

THE TEACHER AS EDITOR

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The major scientific revolutions of the twentieth century, quantum theory and relativity, changed forever our understanding of the nature of reality. Both the solidity and the stability of the world we inhabit were shown to be superficial perceptions, mere habits of thought. The products of human thought, we now admit, are inevitably affected by our own perceptual frameworks, and the language we use to talk about reality does not simply reflect the world; instead, language creates our world. These philosophical assumptions, now widespread, have been assimilated by rhetoricians and have gradually effected major redefinitions in rhetorical theory. But only partially, hesitantly, and occasionally do they seem to inform what happens in writing classrooms.

The basic premises in the field of composition and rhetoric are clear enough: cognition involves creating as well as receiving and using language to produce texts involves more than simply recording or transmitting information. Writers construct reality and in doing so discover meaning. Thus, recent theorists assert, rhetoric is epistemic. James Berlin in summarizing "what might be called Epistemic Rhetoric" writes: "In the New Rhetoric the message arises out of the interaction of the writer, language, reality, and the audience. Truths are operative only within a given universe of discourse, and this universe is shaped by all of these elements, including the audience" (775). Rhetoric so defined constitutes a paradigm shift, according to Maxine Hairston, and the numerous references to her article in recent publications indicate both a general acceptance of this view and a belief in its pedagogical importance.

But if the New Rhetoric or the new paradigm is to be coherently and honestly introduced into the writing classroom, then the writing teacher must fully understand and willingly assume a new role. Refusing normative and prescriptive pedagogies, the writing teacher must instead help writers to discover and express their own messages. The writing teacher must become the teacher as

editor. Although many writing teachers believe that they have always functioned as editors and although English teachers in the popular mind are thought to do nothing but edit, such beliefs usually rest on a narrow and limited view of the editor's role, a role often underestimated and misunderstood by readers—though seldom by professional writers. Paradoxically, the essential job of an editor is not editing, if editing means changing texts at the sentence level and involves cutting, moving, rewording, and correcting. In commercial firms these tasks are performed by “copy editors.” Real editors do more than repair texts; they work with writers in complex and life-giving ways. Some of the very great ones—like Ezra Pound, Ford Madox Ford, and Maxwell Perkins—have left their marks on the world of letters, but not because they corrected texts. Great editors help writers to believe in themselves, to fulfill their most serious intentions, to take risks, to try again. They offer writers the sounding board of their own best readings; they spot the weaknesses that the writer had already suspected; they suggest ways to turn the weaknesses into strengths; they are sensitive to the writer's emotions and know when to lavish praise, when to make demands, and when to extend deadlines. As journalist William Ruehlmann says, “The editor should be regarded as a sort-of sage He or she comes to your material as an objective outsider just as interested as you are in turning out the best possible final product” (39). To be this kind of editor to student writers is what teaching writing really means—as Don Murray has been saying and showing for years.

That the writing teacher should function as an editor, responding and assisting rather than prescribing and correcting, follows logically from the new paradigm, but for the logic of this pedagogy to be complete, certain classroom practices, often accepted as articles of faith, need to be revised. Those who believe that rhetoric is indeed epistemic and who would make their teaching coherent with their theory, it will be argued, must subscribe to and insist upon three basic principles: the teacher as editor does not give assignments; the teacher as editor does not give grades; the teacher as editor, not satisfied with guessing the purpose of a text, repeatedly and systematically asks writers to examine and explain their intentions. These principles, which constitute what might be called a pedagogy of empowerment, are essential to writing instruction. Only when writers are fully empowered to produce their

own texts can they be fully involved in the process. The involvement of the learner, research shows, is the essential measure of the effectiveness of any educational practice ("Text of New Report on Excellence in Higher Education").

THE TEACHER AS EDITOR DOES NOT GIVE ASSIGNMENTS

A considerable literature exists on how best to assign writing. Some of it includes elaborate instructions for specifying a topic, a purpose, an invention strategy, a carefully defined audience, a form, a format, a length, a level of language, and even a role for the writer. Energetic teachers, converted to the new paradigm, sometimes hand out assignment instructions that are longer than the essays they will receive. (Who is doing the writing?) But if the writer, not the teacher, is to be in practice, not just in theory, "a creator of meaning, a shaper of reality" (Berlin 776), shouldn't the writer be allowed to make the important decisions? Why should the student writer be required to create the instructor's meaning and shape the "reality" that has been defined by the assignment? How can responding to the teacher's agenda, however carefully thought out, ever convince the student writer that writing is learning, that writing is discovery?

