Transferable and Local Writing Skills

W. Ross Winterowd

One indication of the state of our profession is the discriminations that we are just getting around to making: useful, even essential, "sortings out" that, when they are made, seem embarrassingly obvious. One such "sorting out" or discrimination is essential for an understanding of what any composition class can do, whether advanced composition, technical writing, feature writing, or whatever.

In the writer's repertoire, there are local and transferable skills. Local skills have to do with a given genre and involve such matters as special forms (e.g., the scientific report), footnoting, vocabularies, special styles, and even the "tones" that particular fields demand. Transferable skills are the "basics" of writing: syntactic fluency, control of diction, sense of audience, organizational ability, "mechanics" such as punctuation and spelling.

A given class may attempt to confer both local and transferable skills on students (e.g., a course in technical writing); furthermore, the distinction between the kinds of skills becomes blurred at the middle of the spectrum. Nonetheless, it is crucial that composition teachers keep the distinction in mind.

According to my colleague and friend Stephen D. Krashen, there are two kinds of language Learning (note the capital L): acquisition and learning (note the lower case l). The overwhelming bulk of anyone's knowledge of language is acquired, that is, is learned in generally the same way that a child learns his or her native language: by hearing it, by attempting to use it, and by receiving feedback concerning semantic intention, not the form of the utterance. The child "swims" in a sea of language and mentally absorbs it because he or she is destined biologically to talk; the child makes attempts to communicate in an unfinished version of this language; the parent responds not to the imperfections of form, but to the child's apparent intention. Gradually, the child acquires a virtually total knowledge of the language, but this knowledge is tacit (to use Polanyi's term): roughly speaking, tacit knowledge is knowledge that paradoxically we do not know we know. For example, anyone and everyone can make a promise, but almost no one can state the set of constitutive rules for promising, even though these rules are explicitly formulable, as John Searle demonstrates.

Our knowledge of the rules for promising is tacit knowledge. However, we can consciously learn some language skills, through rules and paradigms. For example, we can consciously memorize a spelling rule and apply it: i before e except after c. If we are trying to learn German, we can memorize a paradigm for the definite article: Masc.: der, des, dem, den; Fem.: die, der, der, die; Neut.: das, des, dem, das; Pl.: die, der, den, die. It should be stressed, however, that we can learn only a very small part of what we need to use a language fluently. The vast part of our knowledge is acquired.

With Krashen, my colleague Betty Bamber, and others, I believe that the learning-acquisition theory applies to writing, as well as to the first language Learning, second language Learning, and second dialect Learning. If this assumption is valid--and we have good reason to believe that it is--then teachers of composition need to review their programs and methods in light of the theory.

Almost all of the transferable skills must, by and large, be acquired. Prewriting, writing, reformulation--these processes are acquired through models
(hence the importance of the proper kinds of reading); though making attempts at writing; through teacher intervention in the writing process; and through massive, intelligent feedback. (I do not want to oversimplify. In the effective composition class, the student is both learning and acquiring, but acquisition outweighs learning enormously.) The set of skills that can be learned—if they have not been acquired—are those of editing: punctuation, verb agreement, pronoun reference, and so on. As I have argued at length elsewhere, this concept leads to the establishment of two Learning scenes: a writing workshop, where acquisition takes place, and a laboratory, where editing skills are learned.

It seems equally obvious to me that local skills can be—and usually are—learned, though they also can be—and sometimes are—acquired. If this is the case, then a reasonable form for an advanced composition program begins to emerge.

In the first place, advanced composition students must have a relatively complete mastery of editing skills. Remediation in the mechanics of punctuation, verb agreement, and spelling have no place whatsoever in an advanced composition program.

Second, advanced composition students must have acquired a relatively high degree of ability with all of the transferable skills. (Institutions must determine their own criteria for defining “relatively high degree of ability.”) The acquired skills are at the heart of writing ability, and there is no upper limit to their refinement, just as there is no upper limit to the development of skills in any of the other arts.

Third, local skills can be either integrated into the program on the basis of individual student need or as specialized classes in advanced composition.

An example will explain the last paragraph. The ability to write funding proposals for various agencies, governmental and private, depends very largely on learning a set of local skills which are more or less clearly defined according to the agency to which the proposal is aimed. It is quite likely that a significant number of students—who have acquired a relatively high degree of writing skills—could benefit greatly from learning to write proposals. To accommodate these students, there are two possibilities. An advanced composition class could emphasize proposal writing and could even use the term “proposal” in its title. Alternatively, “units” on proposal writing could be developed for the laboratory so that students and faculty could learn the skills of proposal writing when the need arose.

In fact, the laboratory should contain many such units: research writing, writing for the social sciences, writing business letters, report writing, and so on.

This concept brings us squarely into “writing across the curriculum,” for clearly a sociologist can define the skills of sociological writing better than, say, a humanist. Therefore, the sociologist and the writing instructor working together can construct units through which students can learn the skills necessary to make writing acceptable in the social sciences.

Conversely, social scientists can learn how to “teach” writing classes in which students sharpen their acquired skills. Perhaps with undue optimism, I have claimed on several occasions that a literate, interested, and willing faculty member from any discipline can be trained as an effective writing teacher within a very short time, perhaps two weeks, and in another place I will outline the nature of that training. In fact, I have begun in-service training projects that seem to bear out my view.
One of the main problems with advanced composition is defining its goals. Is *advanced composition*, in fact, a euphemism for *advanced remedial writing*, or does the term imply the learning of specific forms such as that of the scientific report?

I suppose the advanced composition course that I would like to teach would be somewhat ill defined; it would be simply a course in writing—not in the composition of literary analysis or technical reports or personal essays, but in writing as writing, writing as an art. That is, I would not be so concerned with what the students wrote as with the quality of their writing, and, of course, there is a qualitative difference among, for instance, scientific reports as there is among representatives of all genres. The qualitative difference almost never comes about from learned skills, but from partially acquired skills, skills that students have not mastered or sharpened. As an adjunct to the course, I would, needless to say, have a well run lab, in which students could learn the forms that they needed for their writing, the local skills.

The key to all of this is an understanding of how people Learn to write. Until we pay attention to that, we will flounder and be more or less unproductive in our efforts.

Which brings me to my final, and polemic, statement. It is always a disaster if a faculty pays attention only to the teaching of writing, the designing of curricula, and so on. We need to ask the basic questions and to proceed on the basis of our knowledge. There is, after all, nothing quite so practical as good theory which we can test, either "scientifically" or in the laboratory of our own experience as teachers.

University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

NOTES

1. By "our profession," I mean the study of literacy and the teaching of reading and writing, and I include creative writing and all literary studies.


4. For three years, I have been working with the HUNTINGTON BEACH UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, and though we have no published studies, our experience indicates that the assumptions are valid and productive.