FROM PREWRITING TO WRITING: BRIDGING THE GAP

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When faced with the overwhelming task of teaching writing to people who do not write, many teachers despair at the chore assigned to them. For years the popular procedure was to present to the students a clearly definable and delineated model of writing, along with accompanying "How to" directions. What emerged from this approach were several models and rather artificial, arbitrary "rules" about writing, rules which lacked in creativity what they served in utility. Thus the writing teacher assured himself that he was equipping his students with the utensils needed for successful academic writing: anthologized models to imitate and an accompanying set of serving platters in the form of caveats about appropriate tone, structures, diction, and so on.

Yet to the disgruntlement and frustration of many teachers of composition, this approach — the product approach — has not been working. Rather than stimulating their students with a workable pattern for composing and expressing ideas in writing, the teachers have found themselves inundated with lifeless, often repetitious and uninspired pieces of writing. While the students obviously are not idiots, their discomfort with the expression of ideas in a written mode has caused them to use the product patterns at best unimaginatively. To rectify this situation, many concerned composition thinkers have now taken a "process approach" to writing. That approach downplays the idea of "correctness" implicit in the product model while it encourages the writers to explore their minds, feelings, and options as writers. These teachers use the process for primarily two purposes: to allow the student to discover what he wants

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to say as he writes and then to select that form or mode of writing that best suits his purpose. In short, the students explore by writing. Many of the activities of the process approach, such as journal keeping, free-writing, brainstorming and other prewriting activities, have as their philosophical justification this "getting at" ideas germinating in the students' heads.

While the process approach to writing makes particular sense in dealing with uneasy or inexperienced writers, those who are reluctant to put pen to paper, as a teaching technique it lacks the form and structure that the product approach provides. Often what develops is a huge chasm that separates the prewriting and writing steps of the process. What I would like to do in this paper is to explore this gap and perhaps to offer suggestions of ways to at least narrow it.

The focus of concern in this paper is the students who do not write well and who further feel uncomfortable and incompetent writing, Mina Shaughnessy's BWs (basic writers).[1] People accustomed to using writing as an acceptable and natural means of communicating will not suffer the same pangs of transference of thought to paper as those who consider writing preferable only to terminal illness or taxes. Specifically, the student writings that I will use in this paper come from selected BW students in two Fundamentals of English classes at IUPUI. Many of the questions that the paper poses have evolved from the same source. In some strange way, perhaps the feelings of frustration and even failure that these classes have induced in me can contribute to a better teaching philosophy and methodology in the future.

The "process" rhetoric thinkers firmly believe that only through writing can students learn to write. Rather than exhorting their students to "know what you want to say and then say it," the process people advise their students to "write." One of the favorite techniques is freewriting: instructed to write on anything that comes to mind, the students are advised to keep their pencils moving for ten minutes, not to pause or reconsider, even if that means writing "I don't know what to say" repeatedly. Peter Elbow, in his book *Writing With Power*,[2] advocates this technique as a way to break through the daily constraints that inhibit writing, as a method to get at topics and as a method to improve writ-

ing, for, he maintains, "freewriting also brings a surface coherence to your writing and it does so immediately."[3] Elbow elaborates on his system of freewriting in what he calls his Open-ended Writing and Loop Writing processes, both of which depend on this freewheeling, undirected original writing, but which then are modified by analysis of what ideas dominate the writing, of what the "center of gravity points" of the writing are.[4]

Often the freewriting exercises do indeed reveal both a fertile stock of ideas and the surface coherence Elbow perceives. For example, on the first day of my class, I asked my students to freewrite, with no further instructions than to keep the pens moving for ten minutes. One student wrote:

> I really don't understand how I didn't pass into W131. I took English all the way through high school and I even took Senior English. I made good grades all through those four years and I feel really stupid. My feelings right now are very frustrating. I feel angry at myself and depressed. I feel better now since I have gotten this anger out of my body. Feeling emotion in a group is very embarrassing. I just feel like I could cry . . .

