Review

Conjectures on (Advanced?) Composition

and Its Teaching

Composition and Its Teaching, edited by Richard Gebhardt, reprints twenty-one articles which first appeared in College Composition and Communication between February 1974 and May 1979, while E. P. J. Corbett was editor. The slender paperback is published by the Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts to honor Professor Corbett, who was also a member of the OC-TELA executive committee during those years.

One can only applaud the appearance of such a volume, making as it does twenty-one short, significant, and stimulating articles easily and economically available. (The book can be bought from Professor Gebhardt at Findlay College for $4.95—less than a quarter per article.) It will be a valuable companion to Ohmann and Coley's Ideas for English 101, Graves' Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers, and Corbett's own older collections, done with Gary Tate, Teaching Freshman Composition and Teaching High School Composition. The articles in the new collection tend to be moderately speculative, in between the extremes of pure theory and what-do-I-do-Monday. Most offer perspectives on identifiable segments of our discipline.

The articles in the collection are not formally divided into topical groups, but Gebhardt points out that they have to an extent been perceived as such. Five articles deal with the relationship between thought and writing, including two views of the writing process. Four articles deal with rhetoric, and three with the paragraph. Others discuss basic writing, needed research, and the preparation of writing teachers. As measures of the recognized quality of the inclusions, Gebhardt points out that two of them won the Braddock Award for the best article in an NCTE publication for the year, and that seventeen were included in Larson's annual bibliography of significant articles on composition. He might have added that the list of authors constitutes nearly a Who's Who of current composition leaders: Corder, Shaughnessy, Graves, Hairston, Gorrell, D'Angelo, Odell, and Emig—not to mention prefaces by William Irmscher and Richard Larson, Corbett's predecessor and successor as editor of CCC.

When I asked myself what the collection offers specifically for advanced composition teachers, I was stymied by the problem addressed elsewhere in this issue: just what is the nature of advanced composition and/or advanced composition teachers? In one sense of those phrases the collection has nothing relevant to offer since none of the articles directly addresses composition courses taught on the advanced level—although several treat basic composition. As I reviewed the 225 articles that had appeared in CCC in the period, I realized that on this matter the collection is an accurate reflection of the entire journal—and perhaps of the profession. Between February 1974 and May 1979, few articles in CCC treated advanced level writing courses of any kind. And the only discussions of advanced courses other than technical writing in CCC for those years were in the "Staff-room Interchange" section: Don Stewart's, "An Advanced Composition Course That Works," May 1974; and Michael P. Orth's "An Advanced Composition Course Aimed at Publication." May 1976.
That approach, however, is trivial. Let me propose a distinction that seems more useful even though very general. Perhaps freshman composition may reasonably oversimplify the world of discourse in order to assist students to gain a handhold. It may be reasonable, for example, to direct freshmen to write each essay with an explicit thesis. It may be reasonable to forbid certain developmental structures to be followed. Not on the grounds that this is all there is to real writing, but that if students master a limited number of workable techniques, they will have made major strides toward communicating clearly and efficiently in the writing situations they are most likely to encounter.

If that is a reasonable--though selective--theory of freshman composition, then perhaps it is equally reasonable to regard advanced composition as helping students already skilled in selected utilitarian techniques to master the more varied and complex possibilities of real writing. In this case a major function--perhaps even a definitive function--of advanced composition would be to acquaint students with the extensive store of admittedly more risky rhetorical options. Now that they have control of the central paradigmatic techniques, they are to confront the sometimes bizarre realities of the amazingly amorphous universe of discourse.

The distinction I am suggesting is well illustrated in Gebhardt's collection by the two articles on the paragraph. The first, Carol Cohan's "Writing Effective Paragraphs," is a clear but very simple analysis aimed at teachers of "inexperienced writers." Concentrating on a practical approach to teaching paragraph unity, Cohan argues that, since the standard advice in textbooks is too vague, we should teach students mentally to convert topic sentences into questions, then to provide the answers. "In the beginning the teacher should simply provide the topic sentence and concentrate on helping the students develop supporting detail that is relevant in the strictest sense." That doesn't seem to go very deeply into the matter; it certainly doesn't take into account the many sophisticated studies of paragraphing (from Braddock to Christensen to Becker), but the approach might provide "inexperienced" writers with one option that if used competently would work much of the time.

