THE TEACHER AS PHILOSOPHER:
THE MADNESS BEHIND OUR METHOD

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Although the teaching of writing has a long and complex history of arguments about the nature of discourse, the nature of learning, and the nature of learning to write, the actual practice of the profession as illustrated in its textbooks lags behind the most current theory or worse, mixes incompatible theories through the classroom activities these textbooks recommend. Few serious scholars or teachers of composition would point to textbooks in the field as embodying the philosophical principles of the profession. Yet it is nonetheless true for many teachers of writing that their only introduction to the profession comes from the textbooks that are offered to them. Coming often from areas outside, and only tangentially related to, the teaching of writing, they have little inclination or time to read the research and scholarship in the field or to attend professional meetings which are focused on composition, the very places where the "trouble" with textbooks is openly discussed. More often than not, they are simply left alone to teach from memories of how they were taught, and from the folklore, outmoded assumptions, and false analytical distinctions enshrined in textbooks. Publishers will readily say that they are interested only in publishing what will sell. They are in business. Therefore, if we are to demand that textbooks embody the best theory available to teachers, we must first give teachers of writing, particularly those who see this role as subordinate to that of scholar and teacher within their area of study, good reason to become philosophers of composition.

The absence of reflectiveness found among teachers of writing, I submit, comes from a conviction that one method is as good as another, that method is, in fact, a matter of personal style. Teachers tend to see method strictly in terms of isolated techniques and strategies, the classroom razzle-dazzle and tricks of the trade, the recipe swap shops that constitute classroom
activity. They, therefore, rationalize their absence of reflectiveness by saying that one method is as good as another as long as "it works," and indeed a healthy eclecticism is the best strategy of all because students learn in different ways. In other words, method is restricted only to solving the dilemma of what to do Monday morning and is supported by the range of activities that some textbooks offer. But what underlies eclecticism, more often than not, is a lack of philosophical perspective so that all methods seem equivalent, discriminated by nothing more than an individual's sense of what would be interesting and entertaining. And eclecticism too often becomes justified because it appears to support the educational needs of diverse students who have different learning styles and who should be approached in flexible and customized ways. It is true that our students can profit from a range of classroom experiences. Diversity of approach supported by a unified philosophical perspective about the nature and value of composing, the nature of learning, and the nature of learning to write assists our students in their development as writers. But eclectism unguided by any philosophical reflectiveness offers variety at the price of contradiction, resulting in confused pedagogical goals and mixed instructional messages to students.

Here is an example. A current best selling handbook on the market offers students two incompatible approaches to assist their development as writers: traditional grammar exercises and free writing. Grammar exercises assume a mechanical model of how people learn to write: first they learn abstract grammatical forms (subject, verb, direct object, complex sentence), then they practice the forms in uncontextualized drills, and then finally, much later, they use the forms to convey personal ideas in "real" writing. By contrast, a classroom practice such as "free writing" assumes a different view of learning: that writers already possess enough grammatical competence to begin writing, that the best way to improve a writer's performance is to keep the writer writing, and that the pursuit of personally valuable meanings is as important to unpracticed writers as it is for experienced writers. The more traditional grammar-based approach values formal and technical propriety above all, viewing instruction as a process of eradicating errors. The approach which includes free writing values the writer's slow, linear, somewhat haphazard discovery of personal meanings above all, viewing instruction as a process of stimulating and supporting the search for meaning even to the point of over-
looking errors as pedagogically insignificant. The teacher who would argue that the sequence of activities is what is at issue (first have students engage in free writing and then have them do grammar drills or the reverse) misses the philosophical issue at stake. No matter which activity happens first, the strategies conflict on the level of intellectual perspective and instructional purpose.

To be truly methodical about their teaching, teachers of writing must continually audit their governing philosophical perspective and the shape that perspective takes in their interactions with students. They must assume a habit of mind that causes them to continually monitor what they are doing in light of the philosophical premises governing their teaching practices. This process of philosophical reflectiveness can begin in faculty development workshops which link theory and practice together by allowing teachers a chance to engage, themselves, in the classroom activities that they will provide students and generalize from their own behaviors toward philosophical assumptions and educational values. A less likely, but more intelligent approach would be to have all teachers of writing be academically prepared in rhetoric and composition. An in-depth graduate education can sharpen theoretical understanding and help teachers to discover more productive lines of inquiry if they are willing to pursue those questions, are motivated to understand the philosophical assumptions guiding them, and are flexible enough to explore the classroom implications of those premises. But in any event, the intellectual discipline needed for teachers to become methodical comes only from a willingness to examine values and assumptions as they relate to goals and practice. Only when teachers become aware of why they do what they do can their instruction become deliberate and purposeful and not just a matter of custom and accident. Teachers can better understand the strengths and limitations of their classroom practice and even question the very assumptions guiding those practices when there is an intellectual context and curiosity which continues to direct their teaching.