Two perceptions stand out: her finding that the writing has acted as a catharsis for her and her realizing the difficulty of "feeling emotion in a group." Such insights appear as evidenced by what another student writes:

> I am sick and tired of everyone telling me what to do. It wouldn't be so bad if they all agreed on one thing but I have my mother telling me not to get a job, my Dad and boyfriend to get a job. My grandfather thinks I can't do any good in school unless I stay home every minute of the day. He and my mother sound like they will disown me if I don't do well in school. God how depressing! How am I suppose to please everyone? The only way to do this is to make myself miserable. Something to look forward too, isn't it? Growing up is such a pain. In a way I wish I could skip all this trouble and let it just be over with!

In both of these selections an objective reader can target the conflicts and intuitions that the students are experiencing; *what is less apparent is if students themselves can identify them.* This identification, the actual, honest revelation or self-revelation is, of course, crucial to the next step in the writing process.

The journals that the students keep also provide a ready-made storehouse of germinating ideas and potential topics for exploration. Once more, startling and honest accountings of personal feelings stand out, as in this mid-semester journal entry from a male student:

> I've been feeling guilty lately because I've been going out with Ken while Bee is at work. The reason I'm feeling guilty is because I won't

let her go out with her friends. So I tried to break-up with her because it wasn't fair. That's just the way I am. I asked for my class ring back also she has been wearing it around her neck for 3½ months. She cried and then that upset me. I must be an ass or something. Because I love her, but I get tired of not being able to see her that much, and going to see her at work its getting boreing. As I was leaving she hugged me and told me not to give that ring to anyone that she wanted it back. So I gave it to her. I can't break up with her. We talked it all out but we still need to work things out. But she said she could live with my going out and me not letting her. She is also going to try not to get mad or upset when I do. I know we can try to work it out, but its going to take time. And I think I am finally starting to trust her a little more. She said she needs me and I think she does or she wouldn't fight so hard to hang on to what we have. We're going to get married someday. I can feel it!

The above passage, full of conflict, unresolved feelings, uneasiness, seems ripe material for a composition. As the uninvited reader of someone else's journal, I am intrigued by the situation and genuinely interested *through* the student's writing. Yet again the question arises: is the material ripe for the student involved or only for his older, more experienced, and duly primed English teacher? Where I can identify many avenues to explore from this journal entry, can the student identify any? And even if he can, does he know what to do with the growing topic he has his hands on?

In order to help the students through this stage of honing in on the "center of gravity" points, the teacher takes an active role in underlining crucial statements, making appropriate marginal comments, asking leading questions, all the while trying to emphasize the writer's personal choices intrinsic in selecting a topic and in treating it. As devices to help the students generate as much information as possible about a topic (Elbow insists a person is not ready to write until he has *too much* information to use), the concepts of brainstorming, free associating — to use D'Angelo's term, probing the subject[5] — are presented. In addition to these techniques, the teacher can introduce the practice of cubing, created by Cowan and Cowan in their book *Writing*.[6]

For each side of a "cube" of a topic, the students must write from three to five minutes, progressively describing, comparing, associating, analyzing, applying, and arguing for or against the topic they have in mind. Once again, the hope is that from all the information generated from this procedure, the students' primary interests in and feelings toward the topic will emerge, thus helping them over the "I

have nothing to say" or "I don't know how to start" hurdle that writers so often experience. Cubing sets up a data pool. The point is *not* to use all of the data that come out but to pick and choose the data that most appeal to the writer.

At this juncture in the writing process, the BW instructor has introduced his classes as effectively as he can to the crucial *prewriting* steps, all the while attempting to explain these steps as a dynamic process leading to an eventual product. By definition, many of these procedures are egocentric; they lead at first to what Linda Flower calls "writer-based prose," meaning that they concentrate on the "me-ness" of the experiences and impressions that the writer is investigating.[7] Unlike the product models which emphasize an immediate, third-person treatment of a subject, these process exercises allow — even invite — the first-person orientation because their purpose is to let ideas and impressions flow, those personal ideas and impressions shaped by personal experiences and situations. Once the students have permitted themselves the luxury of self-indulgence, they have details from which to build a piece of writing. Only when that piece begins to develop do the students need to worry about a "writer-based" orientation.

