APPRENTICING NONFICTIONISTS

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The Challenge

In *The Rise and Fall of English* Robert Scholes noted that enrollments in English concentrations were dropping at most colleges. He suggested we re-evaluate our mission, asking if we are preparing ourselves, our graduate students, and our undergraduates for the critical reading and writing skills needed in our time. This was not a call for service learning or remedial skill building, but rather a re-appreciation of method. If students felt a disconnect between the passive consumption of literary and theoretical texts and the skills they needed to compete in the world, then we as teachers needed to reconnect what made a text useful with how it worked.

To this end, Scholes said, a chosen text could no longer satisfy for its situation in history and culture alone, or for its sacred place in primary or theoretical canons. It had to also reveal the practices of writing—examples of rhetoric, dialectic, poetics, hermeneutics, semiotics, and grammar. What English needed was to prove itself a true discipline, a science in which the traditional goals of literary analysis—to be "fair, accurate and comprehensive"–were attached to writing that mattered beyond the academy (57).

As Scholes and others such as Sandra Jamieson have acknowledged, much of the best and most relevant teaching in English happens through the use of excellent essays. Lynn Z. Bloom, in her benchmark study of "The Essay Canon," demonstrates that, indeed, we base our training of undergraduates on the essay–personal and informational–and on other forms of nonfiction prose—memoir and character sketch; travel narrative

and natural history; cultural, social, and political analysis or advocacy; philosophical statements; science writing; literary criticism; editorials; research reports; satires; and speeches (404). Despite our appreciation of the usefulness of such literature, as Scholes points out, the essay–and by extension, nonfiction prose–still gets no respect as a serious genre. It gets lost between Creative Writing, which privileges fiction, poetry, and drama, and English departments that relegate it to a service genre, not an art form. Part of the problem is that many of these essays and prose pieces have been taught in composition courses for subject-based response–perpetuating the passive consumption Scholes blames for the diminished usefulness and thus lure of English as a concentration.

But, as Scholes and Bloom declare, essays need no longer be solely about subjects like literature; they can become literature. As Robert Atwan says, essays are now being written "in the same imaginative spirit as fiction and poetry," and with comparable artistry (Introduction 6, 9). They take on tough subjects with elegant moves so they are respected, as Philip Lopate says, for their "density of thought," their "living voices," their ability to provide "mental adventure" (x). So too with prose narrative. More writing classes are moving beyond passive interpretation of subjects to practice of narrative forms and artistry which lead students to practical uses of writing in a variety of occupations and art forms.

One Response: Broaden Expos

In the English Department at Brown University, as at other liberal arts colleges and universities, we have moved from the limiting definitions of conventional composition programs to the implied expansiveness of an expository writing program, based on the Harvard model, but tweaked to the demands of our school culture. At Brown, with its adamant rejection of mandatory courses outside a student's concentration and its privileging of creative independence, the Expository Writing Program was constructed as a small but deep cluster of nonfiction courses which

could move the self-selected student from sophisticated academic reading and writing courses to the disciplines of journalism and creative nonfiction. The common pedagogy of these courses–all taught by active writers—is to train students to craft engaging, intelligent stories of life and intellectual journey which analyze, instruct, and persuade a general as well as scholarly audience.

Now English concentrators can "focus" in Expository Writing–taking advanced writing workshops in persuasive academic essay, journalism, and creative nonfiction. They can write an honors thesis of collected academic essays or feature articles, a collection of prose poems or memoirs, a biography or critical analysis of the evolving field of creative nonfiction. The official marriage of nonfiction story-telling with academic analysis in English is becoming consummated through Expos. Students who had not considered a writing course before are showing up, and some are looking at the possibility of an English concentration with new interest. Some have already tried fiction, poetry, or drama workshops in the Creative Writing Program, transforming their facts into imaginative artfulness; now they want to tell nonfiction stories, because as Sven Birkerts reminded us awhile ago, "what happens in the world ... is far more unlikely and interesting than what a novelist can invent" (*Chronicle*, A12).

Our most popular courses are in Creative Nonfiction. Each section follows the inclination and publishing interests of its instructor–travel narrative, memoir, prose poetry, literary journalism, science writing, and historical narrative. In our pedagogy, each of us carries the elements of the essay into the elements of narrative. We ask, "What is the motive? What evidence is needed? What's the story? How do you complicate it? How do you structure it? How does it cohere? So what?" As Robert Root asserted in the *College English* issue dedicated to creative nonfiction in January, 2003, "I think nonfiction is more intimately linked with composition than we usually acknowledge—composition and nonfiction are often one and the same..." (253).

