COLLABORATING ON WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: A WORKSHOP WITH THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Many composition programs--both traditional and process-centered--now teach students to begin with their own topics. Nevertheless, the assigned topic and the essay-question survive, because teachers in many disciplines, including English, persist in making specific and directive assignments, often with very good reasons. Yet studies of assignments and advice on the craft of assignment-writing are too few and far between. Richard L. Larson, for example, cites two out of ninety-eight items on assignment design in a recent bibliography (1979, 196-213; see also Dowst, Walvoord, and Steinhoff). To ask students to address critical questions which our disciplines have found powerful, or to assign sequences of activities and reflection which produce awareness of our commitments, is in intent a generous and empowering act--an invitation to join us and other people in our communities. At the same time, these invitations are subject to misunderstanding, confusion, and failure. As Nancy Martin et al. express it, "What pleases the teacher . . . may not be helpful--indeed may actually impede--the understanding of his pupils" (12). In my experience, the most dangerous assignments are those which have been adopted without criticism from a teacher's memory of his or her college papers or from some other teacher's repertoire of "great assignments." The most successful are those which the teacher has imagined in terms of his or her goals for students as writers and learners--and then "de-bugged" in actual

trials with students--a slow, painstaking, and finally rewarding process, which teachers have often enacted without support from external theory or research.

Collaborative work with other teachers can accelerate this process and enrich interdisciplinary conversations about the curriculum as well. As support for such an approach to an understudied element in the teaching of writing, I'd like to report on a workshop procedure designed to focus a community of teachers on assignment-writing. (I'd like to acknowledge Carl H. Klaus' influence on this systematic procedure--and on other approaches I now use for examining assignments.) By explaining the process and describing a discussion of one assignment critiqued in it, I believe I can demonstrate 1) that the writing assignment is one variable in the writing classroom that teachers can learn to control with some precision, and 2) that collaborative discussion is a richly effective way to help shape writing assignments as better outward and visible signs of a teacher's inward and invisible intentions (i.e. the goals for student understanding and insight which he or she hopes to achieve). The process and the notion of interdisciplinary collaboration are applicable to any writing assignment (or better yet, sequences of writing assignments) in any discipline at any level of instruction, from elementary school to college. The procedure itself is new, but the approach echoes the goals of other cross disciplinary enterprises (Raimes, Weiss and Peich, Maimon and Nodine).

The participants for this illustrative workshop were, however, twenty-five secondary English, history, art, and science teachers from an NEH-funded Teachers' Institute which Professor Patricia Burnes and I directed at the University of Maine at Orono in 1982 and 1983 with important contributions from Professors Howard Schonberger (history) and David Ebitz (art). A group of this size would normally exceed the optimum for such a workshop, but the length of our collaboration and the depth of our experience together as writers and students and teachers made it possible for us to function well. In 1982, participants studied "Perspectives on American Self and Place, 1865-1900" for five weeks of intensive work, reading primary texts from literature, history and art, arranging and cataloging a museum exhibit of American art in our university's collection, and writing, writing, writing. We worked from James Britton's model of language development from the expressive matrix outward toward both "transactional" and "poetic" discourse (Britton, 94-111; Britton et al., Chapter 5). Professor Burnes and I had interwoven both the reading and writing activities to move back and forth along this continuum. Participants responded in many modes to the reading and discussions in the course, shaping and revising some pieces, using others as "ways of learning" to open questions about the next assignment.

In and out of class in this first summer, participants addressed questions we posed or they posed as characteristic of literary or historical or art-historical disciplines, exploring a number of genres peculiar to those disciplines (such as the short catalog-entry for a museum guide, or autobiographical narrative focused on an emblematic moment from childhood). We generally initiated writing about texts we read together in the "expressive" mode, for we had accepted Britton's positing of the expressive as fundamental to personal commitment and to those ways of knowing necessary to engage later "transactional" tasks such as a critical essay or a rationale for a teaching-unit.

In a follow-up year for planning and implementation of new humanities units in the participants' classrooms, Professor Burnes and I promoted such a writing-intensive model for the secondary classroom. Many teachers in the group adapted our general approach, applying it to fields as varied as creative writing, renaissance humanities, and eighth-grade science, and twenty-six teachers subsequently published reports on these units (Burnes and Nees-Hatlen). In reviewing the teaching year in our second summer, then, we had considerable variety of teaching goals, materials, and writing assignments to share and evaluate for future revisions. Although we had worked with teachers as they planned new writing assignments, our agenda for the implementation year (and their schedules) had often been too full for us to talk systematically together about specific assignments. Participants asked for time in the second summer to focus on assignments--to talk especially about their relationship to general goals and about their specific design (their rhetoric to students).