At this point in the writing process I experienced a disappointing lag in the students' performance with what my expectations of that performance had been. Somehow many students, even those whose freewriting and journal assignments contained meaty passages, revealed a constraint in this more formalized prewriting exercise. For example, on the description side of the cube, the old buzz words began to appear: one student, very interested in basketball, described it this way:

> Fun, fast, hard work, relaxing, see old friends, a popular sport, good exercise, challenging, rewarding, easy to learn, one ball and two baskets, sunny day, school activity, girl's and guy's play it.

Somehow the concrete, physical description words never appear in this description even though the writing itself has some glimmering ideas. The same kind of dilemma appears on the analysis side of a cube of friendship where another student writes:

> Friendship can be broken down into parts, such as, loyalty, honesty, truth, love, anger, happiness, sharing, and advice. All these things intertwine with one another. Every word represents and backs up the other. Anger is a very important part. Everyone gets angry and I believe that makes your relationship stronger and more personal.

Again, this passage, although it does not lend itself to a strong analytical paper because of the heavy reliance on the abstract words, has promising intuition. Yet the paradox is that the ultimate goal is to produce writing with applied intuition, with controlled intuition. Unfortunately that self-revelation necessary to that step frequently does not occur. It is at this juncture that the teacher of the process approach faces his greatest challenge.

The next step in this evolutionary process of writing is to sort through the data that the prewriting activities have spawned and to put those data in some kind of order. In an effort to maintain the flow of creativity, to not yet pigeon-hole the BW writers into a structured product, our IUPUI remedial course provides a step called "Chunking." Chunking is writing focused on one subject, on one idea, with the emphasis not on the formalized structure of a paragraph, but rather on the way ideas flow.[8] Often a chunk contains more than one "topic sentence," but with the emphasis of the assignment on the natural merging of ideas, neither the instructor nor the students need to worry about the traditional structure of a paragraph or of multiple paragraphs yet. Theoretically Chunking follows cubing in an entirely sensible order; unfortunately, even with the rather under-stated instructions about the procedures, students seem to become self-conscious and restrained as they write the chunks. The following chunk evolved from the previously quoted student's cube on friendship:

> The best thing about a true friend is the friendship being shared. Friendship consists of being loyal and honest in all discussions and arguments you may have. A friend is someone a person can tell all their innermost secrets to. Everyone experiences having a best friend at some point in their life. Friendship not only exsist between people but also people and imaginary friends. Some people charish an imaginary friendships just as much as you and I would charish a friendship between our friends. I appreciate my friends so much. They have contributed many happy memories I will never forget. Although I don't see my friends as much as I used to, my friendship with them will never die.

Even within the amorphous boundaries of a "chunk" assignment, potential problems for a satisfactory final product are surfacing: lack of specificity, lack of concrete detail, reliance on trite ideas and cliché. What happened to the idea that emerged from the cube that anger is beneficial for friendship? Why has the student chosen the safe path — the path

that leads to dull and uninspired writing? And how does the instructor redirect this student?

Chunks lend themselves to a discussion of the formal writing structures of the paragraph and the composition. As the students review their evaluated chunks, the instructor leads a discussion about limited subject and resulting topic sentences with appropriate supports, thus continually building the bridge between the prewriting and the writing stages. Probably the instructor has pointed out in the marginal comments the possible topic sentences that have appeared in the chunk. For instance, in the above example, I numbered four sentences with the comment that I saw these sentences as possible avenues of exploration. Next to the student's sentence about imaginary friendships, I wrote: "Here's a really interesting point, Cindy. Can you go with it?" The following first draft paragraph resulted:

> Friendship not only exists between people, but also people and imaginary friends. Some people cherish an imaginary friendship just as much as you or I would cherish a friendship. An imaginary friend would be someone you could totally trust. To tell your innermost secrets to and not worry about anyone else finding out. An imaginary friend would be someone you could cherish because he would always be truthful, honest and he would always be there when you needed him.

