MEASUREMENT AND MOTIVATION:
The Final Problem in English 101

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Not long ago, my two-year-old daughter, Caroline, scribbled some random lines and shapes on a piece of paper, handed it to a guest in my home, and asked: "What does it say, Lin?" The incident struck all of us present as indicative of the approach to their own writing often taken by students in composition classes—they hand in their papers and wonder: "Did I say anything? Is it any good? Does it deserve a decent grade?" They really don't know the answers to these questions—the merits of their work and the mechanics of their teachers' evaluations are mysteries to them. It should not be so. Their energies in a composition course should be directed in large part toward developing critical acumen about their own work and that of others, on a conscious rather than unconscious (or self-conscious) level. This is particularly true if we expect them to function well independently once the course is over. Consequently, the final measure of their success ought to be writing which demonstrates growth, control, and conscious critical perception, the goals toward which our courses are directed.

Many of the kinds of assignments and activities we offer our students bring them to the brink of conscious critical perception. Journal writing, often assigned or promoted to keep the students writing as much and often as possible, to enforce prewriting activities for major papers, or to provide students with a forum for the development of their own ideas, is implicitly a different kind of writing from the more public writing of the major assignments in the course. By engaging in both activities the students is constantly in a position to observe how he alters his approach to fit the assignment. The range of formal assignments, from personal narrative to objective argumentation, offers another potential for comparison: what differences in voice do you find in these kinds of papers? what changes can you discern in your style or persona or presentation? Students can, thus, not only do the assignments but come to understand how they did them, as well.

Group inquiry methods are fraught with such critical consciousness-raising. Responding to the dictum that the subject of a composition course should be the students' writing, they engage students in talk about their own work and that of their classmates. The editing sessions small groups engage in, like

the editorial conference with the teacher, focus on specific writing, promote specific changes, and direct the attention of the students to a conscious appreciation of what they've done and how it has affected readers. The give-and-take of these sessions demands a certain amount of comparison and evaluation and often, as in my own 101 classes, evaluation means the development of a system of measurement and its application to fromal assignments by the students themselves. All of these activities encourage an expanding awareness in students of what they have said, what effect it has had, and how they achieved that effect.

To ensure that the perceptions about their writing implicit in such course-work rise to the surface, I frame the course with a sequence of assignments which not only gives me a means of comparative measurement but also offers my students encouragement to continue the writing habits of English 101 in their other courses.

The first part of the frame is the Initial Writing Assignment. It instructs students to "write an introduction of yourself, telling who you are as a writer and what you think a prospective reader-evaluator of your writing should know about your background and abilities." The primary purpose of the assignment is, of course, diagnostic, producing samples of their writing at the earliest stage of their acquaintance with the course. But there are secondary purposes as well: to start the students off on their writing as quickly as possible; to assure them of some accessible material by having the group discussion function heuristically; to create in them an initial awareness of their own writing which the course will reinforce and expand. The assignments and activities which follow, then, will be directed toward the development of criteria by which to evaluate the writing of themselves and their classmates.

Their final opportunity to display how fully they have developed these criteria comes in response to a two-part closing assignment, the Final Problem. Part I again asks students to describe themselves as writers. They are encouraged to offer "an assessment of where you see yourself in regard to writing and language use and a projection of what areas of your writing need improvement. You may include information about your background and abilities in writing. In summary, the paper will be an essay about who and where you are as a writer at this moment." As with the first paper, students are given an opportunity to discuss their ideas with the group, but this time they have the additional advantage of an editing session on the semi-final draft. Between the last class and the designated exam period, they are expected to work at revision, preparing a final draft which is a model of organization and planning, coherent, intelligent, and true. It is the last example of a formal paper assignment, one taken through the standard processes of prewriting and revision, and it demonstrates their abilities at the penultimate moment of the course. As with their earlier papers, I examine it for content--unity, organization, development-and form-grammar, essential elements of written discourse. To provide myself with a clearer concept of the mastery they have achieved, I will compare it with that first introductory paper.

Those first papers usually have several elements in common. They are rambling, undeveloped, and short, often one paragraph long. In them, students express reservations about their writing abilities ranging from a hesitancy bordering on shyness to a virtual terror of their own written voices. Thus, when I read a last paper, I am not only looking for competence but for a change in

self-concept--for evidence of greater confidence, surer intentions, a sense of comfort. I am hoping that the initial hesitancy is gone, that the students express at least a modest self-assurance, that the prospect of writing no longer intimidates them. In most cases the evidence is there, manifested by the students' ability to speak about themselves as writers, to marshall evidence in support of their ideas, and to evaluate their own capabilities ably.