This workshop thus responded to a great deal of work already done collaboratively and apart--work we needed to reflect on as a group, work we wanted to revise (re-see) together. Although we had special support and time for our work, our needs and goals parallel those of many groups of teachers who work together--or want to work together. Because teachers from any discipline can work in such a process--no specialized knowledge or terminology is required--we recommend it especially for interdisciplinary groups. The teaching of writing need not require elaborate initiation ceremonies nor specialized courses for separate disciplines (Hamilton, 782). The only prerequisite is commitment to working with writing to empower students in our disciplines' traditional tasks. The ticket for entry would be at least one assignment and a sample of representative student papers that responded to it (without teacher grades or marks, of course). In return, teachers would receive specific critiques of their assignments. They would also, with their colleagues, confront important questions about expectations for writing in the classroom and out of it, in a context where they reflect about the rhetoric of

assignment language to students. These questions, needless to say, ought to implicate all of us all of the time.

Now, I'd like to describe one particular workshop cycle, preceded by an outline of materials and apparatus. This narrative will be, I hope, suggestive of the theoretical implications of the practical procedure.

Materials

1. Writing assignment--one copy for each workshop participant. We had files of materials from each participant, including copies of all writing assignments *in the exact language given to students* and samples of papers addressed to them--free of teacher marks. We selected three assignments and representative papers (3-6) and retyped them separately for the workshop, numbering assignments with arabic numerals.

2. Student writing samples keyed to each assignment (1.1, 1.2 . . . 2.1, 2.2, etc.), one for each participant. We selected between three and six papers both to represent a range of student responses and to help us focus the workshop. We retyped these, cross-referenced to the appropriate assignment, on a second set of handouts, which we circulated at appropriate times.

3. Copy of Procedure for each participant (see below).

Procedure

We've outlined a guide for the workshop that we hope will lead us to useful analyses of both writing assignments and student papers--and how they relate to each other. In the course of the morning, we hope to get through three sets of assignments, the first of which we're handing out now, and papers to match, which you'll be given at the appropriate time. There will be time for you to write responses for your own use and to share your ideas with other participants. The materials are yours to keep, so do take notes on them if you wish. Assignment-writers: feel free to identify yourself as we talk or remain anonymous--whichever is more comfortable to you.

1. Read the first assignment (original wording, as given to students).
2. In a sentence or two at the most, describe the essential thing that an effective paper in response to this assignment must *do*. Write this down (2-3 minutes).
3. Let's hear some of your descriptions--what do you expect the

most effective papers to do? (5 minutes for discussion).

4. Now, look at the student papers we've just passed around. They are all responses to the assignment you've just talked about.
5. Write your response: Which paper most successfully fulfills the assignment? Which paper or papers are *least* effective? (3-5 minutes).
6. Answer for yourself: Did your writing (#2) fully describe what the most effective paper you've chosen *does?* What other effective papers do? Does it describe what some of the less effective papers do? (3 minutes).
7. Let's discuss matches and mismatches between your expectations and the student papers you've read. (10 minutes).
8. If necessary, revise your answer to #2 (your statement of expectations about what an effective paper must do) in the light of what you've learned so far. (2-3 minutes).
9. Again, let's discuss some of these revised statements. (5 minutes).
10. Now, answer for yourself in writing : What went wrong, or what isn't completely done, in the papers that did not match your new criteria? Is it something in the assignment? in the student? in a misunderstanding? in a larger issue?
11. Time for discussion of what went wrong and why. (5 minutes).
12. What could be done by the teacher to bring the less-effective papers closer to the achievement of the most effective papers? Let's brainstorm, then move on to the next questions as we're ready.
13. Specifically, do you see ways to rewrite the original assignment--and to revise your expectations--which would anticipate and avoid problems?
14. Do you see ways to rewrite the assignment which would challenge students to do more? to try something else? (10 minutes for 12, 13, 14).
15. Write a revised assignment. (3-4 minutes). Share it. (5 minutes).
16. Please free-write about the process we've just been through. We'll talk and see if we can improve the procedure for the next assignment.