On the other hand, the following article, Arthur A. Stern's "When Is a Paragraph," uses Braddock's famous study of professional writing to argue that both Christensen and Becker made untenable claims about the existence of topic sentences in real discourse in developing their analytical/pedagogical approaches. Siding with Paul Rodgers, Stern concludes that "today's paragraph is not a logical unit and we should stop telling our students it is."

Certainly nothing worth having is gained by deceiving our students and telling them that "real" paragraphs are much simpler than they in fact are. But perhaps for the inexperienced writer, it is reasonable to say, not that "this is the way most real paragraphs work," but that "if you do this consistently, you will produce competent, workable paragraphs." Once the inexperienced writer has mastered some kernel strategies that work, it may be time to have him confront the reality that there are a multitude of possible complex transformations.

The collection's two discussions of the writing process are both relevant to "advanced" composition viewed from this perspective. The writers reach (I think) opposite conclusions, but more complex (advanced?) opposites than what freshmen are usually told. The most common model of the writing process, at least to judge by textbooks, seems still to be the triad suggested by McCrimmon, based apparently on the classical divisions of invention, arrangement, and style.
McCrimmon's terms for the process (prewriting, writing, rewriting) are now standard, although some theorists prefer alternatives (prevision, drafting, revision; or creating, shaping, completing, for example). On the other hand, some courses use Ken Macrorie's simple diadic model in which one free-writes rapidly trying to tell a truth that matters, and later revises the promising pieces.

The articles on the writing process in Gebhardt's collection are, if I read them correctly, more complex analogs of these two approaches. Both emphasize the need to base pedagogy on direct examination of the habits of real writers. In "Losing One's Mind: Learning to Write and Edit," Barrett Mandel, using a diadic model, addresses "writing and editing as they exist in experience, not as they ought to or could be done according to theories of writing." He criticizes, based on his own experiences as a writer, the "misconception" that writing follows thinking. He argues instead that "it is the act of writing that produces the discoveries" (a view similar to Emig's in "Writing as a Way of Knowing," also in the collection). Editing in Mandel's view is not primarily for clarity or substantive improvement in the discourse, but to make it conform to whatever conventions the reader expects. Mandel's conclusion parallels Macrorie's though they got there by very different routes.

Don Murray, on the other hand, argues that student writers must learn to "Write Before Writing," again because that is the way real writers proceed. His point is that before "writing" (i.e. drafting) can occur, most writers need "rehearsal," which itself involves writing: "lists, outlines, titles, leads, ordered fragments." He notes, however, that some writers do their rehearsing in their heads, and calls these alternative rehearsal practices the "reflective" and "reactive" prewriting modes. He then notes that eight signals can tell writers they are ready to proceed beyond mental or physical rehearsal into the drafting stage. McCrimmon's triad is still present but in more complex, less linear, form.

Both Mandel and Murray assume that one real writing process exists--the WAY real writers do it--almost a Platonic ideal. In distinguishing "reactive" from "reflective" rehearsal, Murray almost accepts the possible existence of alternate writing processes: writers whose "rehearsal" is primarily "reflective" may not "write before writing" at all. Mandel makes the Platonic assumption explicit: "I assume that I am no freak of nature and that what goes on for me goes on, mutatis mutandis, for others. I assume that others who write go through the same emotional, physical, and intellectual steps." Making such an assumption at least simplifies a writing teacher's problems, and it may be that on the non-advanced level we should teach such a kernel process to students who do not necessarily follow it by nature, arguing that it is valuable because workable. But we ought also to entertain the possibility that we are teaching a writing process, not necessarily the writing process shared mutatis mutandis by all writers. Then perhaps with advanced students we should emphasize that there may be no such thing as the writing process with fundamental similarities underlying surface idiosyncrasies. One function of the advanced course would be to help students to discover the process (or processes) that will work best in different contexts for them. That, it seems to me, would be honest and realistic, and a very advanced view--if not a pedagogically convenient one.

