TOWARDS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF COMPOSITION

John T. Gage

A method is both a set of procedures and a set of assumptions. Most of the interest in the method of teaching composition has been focussed on the procedures, and my aim in this essay is to move this interest in the direction of the assumptions on which those procedures are based. In particular, I think we have neglected the question of what epistemological assumptions govern our teaching methods, i.e., how such methods assume certain kinds of relationship between what our students' writing says and by what means they claim to know it. If it is the case that some of our methods make assumptions about writing and knowledge that are inadequate, then it becomes particularly important that we attempt to adjust our teaching methods to assumptions about the nature of knowledge that are more appropriate.

No one denies a relationship between good writing and good thinking, and we depend on this relationship, in part, to justify teaching writing skills. More importantly, no theory of teaching writing claims to improve writing skills while making thinking worse. It seems unthinkable. Yet, because it has become a commonplace that good thinking is an automatic by-product of good writing, we have neglected to look at how some of the means by which we teach composition reinforce and encourage habits of mind that are unhealthy.

When addressed directly, the heading under which thinking skills are taught is "invention." For those who are most literal about the apparent distinctions between "invention, arrangement and style," the newer term "pre-writing" has seemed more appropriate. In the textbooks and in defenses of "pre-writing" techniques, I find no awareness that in the translation of "invention" as used in classical rhetoric to "pre-writing," a significant concept of invention theory has vanished, the concept of "stasis." Classical invention, which dealt with ways of discovering and testing available arguments, always began with the identification of a stasis, or the precise question at issue on which a writer and an audience found themselves in disagreement. Before they come together, an audience and a writer each know something already about matters that interest them mutually, and it is the difference between what they know
that motivates the need for communication—in both directions—and which therefore compels the act of writing itself. Thus, while classical invention systems aided the writer in finding means of bridging this difference, they were not designed to aid in discovering something to say. The writer's topic and thesis were defined by the mutual presence of a writer and an audience in a rhetorical situation.

Present day invention and pre-writing techniques assume no such situation. In fact, both terms are used interchangeably to mean "finding a topic." Such techniques assume that students need to discover something to write about, which implies that they must feel motivated to write before they are motivated to say something, before the experience of a writing situation which includes the need to say something. We send students in search of something to intend, then, as if intention itself were subject to free choice. Students do not begin writing in order to fulfill an intention; rather, they are assumed to begin intentionless to search for something to want to say.

I take it that none of us has to learn how to find something to intend. When we have intentions, what we seem to mean is that they have us. It is only after we have them that we feel the need to be sure that we understand what they are, whether we wish to have them, and, on the basis of what justifies them, what we must do to see them through. It is by having intentions, first, in other words, that we are even compelled to think about them. Only in the knowledge that our intentions are our own, they are just, and they conflict somehow with other intentions, do we feel the need to begin to search for the means that will be necessary and sufficient to bring them to pass. When we teach our students to search for intentions—which seems to me not only unnecessary but impossible—we in fact encourage them to sidestep the ethical and epistemological questions that follow from having real intentions, because what we have asked them to find will be pseudo-intentions, invented to serve as means to some other end, the end of completing a writing assignment. Such pseudo-intentions, invented for the classroom, cannot compel decisions about adequate means, except adequate means of fulfilling an assignment, because they do not emerge from the compulsion to write in the situation of conflict of belief, the situation acknowledged to come first in the classical idea of stasis.

What I am describing here, of course, is the familiar idea of "rhetorical stance." What is not so familiar about this old problem is that
because students are encouraged by our methods to write before they are compelled to say something, the intentions that they choose will carry no obligation to be tested against the conflicting intentions of others, nor to be looked into for their rightness or justice. The methods of pre-writing, directed at one's "subject" but not at one's conflict with an audience, provide no means of conducting such an inquiry into the basis of one's belief, nor do they depend on any necessity to so inquire. And the result of not asking such questions of belief is the implicit message that one idea is as good as another, provided that it is one's own.

This same implicit message is conveyed by some methods of teaching the forms of writing as available stylistic or structural options. Such methods require students to demonstrate the ability to use forms of sentences, or paragraphs or essays, which are defined as abstract paradigms, and seem to depend on the assumption that adequate choice of such forms is determined by the mere knowledge of the availability of these options, rather than by the prior existence of some real intention which brings with it the real need to write in one way and not another.