A Way In: One Course

My design of an advanced creative nonfiction course mirrored my own journey as a writer—from literary journalism to historical narrative to memoir. I wanted students to see as I had that a more complex understanding of memoir comes after a writer has stepped back, seen one's life as journalism—needing interviews, varied points of view, in order to become fair and balanced; and as history–with texts and gaps that need secondary research to verify and contextualize. In fact, historical narrative seemed to me a crucial link between writing about living subjects (journalism) and writing about oneself (memoir). Journalism teaches students how to "read" interviews with live subjects; memoir teaches students how to "read" memory as primary source. Historical narrative is the one form of nonfiction that depends upon texts such as archival letters, journals, and newspaper stories to tell its story. It is the true bridge from the scholarly methodology of critical reading/writing courses to writing stories for and about the world.

Finding readings for us to emulate proved interesting. To date, creative nonfiction textbooks concentrate on personal essay and memoir with some space given to literary journalism. But, except for Gay Talese's and Barbara Lounsberry's *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality*, no collection offers historical narrative. So I turned to *Smithsonian Magazine*, the *New Yorker* and *American History* magazines, and the occasional historical narrative in *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair*.

I lead students through literary journalism first so they can step back from their own lives and textbooks and learn quickly what a difficult task it is to tell someone else's story without damaging it with presumptions, poor listening skills, or misuse of language. They learn the protocols of interviewing, listening, note-taking, reviewing, selecting quotes, paraphrasing, attributing, gleaning narrative line, and interpreting "so what" in the stories of others' lives. They must get formal permissions, clarify intentions and questions, and learn how hard it is to report fairly and accurately. They come from courses in which they are

often encouraged to make first draft judgments and to validate their own spin. I use the ideals of good journalism to teach them to back off, to stop judging so recklessly, and to let the story come to them. This is very difficult for some. They want desperately to spin the evidence according to the assumptions that have served them so well in smart social discourse.

But they do learn to slow down and become Emersonian eyeballs, absorbing all details, and walking recorders, hearing how speech works. Through in-the-field practice, taking notes and recording, they discover how having the pen in their hand makes them listen better; and how to take notes more accurately and faster. They learn to judge and asterisk key quotes as they note them, so when they go back to the recording later, they have an asterisked map in their notes to lead them to the right spot of recording. When they finally listen to the best quotes recorded, they learn how quickly the ear and memory can distort someone else's words in their notes, and thus why verification is crucial to fairness. They learn how a fact is different from an opinion, that a fact is only a fact if it can be corroborated at least twice, that all opinions or alleged information must be attributed. They keep careful notes of sources, contact numbers, web sites, and possible further sources.

For inspiration students study an excerpt from Tracy Kidder's *House* in Talese and Lounsberry's anthology, focusing on how psychological tensions between subjects/characters can drive a plotline. Mark Levine's "The Juggler" shows them a profile-driven narrative; Paul Fussell's "Indy" shows them an anthropological journey into a community and cultural phenomenon. In each piece students infer the sources: observation, handbooks, reviews, interviews, experts, key players, rituals, objects. And they see how writers structure parts of their narratives–using classification/division categories, analysis of status life details, analogies to other art forms or scientific definitions, conflicting media views.

Students read "Dangerous Liaisons" from the archives of the *Columbia Journalism Review* to hear a variety of journalists talk about

ways to handle the sacred trust between subject and writer. Is the journalist a con artist? A translator? An interpreter? When/why do you not/use certain material? As Tracy Kidder said to our students in a lecture, "There are some things people don't want revealed about them and you realize that you really do not need that for your book or article."

Students learn what the Ws are and where to place the "nut graph" so the reader knows who, what, where, when, why, and how quickly. They learn to cut their "I" out because it's already implied, and to just report the crucial facts through 3rd person observation. As Root reminds his students of personal and academic writing, "personal presence is not measured by the degree of the writer's visibility on the page but by the guiding sensibility behind the writing" (253). Or, as Kidder told my students, "I try not to write down what I think or feel. I want to know what things smell like and what people say....It took me a while to realize the last person on earth I was likely to write honestly about was myself." Likewise, he reminded them, it's never interesting to write "My Journey Into Something....There is nothing interesting in the story of how an ignorant person became less ignorant about a subject." The subject itself is what's interesting, so get TO it.

