

WHO SHOULD TEACH WRITING... AND WHY...AND HOW

Bernard Van't Hul

While visiting Michigan schools during the past eighteen months, I gleaned facts and formed judgments which figure in my plans for Workshop '80. In the paragraphs that follow, I will specify certain of these facts and related judgments; then I will describe my Workshop plans:

Some Facts and Judgments

In most schools, as in most colleges, the teaching of writing has been assigned almost exclusively to teachers of English. Few teachers of courses other than English require much writing of their students; of those few, still fewer teach writing in their classes. Most teachers of English are uneasy with the assumption that they can teach writing when they alone are required to do so; yet we have acquiesced for decades to the curricular effects of that assumption.

In most schools, teachers of English are daunted if not overwhelmed by the sheer number of students for whose writing they are considered responsible. Without considerable help from teachers in other disciplines and with a hundred and fifty students in their daily classes, even the most energetic and imaginative English teachers are doomed to modest success as teachers of writing.

In most schools and colleges, the English curriculum is chiefly literary. In much assigned writing, students respond to works of poetry, prose fiction, or drama. I believe that the study of literature is invaluable--and that it should keep its place in English curricula. I also believe, however, that students should be practiced in writing of several non-literary kinds. (In an ideal curriculum, they would get such practice in virtually all courses. Meanwhile, in the real curriculum, they get such practice in English courses or not at all.)

Whatever their disciplines, and whether or not they teach writing, teachers have a common set of ideals for the best writing that their students can do. In dozens of schools and colleges, a colleague and I made this simple request of hundreds of teachers of all subjects: "Whether or not you are yourself a teacher of writing, please list five or six of the qualities or features that you are most gratified to see in students' writing." In making this request, we asked teachers to set down their responses hastily and independently--"from the top of your heads and before conversing with your neighbors." And we asked them to list the desirable qualities or features with no concern for either the relative importance or the teachability of them. We then collected the responses of each group of teachers and transcribed them on a board for all to see.

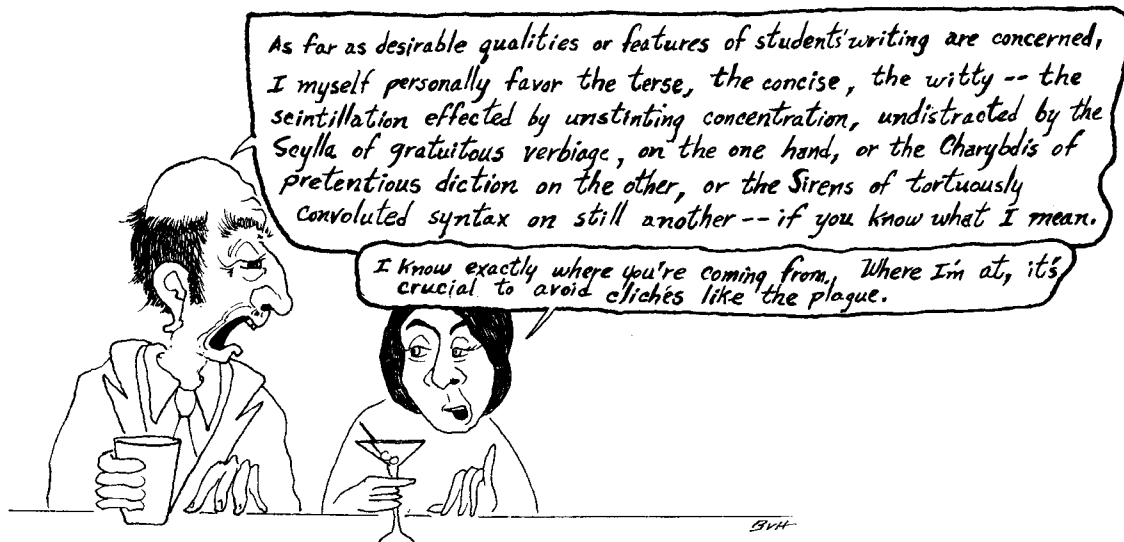
It is not a pious hunch but a demonstrated fact: From teachers of all subjects--and from administrators and visiting board members too--the master list of gratifying features or qualities is finite, and remarkably the same from one school and college to another. Teachers of writing and designers of curricula are not agreed, however, in their answers to related, more complicated pedagogical questions, such as these: Of the gratifying features or qualities of students' writing, which are

more and less desirable? Which are more and less teachable? Of those that are teachable, which are to be taught directly, explicitly--as so many units of assigned work? When in the student's career, and in what sequence? Of those that are less teachable, which should we try most to foster--and how?

My Plans for Workshop '80

In Workshop '80, I will explore briefly with participants their sense of (1) the likelihood that some of their colleagues could be persuaded to teach writing in their non-English courses, and (2) ways in which such colleagues might be identified and encouraged to cooperate in plans for school-wide teaching of literacy.

I will seek participants' answers to the complicated pedagogical questions that emerge from the consensus that I found in the schools. In this effort I anticipate no facile unanimity. The idea is not to achieve a tidy orthodoxy of theory or method, but to explore connections between a given theory and preferred classroom practices. Here it may be useful to invoke Jay Robinson's **traditionalist, inventionist, and rhetorical** "approaches"--as hypotheses with which to account for the most dramatic of differences among participants' answers to those complicated pedagogical questions.



I will give most of my Workshop attention to the making of assignments and to the evaluation of students' writing in response to them. As a preliminary step, I will send the following request, long before the Workshop, to participants with whom I will work:

Please identify one "interesting piece of prose" (not much longer than two pages) written by one of your students recently. Bring with you an unmarked, type-written transcript of that piece (double spaced, the lines numbered in the left margin, and accurate to the jot and the tittle of every spelling and all punctuation). An unusually problem-fraught piece may be as useful to our group as an unusually problem-free one.

Introduce the transcript with a brief, single-spaced description of the assignment, in its context, that occasioned the piece. Explain, if it is relevant, the classroom discussion or textbook work that brought you to making the assignment. Briefly characterize the writer.

Do not identify the writer--OR yourself OR your school or college.

Please bring thirty copies of your transcript to the Workshop. I will collect all sets of copies when you

arrive; and each of us will have the entire anthology of transcripts as we attend closely to a handful.

Sample Introduction

In my _____ we had been
(name of course)

[discussing]
[reading] _____ . I
[working on] (topic, book, etc.)

made the assignment [orally
[in writing]], as follows: "Write...[etc.] Due Wednesday."

The author of this piece is in the
_____ grade.

a typical
S/he is [an unusually successful
[an unusually unsuccessful]

and/but [unmotivated
[highly motivated] writer. To
me the paper is interesting because...

In discussing the making of assignments and evaluating of students' responses to them, I will try to demonstrate the importance of clarifying for students the criteria that vary from one kind of writing to another; and I will try to show how the effectiveness of any kind of writing varies according to the audience for whom, the purposes for which, and the situation in which it is written.