Of course, it can be objected that writing teachers do stress the need for such a purpose in determining the choice of options, which must be known in order to be used. Most, if not all, of these methods begin by prescribing the necessity of purpose. To prescribe that students must have a purpose, however, is not adequate if the techniques encourage students to neglect it because they do not depend on it. The empty forms that we encourage students to exercise as options are taught as if competence were the result of manipulating content to fit the form, and they reverse the "form follows function" ratio that proverbial wisdom tells us ought to pertain.

Our problem seems to be whether knowing the forms is the same as knowing how to use them. Here I would appeal to a distinction made by some philosophers. Gilbert Tyle, for instance, has distinguished two kinds of knowing: knowing that and knowing how. What is interesting in the philosophical distinction is that it does not seem possible to get from one to the other in any logical sense, that one cannot account for the ability of anyone to know how to do a thing because that person knows the rules, nor does knowing how constitute knowing the rules. Ryle's discussion of the difference is particularly relevant to our problem, because he shows that knowledge of what the options are cannot constitute knowledge of how to apply them in a given case. The paradigmatic cases are by nature too
general to embody the exigencies of situations, and it makes no logical sense to say that before one can know how to apply a maxim, one must know how to apply the maxims for applying maxims and so forth in an infinite regress. What we do well, Ryle concludes, we do unaided by maxims and general rules, though certainly we learn by doing a thing right or wrong and then worrying about which is which. The philosopher Michael Polanyi, in a similar discussion, even concludes that the only people to whom maxims are even comprehensible are those who already know how to do what they prescribe. After doing a thing, then one can look into its success, using paradigms and maxims as a guide, but this inquiry can only be carried out in the context of an intention that makes a difference. No one can be taught how to do something, according to this line of reasoning, who is not committed to the intention that is served by doing it well.

In writing, the sort of competence we desire is not the mere ability to exercise abstract paradigmatic patterns, but the ability to adjust and fine tune those means to fit particular situations which the forms themselves are unable to predict. In the exercise of this ability, form always comes second. The problem for teachers is not, however, to factor the rules for making this adjustment out of the composing process so that they can be taught prescriptively, even though such factoring seems to be the goal of much current research into the composing process. Rather, I think, the problem is, in part, how to learn to live with the uncertainty that is inherent in that process, so not to mislead either our students or ourselves about the nature of the skill we are teaching.

We mislead our students and ourselves when by our methods we imply that the difference between knowing how to write and not knowing how to write is a matter of being in possession of some secret formula. Even if our students do become competent manipulators of a few selected forms of discourse, the price they pay is the misleading assumption that a formula can be counted on for the correct solution to any writing problem. Unfortunately, this impression carries over into the intangible world of thought. Our methods of teaching writing often encourage the equally misleading assumption that the difference between being right or wrong, between knowing a thing and not knowing it, is the possession of some secret formula that constitutes an easy test of the truth.

Before I say how I think our methods do this, let me say that any such faith in a formulaic and automatic means of measuring truth, whether right
or wrong, is anti-rhetorical. Rhetoric, traditionally and in the renewed perspective of modern rhetoricians such as Ch. Perelman, Kenneth Burke and Wayne Booth, is by nature a dialectical art, which means that it depends on no absolute objective criteria for knowing but is generated instead from the principle that knowledge is by nature that which can be made into agreement. Rhetoric emerges from a sense of knowledge as an activity which is always carried on in the presence of other minds, rather than a commodity capable of being possessed and transferred unchanged from one isolated mind to another. This is not to say that rhetoricians must view truth as unknowable, but that the act of knowing, people being by nature made in the truths of others, goes on in relation to available beliefs.

Wayne Booth has written on this rhetorical sense of knowledge, primarily in a too much neglected book, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*. He isolates certain articles of modern faith which have resulted in an impoverished concept of rhetoric as the skill of winning, with intolerable consequences in the actual conduct of our discourse. We have all come to believe, Booth argues, in an inherent split between fact and value. For instance, we have placed our faith in a mechanistic view of reason that guarantees knowledge about facts but which consequently subordinates questions of value to irrationality and mere persuasive power. Or we have placed our faith in sure knowledge about value in irrationality, which similarly leaves no room for the possibility of rational assent and likewise reduces discourse to coercion. In either case, from what Booth calls either the "scientismic" or the "irrationalist" perspective, rhetoric becomes merely the skill of manipulating others to believe in ideas which are substantially proven only in some objective method or the subjective heart. Thus, we make truth independent of agreement, either because we want to view it as fundamentally mechanistic or fundamentally intuitive. In either case, the reasons we use to convince others become detached from the knowledge itself and are reduced to rationalizations chosen for the purpose of controlling other minds. The disastrous consequence of these assumptions, which Booth calls "motivism," is that we no longer have any good reason to take anyone else's reasons seriously, because reasons are no longer viewed as the basis of our beliefs, only as the basis of our manipulations.4