"Do you mean you let your students write on just any old thing?" ask colleagues in the halls. Although it might be asked why a topic of the student's own choosing is any more of an old thing than one of the teacher's devising—some of which are very old indeed—the answer is yes; professional writers, academic writers, journalistic writers try very hard to live their lives so that they may choose their own topics. Freedom of choice precedes every serious investment of self.

Only when student writers are allowed to write on subjects they care and know about in forms they create to audiences they define do they take themselves seriously as writers. By fulfilling a teacher's assignment, they may become good game-players, careful strategists, skilled at second-guessing and discovering hidden agendas, but they will not be genuinely involved in becoming writers. That requires writing for one's own purposes. To overhear students' comments about their writing assignments is to realize their contempt for and distance from the teacher's topic. But when students' own purposes as writers are validated, when their own

intentions are taken seriously and made the basis for questioning and thinking and growing, then involvement becomes the norm. Commitment and motivation intensify; new energies are released. It is then the job of the teacher as editor to channel and direct those energies, to help writers increase their knowledge and express their concerns. It is not the writing teacher's job to define those concerns. The experienced editor, "a sort-of sage," may be mercilessly demanding but is wise enough and secure enough to grant writers their freedom; the inexperienced editor tries to hide insecurity and anxiety behind the pose of the sort-of dictator.

The teacher who dictates topics usually also dictates structure by specifying the form or the mode that students must write in, a practice as widespread as it is entrenched. Most structured assignments prescribe the structure of the response; thus, teachers teach forms, not the principles of form. The continuing emphasis on fixed forms in writing classrooms constitutes our major failing as writing teachers and explains the unpleasant secret of our profession: so much of the writing that occurs within the classroom has so little to do with the writing that occurs outside of it. By protecting student writers from their own struggles with chaos, we deny them the experience of achieving for themselves structure and coherence. And we send them off lacking the essential talent they will need as writers in the world of work: the ability to bring order out of disorder. It is as though would-be composers were not taught counterpoint and harmony, but instead were required to write fugues, rondos, and sonatinas—for predetermined patrons. The teacher as editor, working from the student's own text, not from a programmed interaction of writer and reader and purpose and form, helps the student to discover what makes discourse cohere. If we would really prepare student writers for what lies ahead, we must give them permission to create their own texts and give ourselves permission to take those texts seriously.

One of the few theorists to emphasize the inescapable contradiction of demanding very specific writing assignments within the context of a transactional rhetoric is Janet Emig. She criticizes assignment-giving because it represents the "context-stripping," positivist tradition: "A positivistic assignment is one that does not emanate from the student writer nor from the students' prior writing such as free writings, journal entries or response-to-text papers. Rather, the instructor sets a task, often discrete and decontext-

tualized, from the frame of his own rhetorical reference or from the frame of a given rhetorical theory (or rhetoric text)" (68). Janice Lauer, perhaps the theorist most insistent on defining rhetoric as epistemic, shares this concern. In "Writing as Inquiry," she asks: "What kinds of writing assignments can we set to avoid trapping students in contexts so narrow or artificial that they preclude genuine puzzlement or curiosity?" (91). The teacher who would function as an editor, who would turn students into writers by helping them to realize their own intentions and discover their own forms, can only reply, we must refuse to set assignments at all. The teacher as editor must give up the power to prescribe and instead teach writing within the context of a pedagogy that empowers students.