How Procedure Became Critical Process

The first assignment we took through this procedure was written for Alice Thomas' 11th grade U.S. history class studying

Westward expansion in the nineteenth century (Burnes and Nees-Hatlen, 13-19). It was part of a unit designed to help students synthesize textbook and supplementary materials (books, film, pictures, songs, and Hamlin Garland's story "Under the Lion's Paw" from *Main-Travelled Roads*), using more traditional exercises--timeline and map study--as well. The teacher wanted her students to understand what life looked like and felt like to people caught up in the historical "trends" which the text book covered, and by the end of the course to recognize their similar human condition as sometimes subjects, sometimes objects of history. Here is the assignment we extracted from her unit for the workshop:

> Assignment #1 (11th grade U.S. history, Brewer High School)
>
> Pretend you are a sodbuster. Your father was from a large family in Brewer, Maine, which you left to go west. You've been gone for about a year and are writing a letter to your cousin in Brewer telling him/her about your life on the plains in the 1870's.
>
> This assignment will be graded on the basis of the correctness of information and the completeness of the picture of a sodbuster's life.

After writing about their expectations for an effective response, our group of teachers talked about them. In the course of this discussion, we noted a potential conflict between the assignment's invitation to invent a consistent *persona* for the letter-writer and the second paragraph's warning about scope and accuracy of details as criteria for grading. The task seemed ambiguous. We traced some of the ambiguity to the phrase "telling him/her about your life on the plains," which could invite *either* a fact-heavy travelogue *or* a personal evaluation of life on the plains from the letter-writer's point of view. Some of the teachers in the group had written their expectations of effective papers to stress "completeness of information," because they resolved the ambiguity in favor of a fact-filled "picture." Others had anticipated effective imaginative reflections on life, with a focus on changes in geography and lifestyle as these would be addressed to a cousin primarily interested in the letter-writer's views, not so much his or her specific environment as a stance toward values. To some extent, these differing expectations were related to the teachers' academic fields, with history teachers slightly more likely to stress the importance of knowing as much as possible about the constraints facing typical sodbusters, English and art teachers slightly more likely to stress the imaginative recreation of a synthetic but personal viewpoint.

Given this split in our group, as well as the ambiguity in the

assignment wording, upon which we all agreed, we could not anticipate with any certainty which invitation the most effective paper would accept. It was useful, then, to turn next to four student responses to the assignment, which helped us continue to reflect on appropriate goals. Here are the papers.

Sample 1.1

Dear "Cuz" Jack,

Boy! Was I a sucker to try and come west to make all sorts of "riches!" When I came here a year ago, all I saw were dollar signs. When that land company guy sold me this land for $2.50/acre, I thought that was the end of poverty for me and my family of nine. Was I wrong!

Out here, there ain't any wood to burn. We have to use cow chips to keep us warm. Another thing is the fact that the area where I had been growing all my crops has been attacked by grasshoppers and fleas. And not only did they eat all my corn, but they ate Mom's curtains and linens. Was she mad! Also, grass fires start almost every day! The only way I was able to grow my corn in the first place was to dig a well. It's so dry here.

I mainly wrote this letter to tell you that my father passed away and his last wish was to be buried back in Brewer. I think Mom and the whole clan, including me, are coming home with the body. We'll probably end up staying in Brewer for a long while and end up selling our land. Our year abroad has been a living nightmare, but I'm sure some must make it here. We just aren't part of that "some."

Stay Well!
Robert

P.S. Could you get our home ready; we is coming back!

Sample 1.2

Dear Kate,

Well we did it! Papa's dream came true and the family's doing fine. We're in Kansas on 160 acres of our very own farm land. Little Billy got fiercely ill on the trip over, though, almost died. He's better now. Tell Aunt Betsy that mama said hello.

When we first got here [papa came first], we had to live in a dugout. It's a hole dug in the side of a little hill and the roofs covered with boards. It was pretty awful, awful dirty. One day one of our cows got loose and fell in while we were eating dinner! It was terrible! It broke its leg so we had to kill it, boy was papa mad!

After a few months papa and Marshall and Bobbie built us a sod house above ground. It's much better than the dugout but

it's drafty.

Last Friday there was a social at the Olsens. It's so much fun to dance all night. Gets our mind off our other problems. Like the Indians. They've been raiding some of the farms nearby. I've only seen them once and they look mean. Papa's been edgy lately so I think somethins' wrong, you know papa, won't ever worry us if he can help it.

Our last crop was ruined last month by those awful grasshoppers. The sky's just full of them. We'll grow it back though.

The family's gotten closer since this move to Kansas. I really like it Kate, we've gone a long way to come out here and we're making it.

Hope to hear from you soon, send my love to the family.