Booth challenges those modernist assumptions, and renews an ancient defense of the rhetorical nature of knowledge itself and our means of attaining it. He seeks to create an epistemology which puts no faith in self-evident truths which all must see if they have the right method or the
right frame of heart, but he does put faith in what he calls "the art of discovering warrantable beliefs and improving those beliefs in shared discourse." Rhetoric, then, becomes the ideal of mutual inquiry into sharable reasons, of measuring conclusions against the quality and adequacy of the reasons actually offered for them. Instead of an art of persuasion in a manipulative sense, rhetoric becomes the model for exploring the possibility of assent in the symbolic exchange of what one knows in the context of what others know. The contemporary conflict about methods of teaching writing might be characterized along the lines of the split which Booth says is contributing to the failure of our rhetoric. Booth himself includes "many freshman English texts" as contributors to the contemporary dogma that "the difference between good and bad persuasion will become simply a difference in skill, not knowledge or wisdom." Such texts assume, he says, "that the goal of all thought and argument is to emulate the purity and objectivity and rigor of silence, in order to protect oneself from the errors that passion and desire and metaphor and authority and all those logical fallacies lead us into."7

I resist an absolute categorization, but such methods as teach what I have called empty forms, whether as systems of invention or as paradigms for arrangement, seem to promulgate just such a faith in a priori, mechanistic means of solving problems of knowledge and persuasion. I disagree that, by idealizing the form, we can discover the formula in which thought is presumed to be at its objective best. One of the most distressing of these schemas, from my point of view here, is what has been done with the ideas of Kenneth Burke by composition teachers. They have lifted out of context, only sometimes apologetically, certain formulae for discovering ideas in writing which have nothing of that role in Burke's philosophy. It wouldn't be so bad, except that Burke's is a philosophy which is meant to make us wary of formulae. Burke shows how it is the nature of language to play out the conflicts produced by our inevitable ignorance about some things, and he shows us, therefore, how it is possible to live with conflict and ignorance without resorting to what he calls "the hysterical retreat into belief" which he says is responsible for intolerance, hatred, propaganda and brutality. This vast, ethical philosophy about the powers and limits of language, once transformed through the intervention of theorists of composition, has been reduced for millions of students to a simple procedure for getting quick answers. The procedure implies, despite the caveats of Burkean advocates that the "pentad" is an invention device, that sure answers await those who but ask the correct, pre-defined questions.
The mechanistic models of the form-givers have, of course, been rejected by all those who advocate that writing can best be learned in the exercise of free expression and honest introspection. Such techniques, which range from not writing at all to keeping journals of private feelings, would correspond—in the distribution that I still resist even as I make it—to the irrationalist dogmas in Booth's assessment. At least, such a characterization allows us to recognize that these "free" techniques support the assumption that knowledge is a private affair, sought by purging oneself of otherness. At least they seem to privilege the essentially intuitive feelings that resist communication if that process entails compromising the self with convention. Either the objective or the subjective extreme encourages the same anti-rhetorical view of knowledge: that it is independent of agreement, either because it exists as a result of the application of some rule outside the self or because it exists as the result of escaping rules which frustrate the true expression of the self. The subjective/objective distinction itself, like the fact/value split of which Booth speaks, is one of the dogmatic assumptions that reduces rhetoric and writing to an act of declaration, setting rhetoric and writing apart from the intention of engaging a real audience in the process of mutual inquiry into conflicting ideas.

A more adequate theory of knowledge for the teaching of writing would seem to require acknowledging the rhetorical nature of the self as it is made in an exchange with and being dependent on other selves. It also requires a willingness to live with the problematical nature of the "inter-subjective" relationship between language and knowledge, rather than to attempt to overcome this nature by reducing writing to a skill of filling in empty forms or to a knack of equally purposeless self expression. It would require acknowledging both the source and test of knowledge in others, and replace persuasion narrowly defined with cooperation. It would seek to engage students in a process in which they have to confront what they know with what others know, to take the reasons of others seriously, to care whether they say what they have to say well and to look for grounds for assent in a situation of disagreement. And the theory of knowledge would seek to develop a means of allowing the form of writing to be generated organically—as Plato has it in the Phaedrus—out of the sense of what needs to be said in the contest of this dialectical exchange.

