These elements, because they affect imagination, integrate a piece of writing. The shortest road to correct sentences is to ask for elegant ones. Inexperienced writers, asked for correctness, flounder; asked for elegance, they aim at it and are very often correct.
- Prolific writing helps students to learn re-writing, and active teaching of re-writing in class reinforces this skill, so that the papers students turn in are more ready for our scrutiny. Raw first drafts are often dull reading; second drafts are more likely to give us clues to forward the writers' intentions.

Writers can be useful to each other in many ways. Writers can offer each other immediate help by acting as a responsible, responding community. Groups of Queens College undergraduates have for a decade offered such help, and the Queens English Project profited enormously from their experience. They have worked with their peers on writing and reading in two English Department programs, one—faculty/student team teaching—in basic writing classrooms and the other—tutoring—in the Writing Skills Workshop.⁶ Both programs provide strong courses in reading/writing for the undergraduates who, by working in them, learn deeply in order to teach others.

In the Queens English Project, Queens College undergraduates are

⁶For a detailed description of the Queens College faculty/student team teaching program, see Donald McQuade, "The Queens College Writing Program," in *Options for the Teaching of English: Freshman English* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1978) as well as George Held, "Involving Student Tutors in Teaching Writing to Disadvantaged Students," in *Measure for Measure: Classroom Practice in Teaching English*, ed. Allen Berger and Blanche Hope Smith (Urbana, ILL.: NCTE, 1973). For a discussion of the Queens College student tutoring program, see Judith Fishman, "On Tutors, the Writing Lab, and Writing," *Composition and Teaching*, 2(November 1980); "The Writing Center: What is Its Center?" *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, 5(September 1980); "Training and Using Peer Tutors," *College English*, 38(December 1978).

chosen for work in one of the participating high schools. They come to seminars where they learn the principles and methods on which we base our program, and they practice them with high school classes and tutees according to the needs of each school. Most teachers have developed their own particular versions of tutors' tasks. In one school, students are rotated so that part of the class is with the regular teacher and part is in a writing laboratory working in several small groups with several Q.E.P. tutors. In another, tutors participate as team teachers during the regular class hour and later hold two (or three)-on-one tutoring sessions in the writing lab, for which high school students can be scheduled when they register for the course. In one high school, only college-bound students are in Q.E.P. classes; in another, most teachers of upper and lower tenth and twelfth year students are working with our methods and tutors. In three schools, a few high school students who have gone through the program are now working as tutors alongside college students. In nearly all the schools, there are some tutors who have returned to teach in the schools from which they have graduated.⁷

Participation of tutors, teachers, and schools has so far been self-generated; people have volunteered. They have been motivated by real and considered interest in making the changes toward inductive teaching that are called for by this different approach. From these original participants, we have learned the blessings of such self-selection. In addition, we were fortunate to enjoy the encouragement and guidance of the Executive Director of High Schools in New York City, the Superintendent of High Schools in Queens County and, on our campus, the President, Provost, Assistant Provost, Dean of Humanities, and the Chairperson of English. All levels of the educational system were not only represented but warmly supportive—a factor crucial to the success of such a program.

Since its inception in 1978, the Queens English Project has expanded to include seven high schools, their principals and English department heads, a few score teachers, six members of the Queens College faculty, seven CUNY graduate student workshop coordinators, well over one hundred Queens College undergraduate tutors, and nearly four thousand

⁷Now that our funds for seminars are extremely limited, we rely for replication of our work on teachers and tutors who are already experienced. We are experimenting with ways to respond to those who have heard of us and want to know more. We have introduced our ideas at faculty meetings in high schools and conducted some mini-seminars, both by going out to interested schools and by holding Saturday sessions at the College. We hope that *Beat Not the Poor Desk* will communicate the excitement as well as the ideas that we shared in the original FIPSE seminars.

high school students. Basic funding for the program is now provided by the New York City Board of Education, with a supplementary program of released time for faculty sponsored by Queens College. The most readily appreciable effects of the project have been the substantive changes in the ways in which writing is taught in the participating schools and the reduction in the number of students from the pilot sections in the high schools who must complete so-called "remedial" courses before enrolling in our college's two-semester sequence of required composition.

Somewhat less apparent but far more enduring has been a reduction in the personal costs of remediation. Made familiar with the discipline and pleasures of writing and reading in their high school classes, fewer students seem to suffer from the anxieties, embarrassments, and incapacities that attend a lack of preparation for college courses. By working intensely and cooperatively, colleagues in both the secondary schools and colleges have already expanded their understanding of how, what, when, where, and why we learn to read and write as well as of how to teach these enabling skills. So, too, the coordination of rationale, instructional techniques, and curricular materials has led to more successful and replicable teaching and learning.

Based on our ongoing work, we offer the Queens English Project as an example of what can be accomplished when the talents and resources of college and high school faculty, collectively prodigious, are pooled to develop a project. As a result of our work, students, faculty, and administrators can reasonably expect less duplication in the need for remediation. Institutionally, one of the most important outcomes of our work has been that two vast and, heretofore, surprisingly isolated educational systems—the Boards of Education and Higher Education in New York City—have recognized that their respective problems and resources are bound together.

The work of the Queens English Project also offers a useful paradigm for developing in-service teacher-training programs—primarily because it places writing at the center of learning. In fact, it demonstrates that writing is at the center of education. Once teachers have themselves inductively experienced writing as a method of inquiry and as a structured means to discover the nature and significance of their own work, they are better prepared to encourage similar humanistic values in their students. With practice in writing and training in the principles of collaborative learning, we can reasonably expect teachers trained in *all* disciplines to recognize the importance of writing as a tool for learning in *every* field of special interest.

The Queens English Project has re-examined the gaps that separate

faculty in college and high school and insulate all of us from our students. The need for better articulation among English faculty should begin with a demonstrated understanding on the part of those of us in the colleges not only about what the conditions for education are in the secondary schools, but also about what exactly can and can not be taught in writing and reading at any level. Through this understanding, the colleges can then continue where the high schools have left off—without too much disjunction and in a manner calculated to use and enhance all of the new college students' previous training, thereby building upon an already firmly established and stable foundation.