As students sharpen their sense of what is the story and why is it important or interesting to someone other than themselves (ie., so what?), they learn to spot their own prejudice: "He had to face a childhood dominated by a 'stay-at-home' mom," one student wrote. "To face"? "dominated"? Why the quotes on stay-at-home? Did the subject offer specific evidence that proved something negative happened? If so, SHOW the details! Was there proof that staying at home with one's child was responsible for some kind of negative experience? Again, if there's evidence, SHOW it precisely. Also, let the SUBJECT make the judgement on his experience, not the writer. Finally, how is this key to your sense of the story?

In a month's time, students get to write three installments and two full drafts. With each fresh piece of writing they get new

readers in class; and, after I read the writing, I pull examples from pages to show the variety of challenges each writer is facing. In the initial stages, we're asking, "Why are we here? Where is the story? What hook, conflict, or mystery drives our interest? What are the layers?" By the final draft we are weaning sentences of lazy chaff: "Robin is a blonde of a very small build." → Robin is a small blonde → Robin, a small blonde, [ACTIVE verb!]. And we follow Joan Didion's dictum: think of every phrase as part of a picture:

> To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. (as quoted in Talese & Lounsberry, 76)

When they hand in the final draft, even though they have created a fuller story than they have written before, students want more time for more drafts. They truly understand that as Tracy Kidder said, "rewriting is the whole thing." In fact, he writes ten or twelve drafts a book. As he explained,

> I don't know that I think about much of anything until I start to write. I don't know what scenes and what characters are going to be in there....Sometimes you have to start over again and consider that the rough draft has taught you any number of things. One is what you did not want to write about and how wrong you were about the subject that you

> were dealing with....I don't know any other department of life where you can say something and take it back and say it better before anyone else has to hear it. (Lecture)

By the time students get to historical narrative, they have learned that to know a life and to report it fairly is a complex challenge. But at least in journalism they could return to a subject, ask for clarifications or corrections. Now they face the challenge of recreating lives long gone, often without living sources to help. They visit the local historical archives (Rhode Island) and the college archives (Brown). Manuscript caretakers show the students directories, encyclopedias, institutional papers, letters, diaries, oral histories, and photographs. They show them how to find records of births, marriages, deaths, residences, jobs held, who built which building, where the stones came from, when a family came from where, and so on.

The students choose a story – Pearl Harbor as remembered in a Rhode Islander's detailed diary; a portrait of the young Charlotte Perkins Gilman as revealed in letters to her teenage friend Martha in Providence; the story of the "Suicide Pill" controversy at Brown during the 1980s' fear of nuclear war. After students select an event, day, person, friendship or relationship to narrate, they immerse themselves in primary and secondary sources to glean details of the people, their place, and their era.

To understand how to select and shape, besides reading historical narratives in magazines, students read excerpts in Talese and Lounsberry—John Hersey's "Hiroshima" to study simultaneous narration; Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List* to see how scene can be gleaned from the generalized memories found in interviews; Talese's "Rats on the Waterfront" to see how historical and encyclopedic information can blend with well-elicited oral history.

For background research students find newspaper stories on microfilm in the archives of the public library, photographs in books and archives, encyclopedic reports, biographies and

histories of the era. In their drafts once again students face overwhelming notes and must stand back, see the big picture around the discrete event or day or relationship, and narrate the story with scene and characters based on provable fact. As they start to visualize their story, the questions they wrestle with are clear and immediate:

- When the memory of an actual person and a newspaper article or document conflict in content, what do you do? (Try to corroborate both; if one doesn't become more valid, cite both views.)
- How much of your own projection can you put in to the description? (You can intelligently guess the weather on a September day in R.I., but you can't guess if someone was in love. Find some evidence about crucial facts of a subject's life.)
- How do you give texture to a scene or event when you have only one diary or one person's account of what happened? (Use secondary sources for generalizable details of setting, morays, era-specific status life details.)
- How concerned must you be with citing when you're trying to shape artful narrative? (Weave attributions into narrative sentences when source is a crucial part of story. Keep careful bibliographical notes, including pagination of all quotes used; create a Bibliography.)

We begin each class/workshop with reports from the field. Students eagerly or resignedly offer anecdotes about research or questions about how to write from so little or so much material. Their peers usually jump in with parallel problems, related questions, or helpful experiences of their own. I play Editor-in-Chief with suggestions and resources, but the writers have often found their own ways through problems–particularly on using the internet, sometimes beyond my experience.

In class discussion and peer editing groups we address the ethical and creative problems of rendering someone else's life; how to corroborate when most witnesses are dead; how to know if a person's views were typical or not in an era; how to decide which material is important or not; how to define a story-line. If they can't find crucial information, they learn when is it OK to use the language of possibility–probably, may have, most likely—to show this is a moment of intelligent speculation. In structuring, they learn when they should move quickly through the broad sweep, when to zoom in for the close-up and slow down, when to comment, and when to let the facts speak for themselves.