What most impedes the development of theoretical sophistication is that teachers are unacquainted with the history of rhetoric, the subject from which their views of the nature of writing and many of their classroom practices are chiefly derived. They, therefore, tend to rely on their textbooks to provide them with the subject-concepts of the discipline and the classroom activities that derive from those concepts. The trou-
ble with learning the discipline from textbooks is that the majority of them are written by other writing teachers, equally unfamiliar with the rhetorical tradition, who have based their books on personal teaching experience and with reference to other competing textbooks as unfamiliar with the history of rhetoric as their own. The consequent sterile repetitiveness and historical naiveté of most textbooks create the impression that rhetoric is a monolith, that nothing has changed between Cicero and Kenneth Burke. On the contrary, however, rhetorical theory has undergone radical changes through its history, most importantly changes regarding the nature of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and discourse, which have rendered classical models obsolete, the very models on which textbooks most often rely.²

The classical perspective assumed that knowledge was a fixed, static body of information which could be represented as discourse but was not dependent on discourse for its value as knowledge. Discourse was merely the framework in which knowledge was assembled in decorous ways. People learning to write learned how to retrieve knowledge from available sources and present it in prescribed formats. Learning to write was equivalent to learning the forms in which to put knowledge. A modern view, on the contrary, assumes that knowledge cannot exist separate from the knower or exist separate from its articulation as discourse. The habits of mind that cause us to order our experiences are natural competences. Discourse is the manifestation of those intellective processes. So in a modern perspective, writing is a way of composing, a way of discovering connections among bits and pieces of experience and rendering it coherent. Discourse, then, manifests the making of meaning, the interpretation of experience. Composing is not an activity of slotting ideas into coherent structures as the classical model assumes, but of making ideas coherent by means of the relationship of those ideas. Writing is a process of forming those relationships. The process can be nurtured, but it is not explicitly taught; that is, teachers can assist the growth of writing ability but they do not offer that ability as a gift from the literate to the not yet literate.³

Because of the lack of philosophical understanding or reflection, some textbook writers have taken the terminology from modern rhetoric and redefined it in classical terms. An ad announcing the third edition of a popular textbook illustrates this point:
The emphasis is on the process of writing—a process that comprises six basic steps. Step 1 requires students to write a simple declarative sentence. Step 2 directs them to write three sentences about the sentence in Step 1. Step 3 asks students to write a paragraph for each sentence in Step 2. Steps 4-6 help them develop and refine their paragraphs, showing them how to use specific, concrete details and examples, and how to achieve smooth, explicit transitions between paragraphs and between sentences.¹

Process as defined here is a set of procedures, a recipe for developing an idea. The procedure is classically based—the author assumes that the structure that the student assembles, one step at a time, exists separate from the ideas that the student generates. In fact, the interconnecting of ideas is saved for the final steps of the procedure, presumably as a final polishing of the text. Process as defined by modern rhetoric is not a procedure. Rather the term is used to describe the complex mental acts of forming ideas from the chaos of experience and the connecting of these ideas one statement at a time. The process is not linear but recursive. It does not happen in any predictable stages and can not be learned at the discretion of a teacher. Rather the habits of mind that process defines are innate competences that students can develop and teachers can nurture. But the process cannot be imposed or taught explicitly or learned as an abstract system as this ad suggests.

It can be argued of course that many students do eventually learn to write by composing within the constraints of some classically-based organizational system. Yet I would submit that modern rhetoric shows us that the teacher who insists on the classical perspective only makes the task of learning to write more difficult. The reason it is difficult is that the constraints imposed by the organizational pattern force students not only to have to discover connections and relationships among ideas (which is difficult enough for all writers) but also to do so within predetermined boundaries imposed by the teacher. Teachers unaware of the modern perspective sometimes believe that their systems really are the patterns that organize experience for writers. They will argue that it is necessary for writers to practice this or that system in this or that sequence so that writers shall develop a repertory of organizational strategies to survive the rigors of academic life. But although writing can be shaped in ways teachers prescribed, the form does not insure coherence or probity of reasoning or logical entailment, as countless freshmen essays will attest. What happens most often is that the
patterns restrict too rigidly the writers' choices, forcing them to attend to the limits of the pattern rather than to the shape of their evolving meanings. Without an understanding of the modern perspectives, teachers fail to see that organization is only what writers end up with. It is not imposed from without nor can it be practiced and learned once and for all. Writing appears organized because writers have shaped their ideas organically by forming relationships and making connections. Organization is the achievement of a search for meaning. It is not a format that writers start out with or refer to from time to time to determine if they have followed the pattern accurately in order to be organized.

