

TALKING ABOUT WRITING: AN APPROACH TO TEACHING UNSKILLED WRITERS

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As a college teacher who works regularly with unskilled writers, I am often surprised by the gap that exists between students' abilities as talkers and as writers. Students who are identified as "unskilled" writers often find themselves enrolled in special writing programs not because they are unintelligent (many score surprisingly high on their SAT's), but because their writing skills lag behind their other communication skills. While they are not in any sense unteachable, and may do well in other subjects, they come to college expecting to fail in writing. These students need to develop confidence along with skills, and one important means to this end is through talk. Talking helps unskilled writers to formulate and clarify their ideas while they gain confidence.

This is not to say that speech and writing are similar processes. Their differences are well known (Vygotsky; Luria; Olson; Chafe; Halpern). Writing provides a curious blend of transience (it can be erased) and permanence (it can be published). Speech also combines transience and permanence, but its permanence depends on memory.¹ Writing allows for complexity and re-reading, while speech must be immediately understood. Further, they differ in the sensory faculties used to perceive them (ear/eye) and transmit them (voice/hand, eye). According to L.S. Vygotsky, "written speech is a separate linguistic function, differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning" (98).² Yet Vygotsky goes on to observe that despite these differences, speech and writing are connected through their complex relationship to thought. The child first learns the language of speech without realizing the meaning behind the sounds; then the child learns the language of thought, and finally

the language of writing. Developmentally, the child's thought intercedes between speech and writing. Grammatically, however, speech intercedes between thought and writing. "One might even say," Vygotsky wrote, "that the syntax of inner speech is the exact opposite of the syntax of written speech, with oral speech standing in the middle" (99). Inner speech, that fluttering of the mind between unspoken, unwritten words and the pure meaning of thought, is "maximally compact" while written speech is "maximally detailed" (100). For this reason, unskilled writers who have mastered thought and speech but not writing may be able to call upon the skill already developed in order to improve the one less developed.

One reason why speech has not been widely used in composition instruction may come from the mistaken assumption that because speech and writing respond to different mental acts, their functions are mutually exclusive. In other words, writing must emerge either directly from thought or directly from speech. If it comes from speech, it will appear as conversation transcribed--inarticulate and informal. Janet Emig, for example, after detailing the many differences between speech and writing, concludes that "writing is more readily a form and source of learning than talking" (124). Although this view may be technically correct, it implies a polarity between speech and writing which has unfortunate consequences. Speech and writing become either/or propositions. This doesn't need to be the case. Robert Zoellner's "talk-write" model provides a much better pedagogical basis for using speech in composition instruction. According to Zoellner, college students are "significantly and often overwhelmingly better at talking than at writing." As a result, their oral responses to questions can be used to interfere constructively with the writing process (300-301).

There are at least two good reasons why talk is valuable in teaching unskilled writers. First, talk helps alleviate the sometimes sharp social and psychological pressures placed on students whose writing has, for one reason or another, been evaluated and pronounced "deficient." As Kantor and Rubin have argued, "rejection or dislike of writing may be more environmentally than naturally caused" (56). Although this point may be overstated, student attitudes toward writing exert an important and neglected influence on their performance. Students who enter college and find themselves placed in special composition programs typically feel singled out and somewhat betrayed by their very inclusion in them. Not that their inclusion comes as any surprise. Most have been told for years that their writing is deficient. Unfortunately, the euphemism "developmental" for the unfashionable and insensitive "remedial" doesn't help all that much, and the students' chances for success are jeopardized before they begin. Clearly, the composition teacher has problems to address before the first word is spoken

concerning writing. The situation worsens once instruction begins. Students resist learning writing as process--writing as revision--because past experience has taught them that they don't really want to see what they've written. They would rather move quickly along to the next assignment than go back and examine what they already know is "poor writing."

As a result, students need to learn to talk about their own writing performance as well as their strategies on specific assignments. To use Zoellner's term, writing instruction needs to become a "social event" (301). By talking about their previous experiences in writing, students may objectify, perhaps for the first time, concerns that have remained unspoken. Talking about uncomfortable experiences changes one's perception of them in the same way that talking about writing changes one's perception of meaning. When fears are objectified they become somehow less threatening. Discussions of writing experiences can begin as early as the first interview. Students can be asked, "What was writing like in high school?" "In what ways do you feel good about your writing?" "If you could improve one aspect of your writing, which would it be?" Often they will say that they are weak in "grammar," or that previous teachers always told them they were poor writers. At first these private sessions are used almost exclusively to elicit oral responses from the student. Later, I ask for group sessions. The student and instructor then define mutually a set of specific goals for the semester based on early writing samples (not necessarily the placement essay written during the summer) *and* on concerns raised in the private conference. In this form of group therapy, expressing fears somehow makes them less imposing. The sharing of experiences makes the sessions more tolerable and writing more enjoyable.

There is yet another reason why talk should not be undervalued in developmental instruction. Because unskilled writers are nearly always more proficient at oral than written communication, talk can be a valuable tool in encouraging re-writing (not just pre-writing) activity. This is not to say that students should learn to write as they talk, but that talking can be used to get at meaning. Of course, the use of talk is much more effective in small developmental writing classes than in large classes. In small tutoring sessions of three to five students,³ I often ask for brief papers written over several classes and revised after consultation with me (relying heavily on oral questions and answers). When the students seem to have exhausted their options for revising and feel they are ready for closure, the papers are handed out for a full session of discussion. Since all papers have been re-written several times, most of the mechanical errors have been cleared up, allowing for a discussion on the level of ideas, expression and, of course, audience. These sessions are not merely open-ended discussions of problems, and certainly not roasts. Each student is asked to comment on the papers: What works best? least?

Could more have been said? How good are the examples? Do you want to know more? Then the writer is asked to comment: How do you see your essay? What parts do you like? What parts are you dissatisfied with? I'm often surprised by the students' concern and honesty which arises out of these sessions. What one hears is not predictable, well-worn comments, but statements that indicate a student is in the process of coming to terms with writing. The comment, "Oh, this example is good!" will often elicit from the writer, "Yes, that's not bad, but I'm not at all happy with this one. I should have said that . . ." At this point students begin to discover new meaning, not just ways to re-write what they've already said. They begin, as Britton says, to shape meaning "at the point of utterance" (61).

One important result of this approach is that students are helped over the hurdle of premature closure, the problem that Mina Shaughnessy believed to be one of the prevalent tendencies of unskilled writers. Basic writers need to be helped to move from what she called "sentences of thought" to "passages of thought" (227). They need to be shown how to use talk indirectly as a prod to create a further draft or drafts. Most importantly, revisions made in response to talk are made because of idea, not error, recognition. In translating ideas orally, students cannot help but receive insights into how to express their ideas graphically.

The discussions which arise from these sessions ultimately become themselves the basis for revision. But notice the change between this kind of revision and the kind that students are often asked to make. Revisions are made not as a result of marks on a page but in response to peer comments and their own oral response to the comments. Equally important, the sessions become student, not teacher, centered. The instructor, by facilitating discussion, helps remove one important barrier between the student and writing. Students who have difficulty expressing themselves in writing usually fare much better orally, and a student who is encouraged to talk about writing may be able to synthesize ideas and make intellectual discoveries impossible when confronted by pencil and paper.

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NOTES

¹ Peter Elbow has observed that an unkind remark casually uttered may be remembered far longer than more "permanent" written words.

² See also James Moffett.

³ James Moffett suggests groups of no more than six; for other discussions of using speech in workshop sessions see Kantor and Rubin; Collins.

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