In historical narrative the lessons of fiction exercises can be instructive. When researching a story of a witch-scare in a 17th century Massachusetts town, one student writer visited the still-standing house where the accused girl had lived. In one draft he wrote out the prosaic visuals of the house: the stairs in the entry hall, the huge fireplace in the sitting room to the left, the dining room to the right, the low ceilings, and the wide floorboards. In the final draft, the visuals became subtle images intertwined with the story-line.

As writers, students edit their peers, learning from their reading experience of others' stories what questions to ask of their own writing. Where is it unclear, confusing? Where does the narrative leave open questions? Are the journalistic Ws—who, what, when, were, how, why—covered early enough? Is the "so what" set up quickly and then deepened through genuine questions about the story as it is revealed? Where is it most engaging? What is working well? As drafts evolve, is the prose becoming tighter, more active, condensed so that every phrase is a new picture?

By the time students move to memoir, they are ready to see that good story telling does not leap full blown from smart sensibility and easy tongue, but from hours of careful research, thinking, drafting, revising, and fact checking. Now they turn to their own life as a text, a document, a person they must understand better through interviews they must conduct with the detachment of a journalist and through documents they must find

with the research skill of an historian. They can begin with a memory. But they must interview others involved to gain their version of the same memory or time. They must find any relevant primary documents – journals, letters, newspaper stories of the day, song lyrics, and others' papers, and use them either in quotes or as background understanding to tell a story from life that does not spring fully from one's own head.

In Talese and Lounsberry students read excerpts from Frank Conroy's *Stop-time* to see how an older narrator can comment upon the child's scene and Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life* to study how to see from inside the mind of the child. They read James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" to see how to turn personal experience into complex cultural analysis and Alice Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self" to see how to structure around snapshots cohered by one crucial story-line of a life. In Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" they see how one image can be revisited by the memory in four different ways as the mind tries to grapple with what actually happened, if it did, and if that even matters. O'Brien's stories ask, "What is happening fact and what is heart truth? And which is more important?" This is perhaps the students' favorite philosophical and writerly challenge. O'Brien's central question gets at the problem at the heart of all good story-telling and all worthy scholarly analysis.

This approach to memoir is interesting and novel for some students, scary and frustrating for others. Some discover that another person's version of their own story is actually the more resonant tale to tell. Others decide the simultaneous narration of several versions becomes the closest they can get to the elusive truth. Most discover why metaphor, simile, or analogy are crucial for helping to articulate complicated moments. They all discover how slippery the memory is, how true complexity comes from genuinely understanding another point of view, and how narrative gets better the more layers of evidence it involves. These are lessons that make them better critical thinkers as well as more astute and engaging story-tellers. By the end some have articles

they can publish or which can help in job applications. All have learned first-hand how to think more fairly and accurately about individuals, their places, their eras, and the texts they left behind.

Joining the Conversation

Scholes asked: "How can we put students in touch with a useable cultural past? And, how can we help students attain an active relationship with the cultural present?" (104). This kind of course in expository writing programs is one response. Any creative nonfiction course helps the apprentice see how academic writing can move logically to a nonfiction writer's life. As Nancy Sommers said, "I want my students to know what writers know – [...] I want my students to know how to bring their life and their writing together." Robert Root notes that we see creative nonfiction not only in specialized journals – *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Creative Nonfiction*, but in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, *Harper's* and a wide range of more specialized magazines. In recent issues, he says, he saw pieces that were not far removed, "except for expertise in craft, from the kind of writing [his] students do in [his] First-year Composition or Seminar in Writing Nonfiction courses." This point is crucial. Root asks: "If this is the kind of writing that's out there, that people write now, why aren't we encouraging our students not simply to read it but to write it—to be apprentice nonfictionists, preparing to join the conversation?" (255).

Early signs in our broadening Expos program at Brown show students are hungry for Root's kind of vision. Of the 3612 students who took courses in the English Department in 2003-2004, 23% came for Expository Writing courses. This was only the third year that Expos was offered as one of nine possible focus areas in the English concentration, and 20% of the class of 2005 English concentrators chose Expos as their focus. In 2001-2002 there was one inaugural honors thesis; in 2003-2004 seven students wrote honors projects in Expository Writing. Seizing the opportunity to be an apprentice nonfictionist in a serious way, not

just in a course or two, so far seems an encouraging student response to both Scholes' and Root's concerns. The demand seems only to grow.

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