In response to this overly rigid approach to writing instruction, some teachers have opted to combine methodologies from the two radically different perspectives (the classical and the modern) without knowing that the perspectives differ and are opposed. I believe they do so because they see the value of having students explore ideas and relationships and then notice how unorganized their attempts are. Here is an example. A teacher might ask students to write an exploratory piece (a journal entry or in-class "prewriting") in response to the question, "How is country life similar to and different from city life?" After generating the material, the students are asked to write a compare/contrast essay following the formal features of alternating pattern described in many textbooks. The first activity (the exploratory writing) is based on modern philosophical assumptions; the second (the organizational pattern of compare/contrast) is based on a classical perspective. The juxtaposition of these activities may seem reasonable or at least unproblematic when viewed only as a sequence of classroom activities. Students' exploratory writing is predictably disjointed and rambling, and so teachers suppose that students need some structured way to order their thoughts. The organizational pattern of compare/contrast appears to offer a neat package to insure the coherence of the students' ideas. But at the deeper level of philosophical perspective, the two activities are opposed.

The modern perspective values a writer's need to follow ideas as they are formed. Because forming is not linear but dialectical, a draft, a linear representation, may appear disjointed. If connections are missing, the necessary material either exists in the writer's mind but is not represented on the page or has not been formed at all by the writer (the writer does
not see the insufficiency or the connections that a reader may perceive). More often than not, the former is true. If the later is true, writers probably are trying to represent ideas that they do not yet comprehend. No formal shell will necessarily supply the missing connections. In fact, what formal organizational patterns tend to do is to redirect the writers' attention away from what they want to say and toward filling in slots with material whether or not they believe the evidence to be true or personally valuable. Whether or not the teacher values what writers have to say, the message that a formal pattern sends to writers is that their ideas matter only to the extent that the form is filled in appropriately. Teachers who believe they can assist students in organizing the chaos of preliminary ideas and connections by giving them preconceived patterns to put ideas into do so, I believe, because the system seems neat and convenient. What teachers are actually doing, however, is ignoring the way that writing actually comes about.

But some teachers might ask, "How do teachers show students how to get the collage of ideas they have generated to a finely structured essay without using either the 'block' or 'point by point' methods of comparison?" The modern perspective shows that writers learn how to write by continually engaging in the activity and by steadily applying the habits of mind that allow for intellectual penetration of a subject. However, this writing does not happen in a vacuum. Writers need to be shown how readers might respond to their formulations. By internalizing readers' questions, writers can begin to locate possible problems within their own texts, return to the chaos of preliminary ideas, and reformulate them, attempting to make connections more explicit. Students strive to form relationships in writing, testing the formulations on readers, and revising their efforts, taking into account the difference they have been helped to perceive between what they want to say and what they have actually said, or between the effects they want to create and the actual reactions of their readers. This process of writing, listening to readers' questions, and revising to take into account the needs of readers is a slow one. There are no short cuts or ready-made solutions. Because no reference is made to formal organization patterns, particularly as part of the writing assignment, students are free for their ideas to find their own shape, but they are also at times going to fail. Even if some students do compose an unsuccessful essay comparing country life to city life, they will still learn from readers' thoughtful questions and
through their attempts at revising in response to reactions from their questioning reader.

The classical and modern perspectives on the concepts that comprise our discipline—the nature of knowledge, the roles of readers and writers in the creating of discourse, the nature of discourse itself—are much richer and more elaborate than can be covered in a short essay. But the part these perspectives play in the way teachers of writing approach instruction is profound. Teaching writing is a complex intellectual discipline that should require of its practitioners a solid grounding in the philosophical perspectives which shape it. Until composition teachers become philosophers who continually monitor what they are doing and why, they will not be able to articulate to the rest of the academy the necessary and vital role they play in the academic lives of their students. Rather teachers of writing will remain on the fringes of academic life, providing an auxiliary service to the university at large, falling prey to the educational fads that come and go, and being held responsible for things which, in fact, lie far beyond their control. Perhaps I have convinced no one to abandon their textbooks and to change classroom practice based on the argument of this paper. Still, I hope that I have created enough dissonance to suggest that teachers begin the process of philosophical investigation by continually monitoring what their methods say about the nature of writing and the nature and value of learning to write.

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NOTES

1The position offered here is part of a longer argument I constructed with C. H. Knoblauch in Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1984).
4This advertisement for Writing to the Point: Six Basic Steps by William J. Kerrigan (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, 1982) appeared in the November 1982 issue of College English.