Love,
Buckwheat

Sample 1.3

Sterling Pietuck
P.O. Box 294
Arlene, Wisconsin

October 21, 1872

Dear Elijah,

Well, it's been over a year since we have been in touch. I have so many things to tell you. I have purchased 160 acres of land in Wisconsin. Everything here is so much different than in Brewer. The climate is all together different. One minute it will be freezing cold, the next, scorching hot. Last winter we had a terrible blizzard. Momma had a terrible case of pneumonia too. But we somehow survived it all. The West is also a land of bugs, beetles and every other kind of pest imaginable. Our first crop was half eaten by what looked like a flock of birds. Actually they were locusts. They look something like the grasshopper back East, but about 5 times bigger.

We live in a dugout. I know it sounds crazy, but its true. The dugout is actually a home dug deep into the ground. It's cool in the summer and warm in the winter. You're probably wondering why we don't live in a regular home. Well, it's because there is no wood to even build one. I was lucky to even get this paper to write on. The only problems with the dugout are, the roof is somewhat weak, and when it rains out it gets very wet inside and worms come through the walls and floors.

From everything I have said, it sounds as though it is really hard living here. Actually, it is. But all of us like the openness

and fresh air. We would never return to the East. Well, tell Rudolph, Lilly, and Uncle Venner we said hi!

Yours truly,
Sterling

Sample 1.4

Dear Cousin Wilbur,

We've finally gotten squared away. It was tough at first. The first thing we did was build a house. The house was made of sod strips with a roof on it. There was no firewood so we burned anything that we could get our hands on. Cow manure worked very well. Rain brings plenty of water. It can even wash out the walls to the house. We have dug our well. Getting water out of the well was tough so we got a windmill to pump the water out. Barbed wire fences are used out here instead of wooden ones. Range wars broke out between cattlemen and farmers. We've had troubles with bed bugs and grasshoppers and fleas. We have cycles of too much rain and then we have droughts. Out here the church services are held in the school house with a traveling preacher.

Sincerely
Cousin Oscar

Tabulating votes for the most effective paper, the group chose 1.3 by a large majority, with 1.1 and 1.2 getting several votes apiece, and 1.4 three votes from teachers who were uneasy with the paper but committed to it by their expectations for successful response. As we talked about 1.3, it gained adherents as the paper which most successfully incorporated relevant facts in the most credible letter. It became apparent that, whatever the specific expectations teachers had had, they were impressed by the intelligence and "insight" of 1.3, by the way it demonstrated an imaginative projection into the human past. Details that were used to illustrate its virtues included the inference of a paper shortage to parallel the wood shortage on the plains (especially as compared to timber-rich 19th century Brewer) and the sharp image of the bird-like locusts seen through the eyes of the new settler. Rhetorically, the letter was seen to effectively anticipate "Elijah's" reactions from home, both his need for facts and his need for human connection from "Sterling."

Looking next at 1.1 and 1.4, we pursued the divisions which surfaced about the ambiguity of "completeness and information about the life of a sodbuster" in our discussion of the assignment *per se*. Several teachers cited 1.1's attempt at creating dialect and its consistency of focus on the disasters which led to the writer's decision to give up on sodbusting. But other participants (two historians in particular) raised the question of scope. The writer of 1.1 focused on

disasters, leaving out such amenities as the church socials cited in 1.4, they reminded us.

At this point, we pushed against the problem of goals. What, one teacher asked, are these facts in aid of? Why is it, anyway, that we'd ask students to undertake this assignment in a history class? Here, the writer of the assignment volunteered some of her goals. She wanted her students to come to recognize, in the course of her year-long class, the important differences between historical generalizations and convenient categories for summarizing and analyzing historical data, on the one hand, and "history" as experienced by people living their lives out in what seems to them to be the present moment, whether those people are sodbusters or Brewer high school students.

Hereafter, with reflection on the teacher's larger goals, we were able to resolve the apparent conflict between facts and imaginative consistency. We now had the sanction of the assignment-writer to read 1.4's "loss of focus" (e.g. at "Range wars broke out between cattlemen and farmers") as a failure of the kind of historical imagination which she hoped to empower. What one could label as a failure to control the point of view (e.g. the references to "cycles" of rain and drought within a single year) could now be seen as a failure to differentiate between historical abstractions and the facts of personal experience which, in significant numbers, can become the basis for generalizations about repeated events affecting many people at once, in ways which they might not individually grasp at the time.

Looking again at 1.3 after this discussion, we agreed that this letter appeared to satisfy this unstated understanding of the task's larger purpose in a course on U.S. history designed to get students to understand history as a continuing dialogue between the particular and the useful abstraction. Having reconceived our sense of what was at issue in the task, we next undertook the process of revising our expectations for success and revising the original writing assignment in the light of what we'd learned about appropriateness and historical/imaginative truth.