Although refusing to set assignments does require a leap of faith—one that even seasoned instructors recoil from—it really does work. The only writing assignment that needs to be given is when to turn in how many pages. (A weekly requirement of five pages works well because the standby five-paragraph format breaks down after about three pages. And the question, "How long does it have to be?" is settled—in an arbitrary but also in a temporary way.) For many students this is the first time they have been on their own, required to generate their own material, to construct their own designs, to become writers instead of form-fillers. So the first papers are traumatic. But with class sessions focused on invention strategies, and with support and encouragement and occasional direction from the teacher as editor, students soon find such writing possible and occasionally even addictive. One explained her changing reaction: "At first I could not handle the situation, and I fretted and complained because I had nowhere to start. At this point, however, I have so many ideas on which to write that I appreciate the chance to think on my own." Another wrote: "The paper a week was the best idea. I still have notes upon notes for 'The Next Rhetoric Paper.' I could write a paper a week forever with the ideas that I've developed in this class." As students become engaged with their own subjects and concerned with their own approaches, they begin to see the weekly five pages as what they are, a stopping place, not a formal prescription, and papers begin to seek their own length. Since the draft submitted one week may be thoroughly revised and resubmitted another week, papers don't always start from scratch. In theory, one paper could be revised all semester, but in practice this does not happen; most subjects

go through two or three complete revisions. A course conducted in this way requires roughly twice as much writing as a course with set papers, but all the writing eventually becomes a natural—because inevitable—activity; as one student commented, “With weekly papers there is not the ‘Oh, God, I’ve got a paper!’ feeling. It’s more, ‘Well, it’s Tuesday night.’”

Each week the teacher selects some papers to be read to the class. One class period—or more—is spent listening to students read their papers. Here they receive from their peers immediate feedback on how well their texts convey their intentions, on whether their intentions are worth fulfilling. Those who are listening are learning to respond as editors, and their responses, a healthy check on the idiosyncrasies of the teacher as editor, are offered seriously and taken seriously. Involvement—in the processes of generating and of responding to texts—intensifies. A real person is presenting a real paper to a real audience.

Each paper presents the class with a different set of rhetorical problems. Thus, discussion constantly shifts from one part of the composing process to another, from one part of the communication triangle to another, but the focus of the class never veers from writing. When students all write on the same topic or assignment, however, discussion almost inevitably shifts from concerns about writing to arguments about the subject matter—as anyone who has observed numerous writing classes will attest.

Writing teachers who take the leap and abandon assignments will discover with relief that students do not select for themselves silly or trivial topics. The teacher who conveys enthusiasm, seriousness, and high expectations is seldom disappointed. Allowed to choose, students write on all sorts of subjects in a variety of modes. They write about campus concerns, educational and social and political; they write about national and international issues; they write about the majors they have chosen and what learning a discipline means; they write about people and places and memories; they write about books and records and films; they write about acting and dieting and running. They write with a variety of purposes, in a variety of voices. Students not only know what they are most capable of writing about, they also know what parts of the composing process they have the most trouble with, and a surprising number even know what they need to work on. None, however, in this teacher’s experience, has ever suggested

that topics should be assigned; they have all had a lifetime of that practice; they are ready now to be heard.

The psychologists tell us that the self finds, defines, and affirms itself in acts of communication. Granting students the right and the responsibility to find and express themselves in their own acts of communication is surely of greater value and more lasting impact than is the singling out and exercising of particular intellectual skills, the justification offered by most proponents of structured assignments. At least, that is what the students themselves say. They talk about the freedom and the responsibility they feel "after so many years of say this and that about that and this." "The absence of topics is frightening but essential if Invention is really to be put into practice." "A+ on the absence of topics. I have had courses where every paper topic (and length) was specified, and it made my brain rot." "Better writing comes when people write about what they want instead of what they're told. DO NOT ASSIGN TOPICS!"

The writing teacher's best energies, therefore, need not and should not be spent designing intricate assignments or discovering topics that will interest students. They should instead be expended in being the best possible editor of the weekly papers, in offering to each student a meaningful, individualized response. Some teachers can perform their editorial tasks immediately and orally in face to face interaction; some prefer to read papers privately and offer written responses. But the response of the teacher as editor to each writer's text is the essence of writing instruction.

THE TEACHER AS EDITOR DOES NOT GIVE GRADES

Because grades are inimical to the teaching of writing, the success of not giving assignments depends upon not giving grades to individual papers. Such grades are destructive for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most important is that they allow students to focus on pleasing the instructor and accumulating good marks instead of on redesigning themselves as writers. When a paper receives the judgement of a letter grade, in the student's mind the paper is not only forever finished, the grade is permanently engraved in the student's course average. Such a grading procedure, as any bright student will point out, absolutely forbids experimenting, taking risks, following hunches, trying to make it new—activities we profess to value. Lauer asks of writing teachers:

“Do we allow for inverse insight, teaching students that risks and mistakes are integral to inquiry, that good investigations which end in inverse insight can become grist for exploratory discourse?” (92). The answer in most writing courses is no; mistakes get low grades and send messages to cut losses by minimizing risks. The teacher as editor does not give individual grades because high or low they send bad messages; low grades say stop doing this, high grades say do this again.