After reading that paragraph, I felt that perhaps rather than finding her own inspiration and insight in pursuing this topic, Cindy had chosen to write on it only to satisfy me. Although in my marginal comments, I apologized if I had buttonholed her into a topic, she chose to revise the paragraph. Her finished product follows:

> Friendship not only exists between people, but also people and imaginary friends. Adults as well as children have imaginary friendships. People make these imaginary friendships fit their wants and needs. One cannot mold a human friend to his need of comfort and want of agreement, but one can mold an imaginary friend. Although imaginary friends only exist in the mind, they can still be cherished for their companionship and truthfulness.

The paragraph depends on too much generalization, repeats its point, and altogether lacks vitality. Certainly the student's attempt at creating an adequate paragraph structure is there; she has attempted a topic sentence (although it itself lacks strength) and has tried to support her assertion. Yet the voice, that of the writer's essential, unique self, is quickly fading. What has happened?

This retreat of the writer from her most interesting no-

tions is not peculiar to the student whose papers I have concentrated on in this essay; it is a typical regression. As the assignments become more structured, the students tend to resist their own impulses and revert to the automatic responses that have served them so poorly in the past. (I will not detail the composition writing, as the damage I am investigating has already been done at the paragraph stage.) A conscientious teacher must analyze this reversion and evaluate both his part and his students' parts in it. Where does the process fail? What can the instructor do to prevent such failure?

To begin, two thoughts come to mind. First, the humanistic underpinnings of the process approach are hard to refute without sounding like an unfeeling intellectual snob. Insisting that all people have thoughts, intuitions, feelings worthy of paper and audience, the process thinkers belittle the externally structured approach to the teaching of writing and concentrate on communicating through this dynamic on-going process. Hence, they heavily emphasize the prewriting techniques. And they are very often right: from their unstructured writings, the students emerge as sensitive, inquiring people, struggling just like everyone else to make sense out of their lives.

However, intuition and communication are two distinctly different concepts, and the step of bridging that gap is often not as easy or as natural as the process people may lead us to believe. Only students who are willing and able to look at their writing and themselves objectively can come to the self-revelation that a writer must possess, and often the BWs of the remedial class have not reached that stage of maturity or self-awareness yet. One wonders if the boy whose journal entry screams confused and conflicting feelings about his girlfriend realizes his own despair. One wonders if he knows himself enough, trusts himself enough, to pursue his feelings and more specifically, to pursue them on paper. Now the teacher of writing finds his role getting complicated; he must act as a counselor, a motivator, to encourage honest thought and self-evaluation, as he also teaches appropriate structure.

This concept of structure is the second issue that comes to mind in trying to evaluate the problems that the BWs face as they leap from prewriting to writing, for formal writing demands it. Process leads to product, and ultimately all writers must worry about their product. For writers just find-

ing their own voices and feelings, the transference of those discoveries to a written product becomes an enormous obstacle. Suddenly they must say what they are saying with embellishments such as topic sentences, appropriately ordered supports, useful transitions, coherent, active sentences. Magic numbers begin appearing, particularly the number three, as in "Give your reader three reasons that you make the statement that you do in your topic sentence." No wonder panic sets in, with its accompanying defense mechanism, retreat. No wonder the student who all semester long has written journal entries and freewritings on the pangs of growing up abandons all hope and writes a composition on why abortions should be outlawed.

These two thoughts, that the students must come to terms with themselves as potential writers and that the structure of writing must not intimidate them, lead me to a rethinking of the BW methodology. I agree with Harvey Wiener that perhaps one of the best prewriting activities that an instructor can teach his students is talking.[9] The BWs must use both spoken and written word (interpreted and expanded through speech) in order to build a sensitivity and to see a usefulness for language. If the students can see writing as shared thoughts, experiences, conflicts, motivations, as indeed, communication, then perhaps they will not view their writing exercises so much in isolation. Shared journal entries, freewritings, and chunks can only underscore the common human experience that writing is about. And as the students perceive themselves as writers sharing through writing, the leap from the egocentricity of their own scribblings to the necessary detachment of the reader-based writer may seem less mysterious than it does now.