Each of us tried our hand at writing a revised assignment that would better fulfill the teacher's goals with all of the students. Thus, one criterion was to revise the assignment so that it would help the writer of 1.4 keep his point of view limited and personal--to, for example, stay with and develop Cousin Oscar's statement about being "squared away" more expansively, and to understand that facts about the Old West needn't be interpolated if Oscar wouldn't have mentioned them. We also wanted to encourage a writer like 1.1 to develop concrete details in a *fully* elaborated point of view, to build on his enthusiasm for becoming someone else. In the revised assignments written at this point in the workshop, most participants concentrated on healing the gap between the invitation to pretend to

be a sodbuster writing a letter home and the apparently contradictory statement about standards for grading in the original assignment. For example:

> We've studied a lot of "facts" about the sodbusters and conditions they faced on the great plains. Using as much of that background as is appropriate, pretend you are a sodbuster who came west from Brewer with your family a year before, and write a letter to your cousin back home which catches him/her up on what's happened to you in the meantime and how you feel about your immigration to the West and the challenges of sodbusting. Make your letter as consistent and believable as you can.

That's a modest revision, focused on disambiguating the directions in the original assignment to meet the teacher's intent more precisely. It also brings to the surface the rhetorical problem implicitly posed by the original assignment: to select facts appropriate to the chosen persona's circumstances and attitudes. We also considered, however, more radical revisions. The original assignment called for expressive writing (what's happened to you and how you feel about it), but by changing the rhetorical situation of the letter-writer, several participants focused the task toward a "transaction," advice-giving, which would help students organize facts persuasively, using the letter-writer's experience as a source of generalizations. For example:

> It's 1877. Pretend you are a sodbuster whose family left Brewer a year before to buy cheap land on the plains. Now, a cousin of yours back home has written that s/he's lost the mill job, and the Bangor economy is stagnant. S/he asks you about what you see as the potential for success and happiness on the plains. Write a reply to your cousin, using your experience and information you'd be likely to have which can help your cousin decide what to do. Give the advice you have been asked to give.

All in all, we spent about fifty minutes on this process, which ended after the "de-briefing" free writing time when the original assignment-writer thanked the group for informing her work on goals with some useful specific responses to her students' writing. In the remainder of a morning's workshop, we considered two more assignments, streamlining the procedure a bit to suit the participants' sense of issues or details that needed little or much discussion. The second assignment, for example, came with three very long take home essays written in response to a question calling for an analysis of the effects of historical events on cultural forms in ancient Greece. Here,

discussion of the papers was complex and slow. Despite some variation in the sequence, however, we maintained the fundamental rhythm from expectation to evaluation. With the procedure and several trials in one long morning, we modeled and tested a systematic way of thinking about assignment goals and particular strategies and "rhetoric of the assignment." No doubt, the teachers whose assignments we'd looked at carried away the most concrete results of that way of thinking, but all participants learned an *approach* to critiquing their own assignments to use in future.

A key element, we found, was the participation of the original assignment writer, as when the writer of Assignment #1 discussed her commitments. Although we had established the procedure to assure anonymity (overly conscious of teachers' vulnerability to each other in this professional genre), we would now amend it to acknowledge the sovereignty of the teacher's purposes for having students read and write and do "just this," for just such reasons. We found that when the teacher articulated such a goal, it focused our collaboration on achieving *that* goal (and not other goals which we would impose were it our class). In the process of discussion, this procedural commitment does not necessarily imply that goals are neutral, only that goals are personal to the teacher, although they evolve within a community of professionals.

This workshop does theoretical as well as practical work for participants. In addition to helping teachers read their own assignments from the point of view of the student, in order to anticipate misunderstandings and ineffective tactics, the workshop also asks teachers to reconceive the relationship between assessing student writing and assessing their own purposes for asking students to write. In a collaborative context, with candid and detailed discussions of the tasks we set and the language we use when we set them, teachers can build supportive professional groups which share a method for critiquing *praxis* while they invite diversity in teaching styles and disciplinary commitments. With regular meetings, such groups can accelerate the process of consulting on writing across the curriculum, while offering specific rewards for sharing writing assignments and articulating goals.

From the perspective of a composition theorist, I recommend this process as particularly valid for identifying needed research on a neglected variable in the writing process. In the context of classroom instruction, the writing assignment constrains the rhetorical situation of the writer with unique authority. For teacher-researchers to act as if it weren't a critical variable in what students do when they write would be a theoretical error with enormous ethical implications.

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