As a communication system, the A through F grading scale is poverty stricken; the sign B- carries only the vaguest sort of meaning, one which teachers never agree upon. And yet letter grades have a terrible power; students repeatedly focus on grades and ignore comments. But when a paper has no grade, the comments whether written or oral must be taken very seriously indeed. And when no grade intrudes between writer and editor—as one never does between professional writers and editors—the writer and editor may work together without misgivings and without bargaining to produce “the best possible final product.” The elimination of grades frees students to take risks and to grow and encourages them to stop worrying about their teacher as a judge and start listening to their teacher as an editor. And the editor thereby gains considerable power—to motivate and direct and encourage.

That power, however, should be used wisely and consistently; it should be used repeatedly to assist, but only once to grade. Because the judgement of a letter grade—like publication—stops the revision process, letter grades should be withheld until the end of the term when final grades are submitted. In this way the possibility of revising can be kept open as long as possible, as it is for professional writers. A portfolio grading system which requires students to select and present in final form a specified number of their best pages makes grading a single and comprehensive act of judgement. Responding to a complete writing folder greatly simplifies the unavoidable and for most instructors unpleasant task of judgement. Here in one packet is one student’s work for the course; the quality of the final product, the instructor’s now thorough knowledge of what the writer attempted and how far the writer progressed combine to make the determination of a letter grade almost inevitable. For the students as well there is little mystery. Having listened to and evaluated their classmates’

papers each week, they now know who the best writers are and where they stand. The teacher knows too.

But the portfolio grading system allows surprises because it further empowers students. They get to choose which papers they want to submit, and they have the opportunity to revise them until the final moment, the last day of class. The papers that comprise the folder have all received the editor's best advice, sometimes two and three times, and some of the papers have been read to the class as well, but all may be revised again before the folder is submitted. Many students take this last gruelling option and surprise themselves and the instructor with a final burst of progress. A paragraph commentary summing up the writer's work, offering advice and encouragement for the future, and justifying the grade given is added to the portfolio before it is returned to the student. And composing such a message seems to have more to do with teaching writing than does averaging a set of numbers.

The point is to separate editing from judging. Sommers has noted the confusion between directions to revise and directions to edit that characterizes many teachers' written comments. And Knoblauch and Brannon have noted the tendency of teachers bent on evaluation to impose their notion of the ideal text on the student's version, whatever the student's intention might have been. Both of these negative effects occur, it would seem, because teachers are placed in impossible and schizophrenic roles—asked to wear two hats at the same time, that of editor and that of judge. To function as the writer's best and most helpful reader simply does not square with being a judge and imposing the external standards of grade criteria, nor do such criteria square with the context specific rhetorical values of the new paradigm.

For students, being edited rather than judged, means being heard and listened to, instead of graded and corrected. Such a procedure changes what writing means to students; the search for the correct formula is transformed into a search for the best possible self. As students understand the reasons for not being graded, they begin to enjoy their freedom and stop worrying about letter grades on papers; from their editor's comments they know if they are making barely adequate, reasonable, or exceptional progress.

Although the colleagues in the halls generally refuse to believe that students can live without grades, they can and do—if the

rationale is made explicit. We must explain to students and to our colleagues and to the public why giving letter grades is inimical to teaching writing. To proceed according to what is best for student writers, not according to a mindless insistence on grades and scores and rankings which interrupt and impede the learning process, is the prerogative and the responsibility of the teacher as editor.

