

# Teachers, Students, and Artists: Human Sense in the English Class

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Writing is not a skill, but an art, and the teaching of writing, like all good teaching, is an art. If our students' writing is to improve, we must make them artists, persons who understand Henry James's definition of the artist's joy: "Life being all inclusion and confusion and art being all discrimination and selection...the artist finds in his tiny nugget, worked free of awkward accretions and hammered into sacred hardness, the very stuff for a clear affirmation, the happiest chance for the indestructable" (James, The Art, p. 120). We know from studying art--whether a Renaissance statue, a Beethoven symphony, a Henry James novel, or even an animated film like Snow White--that composing is a heuristic, an ongoing process more complex than a linear march from inspiration to refinement. The elements of composition interact as a dialectic, serving to separate as well as mix, to exclude as well as include, and to deny as well as confirm.

The best composing methods remain loyal to the self's inner vision--the imagination--what Ann Berthoff calls "the form-finding and form-creating power" (Berthoff, The Making, p. 28). Composing defies simplistic formulas which dictate how to construct narrative, descriptive, and expository paragraphs along with their various supporting details. Unfortunately, we teachers advance a different notion of composition when we propose step-by-step rules for writing, and when we also define cohesiveness as verbal paraphernalia held to a topic sentence by the imposed logic of a formal outline. We should advance the theory that true cohesiveness is compatible with the mind's power to compose. Josephine Miles explains: "It is that...sort of inert trust in data as data, uninterpreted, and a counter mistrust of human thought (that) has led Americans to

teach fact rather than ideas and accumulation rather than composition" (Miles, p. 8). The imagination, we think, is an elusive beast, difficult to define and especially to trust. Therefore, we ignore it, choosing to admire it rather than to train it.

Because most of us who teach English began to do so as lovers of literature, we enjoy teaching that best. We also tend to view the study of language--grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and sometimes writing--as isolated word work. At the secondary level we too often err in thinking that our subject is made up of so many segregated units, that there really is no common bond connecting them. Our greatest error would be to promote the myth that "the student who can solve problems, as problems, divorced from human sense, is the student who will succeed in the educational system" (Donaldson, p. 66), for this would mean that those students who master the labels may still know nothing about reconstructing sense impressions, ideas, and feelings as sentences and paragraphs and that those students whose failures have further darkened their bleak self-images will continue to fail. But if we see language as an instrument of the imagination and strive to exercise our students' imaginations, the intricacies of language will become their tools; experiences with the dialectics between thought and language, between recognition and classification, and between generalities and particularities will become the synthesizing forces of their language activity; and the study of English--literature and language--will enable them to make meaning from human experiences.

In a ninth grade class I tried to tie together several related aspects of our English studies by focusing on Jack London's story "To Build a Fire" in which

the narrative's single character, a nameless man, is walking from one place to another in Alaska while the temperature is seventy-five degrees below zero. A sequence of mishaps, which could have been avoided, results in the man's freezing to death. In class discussions, I tried to elicit ideas about the story's theme from my students, but I was repeatedly met with morals such as "Don't go out in the cold alone" and "Always listen to advice." The transition from understanding plot to understanding theme is difficult. The students mastered protagonist and antagonist and setting and plot, but no substantial ideas about themes developed. Finally, I indicated a page number and paragraph in the story which I hoped would generate deeper thought:

The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost....It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general...and from then on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe.

"What does this mean?" I asked. Their answers now were good. They explained how the man was doomed from the start. A passage that earlier had little meaning now stimulated connections between this story and present-day concerns about the environment and our planet's undervalued ecological system. Furthermore, the students focused on other examples of human folly and poor judgment that resembled the man's thinking. The difference between things and significances, like the difference between plot and theme, is no easy distinction. The class grasped the ideas as we struggled through chaos, then on to particulars and oppositions, and finally to a concept. But beyond the story's association with disciplines outside the immediate realm of English, we had discovered something else. We saw that it was the man's responsibility to make significances out of things, which is precisely the same responsibility student writers have, because such revela-

tions are not necessarily apparent. The primary function of the mind, the function which elevates the mind above instinct and makes it an instrument for reasoning, is its capacity--indeed, its responsibility--to make perceptions and not just observations. For this we need to think, and thinking is governed by the basic, natural law governing all the universe: Nothing comes from nothing. We must construe the significances of things; we must make meaning.

