

# WLA Newsletter

. . . writing as a liberating activity. . .

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Co-editors:  
Richard C. Gebhardt  
Barbara Genelle Smith

THE WLA NEWSLETTER --  
An Introduction Starring Ted, Fred,  
Betty, A Dozen Teachers, And Three Editors

Richard C. Gebhardt  
Findlay College

At the start of a recent section of Self-Awareness Through Writing, the required freshman writing course of Findlay College, I asked students to "write anything you like that will convey something about yourself." And two pseudonymed students responded with these sentences.

TED(Original)

I'm supposed to tell you something about myself. This is hard for me, because I don't understand myself.

I try to put myself in one class or another, but when I do my character always changes faces.

As soon as the students stopped writing, I directed them in a ten-minute free association exercise. And when I asked the class to write a second time--this time using details they had generated during the exercise--the same two students wrote these descriptions.

TED(Revision)

If I were a country, I would be the USSR because I am like the USSR. The USSR doesn't talk too much to different countries, and I don't usually talk to strangers. The USSR keeps many secrets, and I keep much within myself. The USSR is hated by some, loved by others, and known by virtually everyone. This is also true of me.

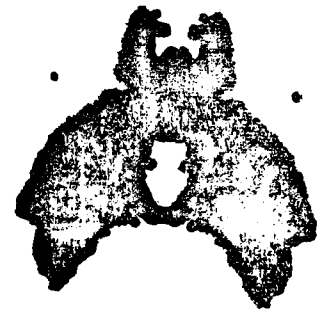
FRED(Original)

I am a human being. I am made of flesh and bone. I have a soul and possess many different feelings. All I ask is to be treated fairly and like a human being.

FRED(Revision)

I am like the winter because I tend to cause problems of my own creation. I can have the fury of winter storms or the gentleness of a winter night. I bring happiness to some people, and at the same time I give sadness to others.

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Writing as a Liberating Activity began as a workshop included in the program of the 1973 NCTE College Section Summer Conference on the campus of Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.

Leading the workshop were: Richard C. Gebhardt, Findlay College; Barbara G. Smith, University of Kentucky; and Ray Kytle, Central Michigan University.

Participating in the workshop: Rochelle Distelheim, Mundelein College; Kathleen Duncan, Lake Michigan College; Frank Fennell, Loyola University; Steve Hoyle, Kansas; Dorla Jenkins, Ricks College; Judy Prince, Kennedy-King College; Ly Sauls, Atlantic Union College; and Melinda Stetina, University College of the University of Cincinnati.

Later in the same course, I allowed students to write opinionated essays on whatever topics they felt strongly about. The result, of course, was a pile of papers, each pushing the pet prejudice of its author. For example, here is a small excerpt from one woman's paper on women's liberation activities:

BETTY(Original Position)

Women's liberation is infiltrating all parts of our society today. . . . They feel that they should have equal pay for equal work and not be discriminated against. This is good. However, they wish to change want-ads and other basic conveniences of our lives. Women's libbers are causing family conflict and giving up motherhood and its responsibilities.

But then I required that students read three published articles on their topics, and I had them spend a class hour working through a short exercise designed to emphasize points of comparison and contrast. And when they wrote a second time, the narrow range of the students' opinions had widened appreciably.

BETTY(Later Critique of Position)

In reading these articles, I have found that most of my views have been solidified. . . . I will be able to discuss these reasons more intelligently now.

One area in which I was wrong concerned the family. I realize now that being liberated does not mean giving up motherhood. It also does not mean starting family arguments and having continuous trouble with family members. . . .

Most of my views were generally correct. I did find that where I was correct I did not go into much detail. Perhaps my arguments would be more sound when backed up with facts. Generally, when I was wrong, I was completely wrong. . . .

Now I do not pretend that these two before-and-after stories show any particular genius on my part, or that the end results of the two simple classroom exercises I used are especially remarkable. But they do suggest, I think, ways that writing classes can liberate students from the prisons of stock-response and over-generalization, and the isolation cells of untested assumptions and narrow visions of life. And, if so, these stories also suggest two possible and complementary focuses for a newsletter devoted to "Writing As a Liberating Activity"--the freeing of student imagination and creativity, and the expanding of student outlook and opinion.