THE TEACHER AS EDITOR ASKS WRITERS TO TALK ABOUT THEIR INTENTIONS

Writing courses are artificial places where learning to write is the focus of all energies; there is no reason not to admit this and proceed accordingly. Much valuable time can be saved if instead of inferring—or imposing—intentions, teachers as editors simply ask student writers to examine and explain what they are attempting. The goal is to maintain a dialogue with each student writer—in that writer's own language—about what is being tried, what is being accomplished, and what help is needed. Such a dialogue requires a systematic approach, such as a standard set of questions, so that thinking and talking about writing are always a part of the writing process and are central to the course. The student writes a paper and then talks about what writing it involved. Don Murray has developed a set of questions which his students answer in their conferences: "What did you learn from this piece of writing?" "What do you intend to do in the next draft?" "What surprised you in the draft?" "Where is the piece of writing taking you?" "What do you like best in the piece of writing?" "What questions do you have of me?" ("The Listening Eye" 15). Other questions or sets of questions with different focuses can be devised; questions about audience can be included; or a paragraph about intentions, including some questions for the reader, can be requested with each paper. What matters is the repeated insistence upon the dialogue.

Students do not like this probing and many are initially embarrassed and resistant, but if the instructor always takes their responses and especially their questions seriously they begin to see the questions as further empowerment. They can ask extremely direct questions and get direct answers. As students realize that the dialogue works, they begin to ask for what they really need; sometimes they need an idea, sometimes a new direction,

sometimes a response, and sometimes they ask openly for praise and encouragement.

Murray's last question, "What questions do you have of me?" is probably the most important for the teacher because it is a way of asking each student, "How can I be the most effective writing teacher for you?" The ensuing dialogue allows the teacher to respond to the student's own concerns and to affirm and direct the student's own intentions instead of appropriating the student's text and offering instructions that are off the mark. And when a student asks, "Is this any good? Do you think I'll ever be a writer? Is writing always so hard?" the teacher is reminded that however amateurish the text, it was written by a person and deserves a humane and individualized response, not sarcasm, meanness, or writing-teacher clichés. Listening to writers explain their intentions humanizes teachers.

For students, examining and explaining intentions, whether out loud or on paper, makes a difference too. Gradually, they gain a healthy self-consciousness about their own composing processes, and as the same questions recur week after week, they are internalized. They become an automatic heuristic procedure for thinking about writing, for defining intentions and justifying decisions. Writers learn to ask of themselves the questions asked by editors, thus developing their own incipient editor, what Murray calls, "the other self" ("Teaching the Other Self"). (We should probably not be surprised if students do not care to internalize the judgement of a teacher who marks a paper C-)

Murray's questions, or questions in the same vein, if used seriously and repeatedly, make possible a dialogue between student as writer and teacher as editor that gets to the heart of what writing feels like and thinks like for each individual student. They can be an extremely powerful tool in the writing classroom; students taught to communicate through them soon realize that letter grades don't have much to do with the development of a writer.

CONCLUSION

These three premises, that writing classes should be conducted without assigned topics, without letter grades, and with constant talk about intentions, are inextricably linked, like the points on the communication triangle. Each requires and depends upon the others; all three require a teacher who can function effectively

as an editor, as a sort of sage. Experienced writing teachers, those who subscribe and contribute to the new paradigm, possess the tacit knowledge required of the good editor. With efficiency and incisiveness, they can see whether an idea works, where structure fails, when style interferes; they know almost instinctively whether to sympathize or chide, praise or demand, encourage or redirect. By simply giving up some of the traditional—but negative—controls habitually thought to be essential in the writing classroom, they can increase their effectiveness tenfold by unleashing, involving, and empowering their students. They can in their own courses—which are likely to be honors or advanced composition sections—proceed according to the pedagogical principles required by the new paradigm.

But the question remains. Can these principles inform our *programs* as well as our *courses*? As Hairston astutely concludes, non-specialists do most of our composition teaching (88). The success of the new paradigm depends upon our success in turning them into teachers as editors. How to do that has long puzzled freshman program directors. The usual solution, providing new teachers with detailed, mandatory course outlines and standardized assignments and grading criteria, forbids empowerment, precludes involvement, and too often allows both student and teacher to focus their contempt on the program.

An apprenticeship program, one that would allow an inexperienced teacher to work with an experienced teacher-editor to acquire advanced editorial skills, might be more effective. Listening to an editor respond aloud to paper after paper, the apprentice would gradually learn how to read and react effectively, how to maintain the editor-writer dialogue, how to be positive and supportive, yet critical and demanding. After mastering the apprenticeship, the novice teacher, now ready to function as an editor, might be granted the privilege of conducting the writing class as an editor, no longer required to disenfranchise student writers, but free to empower them.

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