As writers begin this "making," a list of unarticulated initial responses surface. They are usually a collection of nouns and perhaps verbs and adjectives. There is no form yet, and for this reason, often quick-fix writers will abandon their lists before they have written them, searching in their verbal jungle for a central idea as though they were Ponce de Leon lost in the Everglades. If the writers stay with their lists and try to structure chaos into clusters of similar impressions or set impressions against each other by matching adjectives with nouns and generating verbs to go with them, they will begin the process of composing; that is, they will be using the particulars at hand to form perceptible conclusions. Each writer's goal at this point is not syntactical sophistication or even simple sentences but rather an attempt to identify a what (things or events) together with a how and why that predicate and modify the what. At no time during these initial steps should the shadow of an English teacher be peering over student writers' shoulders ready to pounce on the first errors of subject-verb agreement. As J.W. Patrick Creber writes, "They must learn to perceive before we ask them to organise their perception" (Creber, p. 51).

When we English teachers think of composition as the continuum Creber suggests it is, we realize that the writing act is a perpetual motion machine involving choices and that the writing process both consumes and generates language as it demands evaluations which in turn ignite two desires--the desire for understanding and the desire for a vocabulary with which to probe language itself. But the

first has priority over the second. This second desire often leads to an appreciation for the aesthetic as well as the functional value of formal usage. This is why it is important that when we teachers must evaluate "honesty and authenticity on the one hand, and formal correctness on the other, it is the former that we must chiefly aim to preserve" (Creber, p. 71).

Since literature broadens our experiences, and provides occasions for analysis and interpretation, I often assign students writing tasks based on reading in order to give them rich opportunities to make meaning. At times I have tried to structure my students' experiences with a particular work by using study guide questions, which I have prepared or which have been prepared by "professionals." These contrivances make class preparation easier because I can base my discussion on the questions which probe that day's assignment; however, such probes do a disservice to literature by fragmenting the art into components that rarely fit into the student's mind as well as they do the teacher's.

In a tenth-grade class, I recently experimented with a published kit designed to make the teaching of a particular novel or play easier. These kits work on the premise that the teacher need only read the book (maybe not even that) because the rest of his work has been done for him. Among the tests, chronologs, and character sketches are study guide questions for chapters or acts. The teacher's edition contains the answers (in Scriptural red), while the students are on their own. Along with the obvious hypocrisy is this brand of learning: The student strives to come up with the answer that will please the teacher.

As an experiment, I gave question sheets to my tenth grade class after we had read and listened to a tape of the first two acts of Arthur Miller's The Crucible. I told them not to write answers on the sheets themselves but rather to draw a line down the centers of several notebook pages and take notes as I dictated the answers directly from the teacher's edi-

tion. After the dictation I assigned a question to each student. Each student was to deliver an oral presentation the next day that answered the question better than my dictation did. The class would take notes again, this time on the opposing side of the page from the original answer. The results were terrific. The second round of answers was much longer and better than the first. Students proved to each other that questions like "Why does Abigail lie?" cannot be answered with one or two sentences because the playwright's composing process does more than tie together neat little plot developments with thematic arguments.

