

TEACHING WRITING IN THE '80s: CONVERSATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

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From a keynote address at the 1st annual
Indiana Teachers of Writing Conference

I am delighted to be here at the first annual conference of the Indiana Teachers of Writing, a conference that by its very existence sends a message: "We're all in this together." As Ron Strahl said in a local newspaper article, this conference is designed to "nurture the seeds of unity in the profession." The teaching of writing — education in a broad and inclusive cultural literacy — is the responsibility of every teacher of every subject across, up and down the curriculum, from grade school through grad school.

Let me give you all a word association test right now. I'll say a word and then you say to yourself the first word that comes to your mind. Ready? *Writing*. How many of you thought *problem?* *crisis?* The general public does.

We know that the teaching of writing is not a problem but an opportunity — an opportunity for us to involve students more actively in their learning. When students write, they cannot passively observe us as if we were figures on a TV screen. Writing rivets students' attention. One of my colleagues in psychology has told me of a study that shows that

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in the typical college classroom every 30 seconds someone is thinking of sex. Writing helps people learn because it keeps the mind from wandering.

Writing is not the problem. The problem is fragmentation, disconnection, and territoriality in education. That fragmentation is manifest first of all in the finger pointing and buck passing that we teachers engage in. Some college teachers refuse to take responsibility for "the writing problem" because it is really the responsibility of the secondary schools. Some secondary teachers also yearning to teach in the rarefied air of pure literacy content, point to the elementary teachers. Some elementary teachers blame parents, and parents blame TV. One marvelous feature of this meeting is that it's impolite to point fingers when we're all having lunch together. Those finger-pointers back home should remember that it's almost impossible to write when you are pointing your finger.

Fragmentation affects our curriculum as well as our interpersonal relations, and as a result students may learn all the wrong things. They may learn that segments within a single class session often have little to do with each other. I once observed a forty minute high school English class during which the students did workbook exercises on subject/verb agreement, saw a short film on interjections, and listened to an oral report on how to bake a cake. From that kind of episodic structure, students learn to dissociate the activities in one classroom from the experiences in the next. They learn that what goes on in a history class has nothing to do with what goes on in an English class, that what goes on in high school has little to do with what goes on in college, and that what goes on during their school years has little to do with anything important.

We need to make vital connections. The participants at the NEH/Beaver College summer institute gave me a T-shirt this summer with my favorite epigraph, from E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, "Only connect."

The motto of this first conference of the Indiana Teachers of Writing could also be "Only Connect." I'm pleased to be speaking near the conclusion of this conference because my place on the program gives me a chance to make some connections. What have we learned from all the formal presentations and from all the good informal talk over lunch, dinner and cocktails? I think we have learned that all of us who see ourselves as writing teachers have a

great deal in common. We are no longer, as Francis Christensen said 15 years ago, merely expecting our captive charges to write; we are trying to teach them. In order to do so, we have been looking closely at what writers actually do. George Plimpton's *Paris Review* series, *Writers At Work*, has been a key document for many of us. How do writers behave? Can we generalize about their behavior? First of all, professional writers write regularly — every day in most cases. Writing is a natural part of their thinking processes. They make false starts; they take risks; they hear the right voices; they ask the right questions. They learn to view their work objectively enough to rewrite what needs to be rewritten and to let alone what needs to be let alone. When they feel themselves losing that objectivity, they show their work to friends.

We are beginning to make use of these practices in our writing classes. We are asking students to write more, but we are grading fewer papers. We are teaching the difference between private and public writing. We are distinguishing between practice and performance in the writing class. Who would ever learn to play the piano if the only time you practiced was when you were performing for a teacher? (My daughter tried this method. It didn't work.) If writing students write only when they are performing for a teacher and the teacher then points out the errors to avoid, the student will learn to avoid error by the most efficient means possible — by avoiding writing. My daughter now avoids the piano.

In our writing classes today we try not to teach strictly by error avoidance, while we still try to convey to students that on finished papers, as Shaughnessy says, "Errors carry messages which writers can't afford to send." We are able to see that many papers that we thought were poor are really unfinished. We know that it is our job to help our students find the means of completing the papers that should be finished and to have the wit to abandon the projects that should never come to light. Along with our students, we are rediscovering the value of false starts.

We are encouraging students to comment on each other's work in progress and to acknowledge that help. With the assignment of an acknowledgments page, writing can be less lonely while still remaining individual.

We are teaching students to learn from each other, to learn from their own false starts, to learn from writing. And, of course, the connection between writing and learning is

the key to persuading our colleagues outside the English department to join in our effort to teach our students how writers behave. Our colleagues want to hear how writing can help to teach their courses — psychology, biology. Writing across the curriculum does not mean that English teachers become ersatz biologists and that biologists become ersatz English teachers. We need to communicate while retaining the integrity of our identities.

Our colleagues in other disciplines also need to hear from us that writers are not only those who publish novels. In fact, most writers will never publish anything at all. Writers are people who write, and writing is the sign and the advantage of the educated person. Our colleagues in science and in social studies may be more willing to join in a comprehensive writing program if we can allay their own fears about themselves as writers. Many of them, we must remember, were frightened during their formative years by a well meaning English teacher who wanted them to identify gerunds and also to put flair and flavor into their lab reports.

Those of you who teach on the elementary level have been teaching writing across the curriculum for a long time. *You* are the curriculum in your classes, and you have always done a good job of integrating writing with other subjects. Now that we are giving particular attention to writing across the curriculum, some instructors are making special efforts to make writing an inevitable part of every teaching and learning day.

On the secondary level writing across the curriculum is more difficult to bring about. What can you say to your colleagues? Writing is difficult. It's difficult even for English teachers. We all struggle. Learning to write is a life-long task. Students need practice in every course, and writing can help them to learn in every course. More writing for students does not necessarily mean more grading for teachers. It is the threat of the paper load that has killed many writing across the curriculum programs. We have to remind our colleagues that writing across the curriculum does not mean necessarily more term papers across the curriculum. Teachers in all subjects can, as Mina Shaughnessy says, "encourage in countless ways the habit of writing things down (but not necessarily "up") as finished products." Perhaps then we'll fulfill Ron Strahl's vision of a continuing approach to writing that is begun when that 3 or 4 year old grabs a

pencil and is practiced in every course in school, not just in the English class.

So we have all gained sustenance at this conference from hearing that we have developed common definitions of writing and of writing across the curriculum. I think that we also have discovered that we share some lingering anxieties. Now that we have shaken off the old, unexamined roles, how exactly do we plan the new ones? We know that we are not our students' proofreaders, editors, or co-authors. But how can we more effectively play the appropriate role of teachers? How can we comment on a student's draft so that the writer can see a new way of proceeding? If teachers in all disciplines are now teaching writing across the curriculum, what is the particular role of the English teacher? And how do we keep ourselves from falling back into our own old habits of teaching? We know that there is no single right way to teach writing, and that, despite all the common ground we now share, we are still evolving our own particular right ways. The difference between what we are doing now and what many of us were doing ten to fifteen years ago is that we are now thinking logically and systematically about our composition teaching. We have become scholars of composition.

At this conference we have not been hearing the latest catch phrases and fads in the teaching of writing. We have been participating in the creation of a new paradigm — one that helps us to connect with our students' processes of learning and with our colleagues' processes of teaching their disciplines.

