

Frank Newman

My most embarrassing and discomfoting moment in the classroom came the day that a freshman chemistry student at the University of Michigan wrote an "A" paper on an in-class impromptu assignment. I had taught Haab the preceding semester, and to no avail. When he did not write "D" papers, he wrote "F's." On the final examination for that first semester he wrote his usual "F" composition once again. He was always at his weakest in stress situations. Or, at least, so it seemed to me. In any case, Haab had failed his first semester of freshman English and would have to repeat the course. We followed the practice at that time that no student could fail freshman English unless a second reader certified that the student's final examination essay really was a "D" or "F." Haab's second reader found his final paper even more of an "F" than I myself had.

In those days we did not yet have the computer to sort registrations for the next semester and then disgorge students upon us. But neither did we identify which faculty members would teach each of the seventy-five sections of freshman English that we then offered. It was, I discovered to my shocked disbelief, our mutual destiny that Haab and I should confront each other again the second semester of his freshman year. On the first day of class I offered him the option of changing sections and trying his chances with another instructor. He declined the offer, feeling, I suppose, that if he had to undergo his torture, he might as well stick with the evil he already knew. We settled into our previous pattern of out-of-class "D" papers, papers that were laconic, short on ideas, wholly unconvincing both to Haab and to me. No one could have been more apologetic than Haab was. He felt that the deficiency was wholly his, that he could not write, had nothing to say, and eminently deserved the grades he earned. And so we proceeded to the fifth week of the semester when an in-class impromptu occurred in those days so that we could be sure that the student writing the papers outside of class was really writing them. We trusted roughly for some obscure reason that if the impromptu matched the student's outside work, he had written the outside work.

It was at this point in my teaching career (I was about four years into it) that I was first struck by the notion that since I did not have only English concentrators in my classes perhaps it might be desirable to offer that mixture of chemistry, physics, economics, sociology, art and architecture, psychology, and non-English concentrating students in general a range of topics to choose from that would allow them to write on a topic from their own field. Among my ten topics was "Explain the benzene ring. I did not know much about the benzene ring, but I at least knew of its existence and had been reading background works in anthropology and chemistry and several other areas arcane to me but not, I had reason to believe, to my students. If my sources were right, Haab should have been able to produce three paragraphs on the benzene ring.

To my delight, as the class settled down to its assignment, Haab was writing. To my great surprise, at the half hour mark he was still writing. At the end of the hour he was feverishly hurrying to finish whatever it was he had been producing.

I did not rush to read what he had produced. Haab's papers were not the kind to encourage a young instructor to stay on in the profession.

Nor were they the kind to encourage him to get on with the grading of a set of papers as a whole. When I came to Haab's paper, however, I found not his usual crabbed two-thirds of a page but a full eight pages. I also found that his eight pages explained the benzene ring more clearly and fully than the popularized text I had been reading, that he had included four exceedingly detailed diagrams of atomic structures for the benzene ring and significant derivatives and modifications of it, and that in his own subject he wrote fully developed paragraphs and no sentence fragments. He even used subordinate clauses. The paper was a clear "A" paper.

Poor devil! On an otherwise excellent record he had an "F" for first semester freshman English because I had not been clever enough ever to have given him a topic to write about, about which he knew anything. I had failed him; he had not failed me. I simply had not discovered what he was prepared to write about and built on that.