In his "Notes for an Anti-Curriculum in English," James E. Miller, Jr. commented indirectly on both of these points. He identified the imagination as an essential faculty through which man can "free himself from the narrow range of his physical vision," through which "he can be liberated from his parochialism in a process that is at the heart of the meaning of 'liberal education.'" He defined the "truly human human being" as "the liberated man, the creative man." And he remarked that the educational goals of creativity and freedom in English classes are quite significant, since these goals can be included under the higher goal of preserving humanness (*College English*, 33 [May 1972], 963). And Miller's ideas, as abstract as they may sound here, have been echoed repeatedly in the descriptions of curriculum, classroom organization, teaching, and grading offered by dozens of teachers, including Wallace Douglas, Peter Elbow, Brent Harold, Lou Kelly, Ken Macrorie, Barrett Mandel, Donald Murray, Jean Pumphrey, Alan Purves, James Squire, and Geoffrey Summerfield.

So the idea behind this newsletter is a logical one, given the recent-to-present climate of college writing teaching. For its purpose is to let people interested in writing as a liberating activity discuss the meaning of the phrase, and to let them share some techniques that have worked to make writing classes creative, exciting, liberating places.

And it is possible, too, that the present-to-future climate of college writing instruction makes this discussion and sharing doubly important to teachers who believe that writing should be creative and personal rather than pre-packaged and formal--an imaginative process rather than an arbitrary exercise of conventional forms and expressions. For if the English editors of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Scott, Foresman, and John Wiley are correct in their analyses of Freshman English, then teacher-advocates of writing as a liberating act

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## WLA READING LIST -- #1

As a continuing feature of the WLA NEWSLETTER, we offer a brief list of materials that provide some insights or inspiration for the teacher-advocate of writing as a liberating activity. If you have titles you have found helpful in your own teaching, please send them to Richard Gebhardt at Findlay College, along with a "quicky" annotation of the title's main focus.

Barasch, F. K. "Poetry for Open Enrollment." CCC, 23 (May 1972), 195-198.

College English, 34 (Feb. 1973). This issue, on the theme, "Nuts and Bolts: Teaching Composition," includes these articles: Jean Pumphrey, "Teaching English Composition as a Creative Art"; Barrett Mandel, "Teaching without Judging"; Lou Kelly, "Toward Competence and Creativity in an Open Class"; and Kenneth Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models."

Klein, Thomas, Howard Millman, and Betsy Arons. "Appendix: 24 Exercises." Spinach Is Good for You: A Call for Change in the American Schools. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1973, pp. 165-212.

Koch, Kenneth. Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry. Vintage ed. New York: Random House, 1971.

Lyon, Harold C. Learning to Feel-- Feeling to Learn: Humanistic Education for the Whole Man. Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill, 1971.

Maloney, Henry B., ed. New English, New Imperatives. Champaign, IL: NCTE, 1971.

Murray, Donald. A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

Purves, Alan, ed. How Porcupines Make Love: Notes on a Response-Centered Curriculum. Lexington, MA: Xerox, 1972.

THE POEM A WORD MAKES:  
Poetry As One Way Toward Liberating Writing

Barbara G. Smith  
College of Education  
University of Kentucky

Words have always fascinated me. And writing, composing with words, has generated within me excitement, pleasure, and a measure of control over myself and my living. In a word, writing for me is liberating.

It is this quality and this activity of writing which I have tried to share with composition students. In order to share with them my own fascination with words, I have had to think through some rather difficult questions, such as what are words for? how does a word match a feeling, a thought? what is it inside a person that needs to be put into words, that receives gratification through verbalizing, through composing word patterns in writing? Seeking answers to these questions has led me from psychologists of perception, to linguists, to writers writing, especially to poets, and back eventually to my own writing, to my own teaching of writing.

Through classroom exercises involving sensory explorations, free association, denotation and connotation, alliteration, rhyming, imagery- and metaphor-making, I try to help students discover that composing with words is fun. We start with poetry, because in a poem the words one-at-a-time in an intriguing economy do take on a life, a liveliness, a reality all their own. They squirm, dance, shine; they pout, protest, smoulder. The poem a word makes may then be a lucky accident, a guess, a metaphor, a rhyme, and making poems from words brings about the realization in teacher and in student alike that writing is a process of choosing, of trying to control the vagrancy or the ambiguity of words, allowing the magic of words to work for, rather than against, the writer.

This emphasis on words has reverberations in all of the teaching I have done, especially, and not surprisingly, in modern poetry. How the exercises from freshman writing can be transformed into an examination of senior poetry students is just one example of the application of poetic techniques toward liberating writing. In November, 1971, I gave my English 403 Modern Poetry class a take-home examination in seven parts; I called the exam "An attempt to integrate a ten-week experience. . ."--that is, the course.

PART ONE. Free association.

Source: The meanderings of your mind

Purpose: To tune you in. To get your vibrations vibrating on a variety of frequencies. To take inventory.