Such an approach does not neglect structure; rather it encourages it, but in a different way. Wiener's suggestions in *The Writing Room* are sound. Instead of free-floating directions to pick a topic from the freewriting or journal to pursue, he leads his classes through rather specific assignments. His classes even learn three specific modes of paragraph development, description, narration, and enumeration, under his direct though not dictatorial guidance. Perhaps IUPUI's course with its de-emphasis on telling the students what to write about has really done them a disservice by putting an additional burden of choice of topic and treatment of topic on them in addition to all their other worries. A class assignment such as "Describe this room at this

moment" after suitable and significant lessons on word choice, connotation/denotation, concrete/abstract, general/specific, and topic sentence may well give their writing a sense of direction that it now often lacks. Wiener finds that because the class writing has focus from the start, the concept of structure slowly evolves as he discusses topic sentence and enforces limitations of the perimeters of the description. His insistence, for example, that his students specify in the topic sentence *at what time* they are describing the room sets useful boundaries for them, undoubtedly without an abstract 90-minute lecture on limiting the subject. Wiener's approach follows a carefully structured plan, perhaps one too structured for our purposes, but nonetheless one with great merit.

In any case, I firmly believe that BW classes should depend more on a sharing of experience. Wiener's suggestion in setting up the classroom to encourage maximum eye contact and interaction absolutely applies here. Perhaps the instructor could duplicate five or six similar journal entries he collects, all dealing with love problems, for example, and see how the students react to each other's writing. The real distance between themselves and the other writers' efforts might heighten their sensitivity; they are more likely to identify others' center of gravity sentences than they are their own, at least at first. By encouraging the students to participate in this discovery method, the teacher can hang back and play a less pontifical role in the classroom. Instead of the teacher only reacting to a chunk, for example, the students could exchange papers and identify points of interest, possible topic sentences, and centers of gravity. They could participate in asking probing questions to each other. Even a freewriting exercise based on a reaction to someone else's writing has the potentially beneficial effect of looking at the extended intention of writing as sharing. The teacher should participate in this process with his own writing. Obviously both the teacher and the students would also profit from required individual conferences at which the teacher can at least get an idea about how each student perceives himself in his writing and as a writer. He can also make personal suggestions to the students about their special concerns.

These two ideas of methodology sound contradictory, but they are only mildly so. What I am advocating is using the best that the process approach offers in combination with the unavoidable strictures/structures of the product ap-

proach. Both kinds of process writing may occur within the classroom, be they the specific, directed assignments designed around a special goal (i.e. how to generate good, concrete sensory detail and put it into a descriptive paragraph) or the looser, more intuitive freewriting or brainstorming whose goal is more abstract (discovery of ideas, ease with writing down ideas). In either case, the overriding goal is to express to the students the teacher's personal commitment to good writing as a means of *shared revelation* and communication among people. This goal never changes through all the stages of the writing process; it does acknowledge those stages and nourishes fledgling writers through them. Above all, the students must perceive their instructor and themselves as engaged in the same goal: to become communicators through the written word.

NOTES

[1]Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[2]Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[3]Elbow, p. 16.

[4]Elbow, pp. 50-77.

[5]Frank D'Angelo, *Process and Thought in Composition* (Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1980), Chapter 2.

[6]Gregory Cowan and Elizabeth Cowan, *Writing* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), pp. 21-26.

[7]Linda Flower, *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1981), Chapter 10.

[8]Unlike the "chunking" exercises of people like Frank O'Hare, exercises which are used for stylistic purposes, the program at IUPUI uses the concept as an organizational and structural device.

[9]Harvey Wiener, *The Writing Room* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 22.