The Final Problem Part I does a sufficient job of providing a basis for final measurement, but, because I believe that critical perception is so important to students, I want some means of sharing with them the discoveries to be made in the comparison of the first and last paper. For that reason, in the final exam period, before collecting Part I, I return their first papers, which I have kept all semester, and hand out the Final Problem Part II. It asks them to compare the two papers as to circumstances of composition, content, form., evidence of improvement or deterioration, persona of the writer, and attitude. Once they have considered these matters in regard to both papers, they are to organize their thinking and then write a brief, coherent, well-organized comparative essay about them.

The Final Problem Part II is an informal writing assignment. In effect, it makes the demands of a formal paper assignment in a journal writing situation, the kind of demands frequently made for examinations, and demonstrates how well the students write without extensive opportunity for editing and revision. In comparison with the Final Problem Part I, it demonstrates the relationship between the students' formal and informal styles, and their relative abilities in different writing situations. It also provides a check of sorts on the degree to which their outside writing exhibits elements clearly their own.

More important, the Final Problem Part II is further evidence of how the students have progressed, since it also compares with the original description of the student as writer, written under similar conditions at the beginning of the course. Together with Part I, these papers locate, by a process of triangulation, where the students stand at the end of the course and how much their positions have altered from the beginning. Furthermore, Part II reveals how well the students can analyse their own work, since the paper should show an awareness of the kinds of differences the course has made in their writing. Thus, I am not simply allowing them to say in a different fashion some of the same things they said at the beginning of the course but, instead, forcing them to demonstrate that they understand what they are doing and what they have done.

This would be sufficient for my goals: to have kept the focus on the students' writing, to have developed their critical perception, and to have measured that perception along with ability and growth. But the act of engaging the student in this process of comparison and evaluation has an important subsidiary effect, beyond the effect of measurement, on their motivations as college writers.

In comparing their first and last papers, students find that they do, indeed, possess the ability to assess their own writing with concrete examples; the second paper is almost always fuller, clearer, better than the first, and comparison makes them realize that they have more to say about themselves as writers than they originally thought they did, more that reveals their conscious awareness of their own writing. Second, since the Final Problem Part I is almost always better than the original paper, students are encouraged about their writing by proof of improvement. The evidence suggests to them that they are capable of improving beyond where they are now--after all, look how far they've come since the beginning of the course.

Finally, the comparison reinforces the techniques espoused by the course, because most students tend to blame their poorer showing at the beginning on the lack of opportunity to think about the subject at length, to improve the original drafts by continual tinkering and rethinking, and to revise and edit their papers. In effect they find that writing papers impromptu produces work they may be ashamed to acknowledge as their own, and that the painful processes the course teaches are worthwhile because they produce results.

To a certain degree, students in the initial shock of realization, exaggerate the changes in their writing. Yet there is a positive aspect to their misconceptions about their improvements, because they inculcate values about writing and techniques for producing better writing which will, in time, actually produce the improvements the students see and desire. In effect, the Final Problem assignment validates certain approaches to writing. And it encourages students to retain these methods, because the evidence that they work is before them and they have made the discovery themselves.

A Call for Articles

HOW DO YOU "TRANSLATE" RESEARCH ON COMPOSING INTO CLASSROOM STRATEGIES?

This is a good time for writing teachers who share Richard Young's skepticism about the "current-traditional paradigm" with its tendency "to become a critical study of the products of composing," and Mina Shaughnessy's belief that "the composition course should be the place where the writer not only writes but experiences . . . the stages of the composing process itself" ("Paradigms and Problems," Research on Composing, NCTE, 1978, p. 31; Errors and Expectations, Oxford, 1977, p.81). Interesting articles on writing processes arrive with nearly every issue of College Composition and Communication, Research in the Teaching of English, Freshman English News, and other publications. And it seems certain that the flow of articles growing out of composition research will continue for quite some time.

This wealth of insights into composing, though, poses a problem: how to move promising insights into college and high school writing classes without drownding students in sublties of theory or complexities of research studies?