I should say that this is not an impossible task, and in defense of our profession, that there are some methods in our teaching strategies which attempt to achieve this aim. I have left myself little room in this negative
harangue to advocate anything or to give a fair account of these methods. I will do no more than suggest, therefore, that from the philosophical defense of rhetoric as a means of knowing, certain practices recommend themselves. I am reluctant to say that there is any single practice that is most consistent with what I have described as a more adequate epistemology. For one thing, any such procedure can be reduced to the sort of easy formula which I have said leads to unhealthy assumptions. In fact, the principles which Aristotle developed from what appears to be a dialectical perspective were reduced in just this fashion quite early in the rhetorical tradition, so we have the heritage of empty forms from much of the rhetorical tradition to contend with as part of our problem. Not surprisingly, however, such practices as I would advocate depend heavily on the classical tradition, for it is the neglect of such concepts as dialectic and stasis which I see as contributing to the inadequacy of contemporary methods.¹⁰

To this short list I would add the concept of the enthymeme, which might be restored to its role of centrality in the teaching of rhetoric and by that means encourage us to view knowledge as discovered and tested in the mutually respected reasons of others. The practice of enthymemic invention is getting more attention recently,¹¹ but, rather than end this theoretical essay with a sudden departure into the practical, I will only say how this way of approaching writing is based on different assumptions from those which I have accused of inadequacy. Most invention techniques are accompanied by the advice that students should “know their audience;” yet, because such techniques are designed to get students to look into the nature of their subject, they do not depend for their success on this advice being carried out. The enthymeme, however, when applied to invention, is necessarily dialectical and can only be discovered and written in the mental presence of an audience, because it is the audience which is mutually engaged in the definition of the question at issue which the enthymeme addresses. The audience is mutually engaged in the definition of the shared assumption which allows the logic of the enthymeme to function. Thus I engage students in finding the enthymemes which generate the logic of what they have written (and that will always be there, whether their writing is expository or narrative or what have you). I involve them by asking how much the truth of what they have said depends on the possibility of their knowing what others might say about the same question and what their own reasons are. They can discover, by this means, that what they would like to think is only as good as what others think about it in response. Beyond this, then, I would have students be able to use enthymemes as a way of thinking out the exigencies of a piece of
writing beforehand, not to be able to assert what they wish were true in the absence of conflict, but to discover what can be made the basis of agreement, in the context of known reasons to disagree. Although in one sense, then, the enthymeme must be formulaic to have this function, yet there are no secret rules or pure forms which will guarantee when it will find its audience, how it must be put together or where it will all lead. All these things depend entirely on the nature of the audience and on the students' reasons for writing to reach the audience. In fact, the effort to compose structural enthymemes conveys the implicit message—to use my earlier phrase—that conviction is no easy matter and that it involves risk and responsibility of confronting others' ideas with respect in the mutual search for assent. So, at the same time, the enthymeme is not reducible to a systematic procedure, which may have been one of Aristotle's reasons for viewing it as a metonymy for the whole rhetorical enterprise.

The use of the enthymeme is only one way in which we can approach teaching writing that does not distort the rhetorical nature of knowledge and discourse, as I think some of our other methods do. I mention it only to suggest that such methods are impossible. Employing them in the writing classroom is not a matter of finding the perfect technique, as I have tried to indicate, but a matter of simply acknowledging that no such technique is likely to emerge for the teaching of the essentially intractable skill of good writing. Perhaps, in the mad rush of our profession to produce the technique which will guarantee this skill, we have neglected sometimes to ask ourselves why we think it is such an important skill to acquire. Do we want to produce writers whose skill is an uncritical source of power over others? Or do we want to produce writers whose experience with both the powers and limits of language help them achieve a critical, inquiring stance towards the powerful persuasions of others? It's a loaded question, I realize. It was loaded when Plato asked it.
NOTES


6Something similar is argued by Booth in "The Uncritical American: or, Nobody's from Missouri Anymore," Now Don't Try to Reason with Me, esp. p. 65.

7Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent, pp. 87, 88.


10For a treatment of the epistemological themes in classical rhetoric which is different from my own, yet leads to similar conclusions about contemporary methods, see C.H. Knoblauch, "Modern Composition Theory and the Rhetorical Tradition," Freshman English News 9 (Fall, 1980), 3-17.