Using a straight edge (ruler, etc.), mark off a column for each of the following terms (that is, draw 12 columns. At the beginning of

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each column, place one of these words or phrases:

sun moon stars rain

PRUFROCK

dooms of love

shantih shantih shantih

a pretty how town

April

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

"Constantly risking absurdity"

imaginary gardens/real toads

the violet hour

i

stray birds

Then, under each term, in each column, list whatever associations with the word, words, phrases come to your mind. It is NOT essential that you seek the origin of the terms or the poetic context--just free-associate!

#### PART TWO. Expression.

Source: Your senses and your word-board.

Purpose: To connect two or more associations, then to communicate them in language.

Describe each of the following as vividly and as accurately as possible in one phrase or in one sentence.

The color of your eyes

The smell of newly mown grass

The taste of an onion

The feel of cat's fur

The sound of a door being slammed

The stillness of a sunrise

The feel of a handful of snow or sand

The wetness of rain

The color of rain

The taste of rain

In your description try not to use any of the words given here. Try for an image: not just, THE COLOR OF TWILIGHT IS GREY, but "THE BURNT-OUT END OF SMOKY DAYS (T. S. Eliot)."

To be continued, with PARTS THREE through SEVEN in the next issue of the WLA NEWSLETTER.

## HUMANIZING ENGLISH: Exercises for the Classroom

Thomas Klein  
Bowling Green University

Our mission as English teachers is to engage ourselves and our students in the tasks of languaging. We accomplish this by examining how we use language and by actually using language to organize and refine our experience. In these processes the writing, talk, drama, and reading we do never occur in a vacuum. They happen in the context of our ongoing individual lives, as well as the group life that can provide solid foundation for the external contents of English. Where teachers may have little control over the individual lives--the family, social and cultural life of the student outside the classroom--they can affect the quality of group life in the classroom. The exercises which follow--exercises for Getting Acquainted, Deepening Acquaintance and Increasing the Flow of Interaction--are meant to help teachers in English to provide an environment that is both safe and person-centered; that gives rise to an interconnected world, one in which there is rarely the feeling that "My class has nothing to do with me."

Authentic human relationship, of course, never develops along pre-conceived tracks. What is most exciting about being human is usually most unpredictable, even to ourselves. The surprises of insight, humor and reaction are our most natural and real sides. All we can do, then is to suggest a progression that might govern the ideal pattern, but never one that actually guides an actual pattern. We must depend on the teacher's own sense of rightness. He/she must choose, invent, modify. He/she must use these three kinds of exercises with greater boldness or delicacy, direction or indirection as the moment and the group demand.

### I. Getting Acquainted

A friend of ours once announced to his class that the names of the other students in the class were among the most important matters they could learn in the course. In the sense that our individual experience are some of the keys we can use to unlock the messages of literature and important issues in life, this is true. It is also true insofar as acknowledgement of names can represent recognition of each person's worth. In a less global sense, an exercise helping us to learn a name of another can help us to conduct a personalized class, where we and our students know something about each other.

A. Learning Names --. The easiest technique we have found is simply to hand out 3x5 cards and pass around a magic marker, each person, teacher included, writing his/her name on the card, folding it and putting it on the desk.

A more engaging technique, requiring eye contact of each person with each other person, is executed as follows: One person says, "I'm \_\_\_\_\_." and fills in his/her name. The person sitting in the next position (students should be in a circle) says "I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and that's \_\_\_\_\_," filling in the name of the first person. This goes until the last person in the circle has said his/her name and those of each member of the class.

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may soon be working in an environment that is more singlemindedly concerned with basic writing skills and widely dominated by conservative and practical considerations ("Editors, Textbooks, and Freshman English," *Freshman English News*, 1 [Winter 1973], 1-2).

If such a concern for practical, as opposed to creative, writing (as grossly oversimplified as I put it here: Is all comp divided into only two provinces?) should come to dominate college composition courses, then the teachers of writing as a liberating activity would face some difficult questions. Of course, there would be questions conveying implied criticism and threats from the students, department heads, and deans who might want more practical writing instruction. But there also would be questions of principle and of educational conscience arising from the teacher's own concern for creativity--questions about what writing classes are doing to help students become fully developed human beings capable of imagination as well as logic, able to use the flexible possibilities of language as well as the conventions of usage. For example, in "Peak Experiences and the Skill of Writing," Wallace Douglas asks whether English teachers can afford to limit students to practical writing. And he wonders what the long-range effects on the growth of students will be if a neat division between "practical" and "creative" writing is allowed to exist [*How Porcupines Make Love: Notes on a Response-Centered Curriculum*, ed. Alan Purves (Lexington, MA: Xerox, 1972), p. 180].