Given this notion of what makes an article relevant to advanced composition, several others in the collection deserve special notice. Richard Graves defines with precision three "Levels of Skill in the Composing Process," primarily relating to the sentence. He argues that combining kernel sentences is a valuable basic
activity, but that “recasting flawed sentences” and then “composing sentences based on rhetorical models” are more valuable advanced techniques. His section on revising flawed sentences proposes a six-step mental model that is both perceptive and practical. Also treating primarily the sentence level, Robert Gorrell’s “Usage as Rhetoric” is an elegant and eminently sound argument against several popular myths about usage, suggesting instead that grammatical choice “like any other rhetorical choice, depends on anticipating results.” We may not want to push that too strongly onto beginning writers since it complicates the writing process by forcing audience analysis and prediction onto even relatively simple choices. But surely that is the realistic position we should confront in advanced composition.

On the level of the whole discourse, Maxine Hairston offers an unusual and advanced approach to persuasion in “Carl Rogers’s Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric.” Using Rogers’s view that the normal response to a message is not to try to understand it but to offer a counter message, Hairston proposes a rhetoric based first on a sincere attempt to understand opposing positions and to seek common ground. It is a stimulating discussion whether one agrees with it or not. Frank D’Angelo’s “A Generative Rhetoric of the Essay” applies Christensen’s notion of levels of coordination and subordination to complete texts, a process that D’Angelo elsewhere calls syntagmatic analysis. It is a provocative and advanced article for serious writing teachers. I have reservations about the pedagogical value of D’Angelo’s complex analytical process; it seems more likely to be a useful weapon in the arsenal of the rhetorical critic concerned with an already existent text. I certainly would not teach it to freshmen writers, but it might be of value in advanced or graduate composition courses, especially those including a high proportion of prospective teachers.

Finally, the two Braddock award winners. Jim Corder’s “What I Learned at School,” the introductory essay of the volume, narrates a semester in which Corder wrote each of the papers he assigned his freshmen. The process forced him to face the complexity and variety hiding in freshman assignments—even for a skilled writer. The essay (which defies summary) raises a number of issues about writing and teaching, all of them relevant to composition at any level. Gebhardt’s own award-winner, “Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers,” outlines “four kinds of knowledge for the writing teacher,” (structure and history of the language, rhetoric, theoretical frameworks, productive classroom methods), and these provide an excellent set of desiderata for the preparation of advanced as well as freshman composition instructors.

It is easy to criticize omissions from such collections, but as I reviewed the twenty-two issues of CCC covered, though I would personally have made a few different choices, I generally found little to complain about. I was, however, puzzled by the omission of three Braddock Award winners. Mary Hiatt’s “The Feminine Style: Theory and Fact” (October 1978) probably was not included because it is more research on written products than on the composition or pedagogical processes. It seemed a rather unusual article for CCC in the first place. But I have not reached any satisfactory explanation of why Frank D’Angelo’s “The Search for Intelligible Structure in the Teaching of Composition” (May 1976) and Glenn Matott’s “In Search of a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition” (February 1976) were omitted. Possibly both were regarded as too broad and theoretical for the collection.
In addition to its valuable insights, this volume offers a genuinely pleasant reading experience, for the articles selected are superbly clear, graceful, even elegant. These teachers write well, their own writing frequently a beautiful illustration of the position being set forth. The articles thus form a high-quality microcosm of that complex and various world of real discourse.

E.P.J. Corbett's editorial work was marked by great energy, a clear sense of purpose, and high standards--both substantive and stylistic. I have several manuscripts bearing his elaborate and helpful commentary to attest to his scrupulous attention to both stylistic and logical details. I even recall, with chagrin, once spending the better part of three days revising a three sentence passage whose imprecision in both argument and expression he had dissected with penetrating precision. Composi

Composition and Its Teaching is a just reflection of Corbett's leadership, an elegant and deserved tribute to the skill with which for six years he guided College Composition and Communication.

Reviewed by Richard Fulkerson

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1981 CCCC Program

ATAC members are urged to submit proposals for panels on any and all aspects of advanced composition to Mary McGann, Department of English, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43201 AS SOON AS POSSIBLE BUT NO LATER THAN 1 JUNE 1980. As Program Director of the ATAC, Mary McGann coordinates the program proposals for the ATAC membership so that as many of the most attractive programs on the subject of advanced composition may be submitted as possible. She was very successful in her work for 1980 and she will have an additional option for 1981 because the time-slot for the ATAC meeting will be devoted to a program rather than to a business meeting. Write to Mary McGann at Ohio State as soon as possible.

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