WLA would like to see compact pieces addressing that question for an upcoming feature on "Translating Writing Research into Writing Instruction." Pieces should be short--ideally, under two double-spaced pages. They should follow this format:

1. Give a bibliographic entry on an article or study (MLA form).
2. Write a brief summary of one idea or conclusion from the study (or possibly a couple of very connected ideas).
3. Describe compactly how you "translate" the idea into your teaching. You could deal with class presentations, assignments, activities, materials, etc.

In order to be considered for the Spring 1981 issue, submissions should be mailed by February 28--and earlier if possible. Send submissions to Richard Gebhardt, WLA Newsletter, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840

PREWRITING IN THE BUSINESS WRITING CLASS

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Most people who have been trained to teach standard freshman English feel a bit apprehensive when faced with the prospect of teaching a business writing or practical communications course. Letters, memos, and business reports seem suspiciously mechanical to one who is accustomed to teaching the standard academic essay. We have found, however, that traditional rhetorical principles can easily be incorporated into a business writing course if an instructor allows prewriting activities to hold a central place in the course. Furthermore, this can be done without allowing the course to slip away from a business orientation.

We know, of course, that attention to prewriting in business writing courses is not unheard of. Many business writing texts provide students with prewriting questions that are useful in the analysis of the writer's audience and purpose. We, however, go beyond suggesting that students use such lists; we connect a prewriting task with _every_ assignment we make throughout the semester.

When, for example, we assign a memo, we require that students present us with more than just the memo that has been composed to meet the specific demands of the assignment. They must also turn in answers to a set of prewriting questions (which we give them along with the other details of the assignment) constructed especially for memos (we use different sets of questions for letters and reports). The student is required to answer this set of questions in complete sentences formed into well-developed paragraphs. The questions require the writer to focus on the following concerns before he begins to compose his memo: In terms of the details of the writing situation given the student, what is known or can be inferred about the potential reader or readers? What response is this memo likely to elicit? What response is desired? What does the reader already know about the subject the memo addresses? What does he want to know? What must he know? What specific strategies will the writer employ to achieve the desired response to his memo?

The answers that students compose in response to these questions are collected along with the completed memos. In fact, we will not read any student writing that is not accompanied by a prewriting exercise. We let students know that we take these prewriting exercises seriously by grading them as rigorously as we do the rest of the assignment: we make comments on the thoughts expressed; we keep an eye on paragraphing and sentence structure; and we point out any problems in grammar and usage.

At the beginning of the course, some students think that we require prewriting just to make extra work for them; and, of course, grading the prewriting exercises makes extra work for us. But we're convinced that our emphasis on prewriting is worthwhile, and by the end of the semester most students agree that time spent on this phase of writing is time well spent. We believe that requiring a prewriting exercise for each assignment adds to the value of our business writing courses in several ways.

First, prewriting exercises increase the amount of writing required of students. Writing assignments in business communications courses are often quite brief, but the prewriting exercise increases the amount of writing required to complete any given assignment. A memo, for example, is generally no more than a page in length; the prewriting exercise that accompanies the memo may be two or three times the length of the memo itself. This gives students additional experience in composing sentences and constructing paragraphs. The instructor, in turn, has more opportunities to instruct the student--though his comments and corrections--in paragraphing, sentence structure, grammar, and usage.

A second and more important benefit of prewriting is that it asks students to explore the thoughts and assumptions upon which they base the rhetorical choices they make for the completed piece of writing. The student is asked to explain what he wants to achieve, for what specific kind of audience, and how exactly he thinks he should go about achieving his goal. Thus, the prewriting exercise gives the instructor key insights into the process of composition that leads to a given memo, letter, or report; as a result, process can now be taken into consideration when evaluating the finished product.

This emphasis on process renders yet another benefit: it encourages students to view all writing as a complex human activity rather than merely as the transfer of information guided by a static set of rules. Early in the business writing course, most students expect to be taught a set of formulas that can be applied with very little thought to any business communications situation; they would like to ignore the many variables that come into play when people attempt to communicate in the real world. Through the prewriting exercises, however, the student is constantly made aware of the role that audience must play in successful communication. Prewriting makes students see that general principles of communication must be employed with great thought and care if they are to meet the exact demands of a specific writing situation. It forces students to understand that successful communication must be judged in light of the purpose it sets out to achieve.

Thus, by featuring prewriting we find that we are better able to apply our general knowledge about rhetoric to the specific demands of business writing situations. A prewriting approach allows students to see that such rhetorical concepts as audience, commitment, and purpose are important in business writing and not just in the traditional academic essay.