The WLA NEWSLETTER hopes to serve in some small way as a forum for the consideration of such questions and for the exploration of the educational approaches and teaching strategies implicit in the nature of writing as a liberating activity. More specifically -- but certainly not exclusively -- the WLA NEWSLETTER will address itself to questions such as these:

- What specific teaching techniques, assignments, and course approaches are being used by teachers in U. S. colleges, universities, and community colleges to free student imagination and creativity and to expand student outlook and opinion?
- If a teacher values accuracy and clarity of communication, but also spontaneousness and freshness of expression, how can he/she prevent the former from impeding the latter? How can usage, organization, and language be handled so that they do not prevent the student from feeling that writing is a creative, liberating activity?
- If a teacher has a set of conditioned ideas about the necessary formality of a classroom or the decorous behavior of a teacher, how can he/she break through this programming, release his/her own creativity, and so help students be freer and more creative?
- In the liberating writing class, what are the most appropriate methods for conveying information to the student about his/her writing? How can, or should, papers be "marked"? How should work be evaluated, or not evaluated?
- What organizational framework or bureaucratic support does the writing teacher need to teach writing as a creative, humanizing activity; i. e., from course titles and descriptions to department heads to deans, etc. ?
- Sure, all writing is creative, but what place does creative writing have in freshman comp? Is the use of student creative writing, such as short stories and poems, a workable way to help students become generally more creative in their writing? What about music, dance, pantomime, the graphic arts? What do they have to offer to the teacher and the students in the creative, liberating writing class?

This first issue of the WLA NEWSLETTER has been sent to you gratis from the co-editors, in the hope that you will find it useful in the classroom as you attempt to teach composition. If you are interested in the concept of writing as a liberating activity, if you are practicing the concept in your teaching, if you have ideas and activities that have worked for you in liberating your students' writing, won't you share them with us? We will be glad to consider any materials -- letters to the co-editors, brief book reviews, descriptions of your techniques for liberating writing, criticisms of the concept itself -- for reproduction in the newsletter. We do not intend for WLA to be a profit-making publication, other than that you profit from the exchange of ideas it offers.

We have selected your name from professional programs related to writing and from personal acquaintance with some of you. Please share the newsletter with others you know. Send us their names to include on our mailing list. Send us some liberated writing of your own!

Application to English: Ask students to think of one word which describes some significant quality of theirs. This word must be put before their names. The exercise is then executed as outlined above. A discussion about the innuendos and subtleties of word choice can then follow.

**B. Exchanging First Impressions--.** Cards are passed out on the first or second day of class. Students have a chance to learn names and look around, perhaps to mill among one another. They are to write on their cards the first impressions received from one person in the class, teacher included. The teacher collects these, reads them aloud, skipping those that are negative; *i. e.*, ones that disparage or criticize. After one is read, the class tries to guess who is being referred to. When the class guesses correctly, the writer signals the correct choice and the teacher writes the proper name on the card. Later in the school year, the exercise can be done again and comparisons to their first exercise can be made to see whether acquaintances have developed beyond cliché and stereo type. More dramatic even, the first set of cards could be read to see how accurate or inaccurate the guesses were.

Application to English: The exercise provides an excellent transition into an examination of the roles we play and the faces we put on.

**C. Face-to-Face Description--.** Variation A. Two students who would like to become better acquainted face each other and talk for five minutes about a subject given them by the teacher (e. g., grading systems; abortion; generation gap; future shock). Then, each is asked to write about the other person--again, on a narrowed subject, like how the person's character is revealed in his/her appearance, a day in the person's life five years ago, etcetera. Variation B. Two students who are for the most part unacquainted face each other and without any conversation, write about each other. It might be easiest here to leave the writing open-ended, giving suggestions if students want them. Variation C. Two students are paired at random and sit back-to-back. They role-play a telephone conversation for five minutes, where one is perhaps taking a survey on attitudes of students, reactions to liberated women, or on tastes in music. Each then writes on a given or a self-selected topic. These papers are then shared, face to face. Variation D. Two persons, strangers or friends, are paired and face each other, standing, but blindfolded. Without conversation each explores the other person, starting with the hands and shoulders and then moving to the face. After a few minutes, they turn around, remove the blindfolds, and write about what they perceived or imagined about the other person.

[ To be continued in the next issue of WLA. ]

WLA NEWSLETTER

Richard C. Gebhardt  
Chairman, Division of Humanities  
Findlay College  
Findlay, OH 45840

Barbara G. Smith  
111-A Dickey Hall  
College of Education  
University of Kentucky  
Lexington, KY 40506



Richard C. Gebhardt  
Chairman, Division of Humanities  
Findlay College  
Findlay, OH 45840