Later, we followed the same procedure with the final two acts. A follow-up writing assignment focused on the trial scene. Reverend Hale, originally a strong advocate for the rooting out of witches, is revolted by the court's stupidity and abuses, and in the third act he shouts, "I denounce these Proceedings!" I began the assignment by asking the class to give nouns orally in response to the question (not topic sentence) "Why Does Hale Denounce the Proceedings?" Their responses were very perceptive, and I listed them on one side of a line drawn down the center of the board. I ended the list at about fifteen. In response to names of characters in the play, came nouns like "pretense," "distortion," and "self-righteousness." I then asked for verb lists to go with each noun. Again, the responses were quick. For particular characters like Abigail Williams there were words specifying noticeable behavior: "lies," "manipulates," "threatens," and "accuses." Sometimes the verbs indicated keener observations. For instance, Elizabeth Proctor also "lies," but one student determined that she "sacrifices" as well. My role at first was merely to list the verbs with their corresponding nouns. Initially, I did not ask for clarification, even though a relationship between subject and predicate might be vivid for one student but not for others. I emphasized that we would not qualify or disagree with any choice until all were listed. The board was soon covered with the cores for nearly a hundred sentences,

far more than were needed; but within the huge informal listing stood the invitation to make choices, to define and refine one's understanding of The Crucible, Act III--an invitation to be artists. Making meaning was becoming tantalizingly possible. Now clarification was in order. The question itself presented a what and posed a why. An answer would also need to add a how by explaining the court's twisted reasoning. Whatever evolved as a topic sentence developed from this process and was not a reiteration of the assignment's title.

Weak verbs were passed over for stronger ones. The discussion, at times a lively debate, brought another dimension: Modification became necessary. Grammatical jargon was downplayed; instead, the conditions under which a certain conclusion is true were emphasized. And those conditions, the oppositions and correlations, dictated the need for mature sentences or, at least, additional sentences for specification. The resulting compositions which were finished for homework explained, among other things, the court's inability to recognize the difference between a lie that protects a liar and a lie that protects a loved one. These compositions showed how distortion and pretense were being valued over truth and sacrifice in Miller's Salem.

This was a new challenge in writing for most of these students, an experience which demonstrated that the balance and relationships between generalities and particulars exist only when one composes them. It was not an exercise in plugging components together. Nor is writing, they discovered, the final step in learning, but rather a necessary tool in promoting learning, because the composing process, based in analysis and interpretation, is the best method for increasing understanding. We began a composition together, seeking significant answers to a question which defied an easy answer. The compositions showed a human sense had been formed. Each student avoided canned terminology and artificial outlining and sought instead to make choices, to find "his tiny nugget, washed free of awkward

accretions and hammered into...the very stuff for a clear affirmation." Together, we had become artists.

#### References

Berthoff, Ann E. Forming Thinking Writing. Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Co., Inc., 1978.

Berthoff presents her theories about "generating chaos" as a first step in the composing process and explains how this can progress to classifying and specifying and finally to editing. Her approach is "assisted invitations," a collection of short writing challenges that make her theories vivid and excite the writer's imagination.

The Making of Meaning. Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1981.

This text further explains Berthoff's theories about learning and composing as being "preeminently a matter of forming structures." Included are pieces by such thinkers as William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Jane Addams, Leo Tolstoy, Marie Montessori, Northrop Frye, I.A. Richards, Paulo Freire, and Paul Freund.

Creber, J.S. Patrick. Sense and Sensibility. London: University of London Press, 1965.

A book originally written for British secondary school teachers, this text explains a four-year approach to bring students from observations to perceptions to cohesive, literate expression. Creber employs such non-writing techniques as mime and creative dramatics to aid his young students in making their own meanings.

Donaldson, Margaret. "The Mismatch Between Schools and Children's Minds," Human Nature (March, 1979), 60-67.

This article includes new interpretations of some of Piaget's experiments. Donaldson concludes "that we tended both to underestimate children's competence as thinkers and to overestimate their understanding of language." For this reason children need both respect and patience as they are taught to become literate.

Miles, Josephine. Working Out Ideas: Predication  
and Other Uses of Language. Berkeley: University  
of California, Bay Area Writing Project.

Miles attacks glibness and irresponsible  
writing by stressing the importance of both

particulars and generalities in writing.

The Henry James quote from The Art of the Novel is  
from his Preface to The Spoils of Poynton.

