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Writing as Art

FRANCIS L. FENNELL

WE SAY, perhaps too glibly, that good writing is an art. But suppose we take that conviction seriously, suppose we examine its implications. If we teach an art, surely there are relationships between what we do and what teachers of other arts do. What can we learn from observing them, and what concrete changes in the way we teach our subject might be suggested by this observation?

To view writing as an art should encourage us. It dispels the myth that writing cannot be taught. No one would deny that to become an accomplished pianist, for example, requires instruction. Conceivably you could learn the piano very painstakingly on your own, but in practice a good teacher is almost indispensable for mastering the art quickly and for developing technique. There are limits to his powers, of course. Because of the immense number of variables in practice time, interest, experience, and talent—variables which apply equally to instructor and pupil—improvement may be dramatic or negligible. And even in the best relationship, there may come a time when the student overreaches the instructor, when he becomes answerable only to his own ear and his own taste. But no one challenges the instructor's role, only, occasionally, the competence of a particular person to fulfill that role.

Furthermore we observe that the teaching of other arts is almost always based on two simple principles. The first of these is that learning is incremental. The student of piano begins with middle C, then moves on to the rest of the octave, the use of the left hand, sharps and flats. The mastery here is

concurrent. He may begin with middle C, but in another sense, he always remains with it, because he continues to practice it and keep it as part of his skills. The second principle is that learning means repetition and revision. The student is conducted again and again through a few familiar pieces of music. The purpose is not only to increase his ease and fluency but also to sharpen his technique, to change (read "revise") his playing until it is more graceful, sensitive, nuanced. And of course both processes are supervised by someone who is more experienced in the art.

The same twofold process occurs in the other arts as well. Painting, poetry, sculpture, even such bodily arts as gymnastics or the dance—each is acquired step by step, one skill complementing another, the technique constantly refined by practice. Always too there is a teacher, who suggests, criticizes, stimulates and who can serve as a model of relative success in the art.

If we apply these principles to the art of writing, it means that we should teach incrementally. We have to deal with the constituent elements, with words and paragraphs, with tone and rhythm, each skill building on the other. This process must also be accompanied by constant revision, "replaying" the piece until it becomes haltingly but recognizably "true," true to the experience or the idea which the writer feels he must convey.

Of course, this seems hardly novel. There are books which begin with the word, then move on to the sentence, the paragraph, the whole essay; and every

composition text makes a plea for revision. But somehow we often feel it doesn't work. The reason, I think, our use of these methods has been relatively ineffective is that we have not observed closely enough this model of writing-as-art. If we did, we would see fundamental differences between the way we teach our art and the way other instructors teach theirs.

One difference is structural. No one who wishes to teach the piano would try to instruct twenty-five people at once. In fact, the usual method is for instructor and student to meet alone, perhaps for a half hour once a week. Class size, of course, is a factor over which we have little control. No administration will allow us to tutor eight students instead of teaching a full section. But we should be aware of the anomaly which our course structure represents when compared to the other arts, and we can be forthright in showing how this might affect our "results."

Part of our difficulty may come from the conditions under which we labor. But other differences exist for which we must bear responsibility and which do lie within our remedy. For example, in every other art, the apprentice has an implied goal of becoming like his teacher, perhaps later of becoming like the great masters of the art. At first, you want to be able to play Beethoven's "Minuet in G" like your teacher does. You compare your skills with his, your accuracy and pacing with his. Eventually, aspirations may be even higher, and you may seek a more accomplished instructor. But always the teacher instructs by demonstration.

In writing, we seldom proceed this way. How often, for example, do we complete the same assignments we ask of our students and then show them our own writing as a model of how the assignment could have been developed? There may be several reasons for our

not doing this. Perhaps we don't think of it, perhaps it seems unnecessary or even vainglorious. Perhaps—most unsettling possibility of all—we doubt our ability to create a paper demonstrably superior to the work of our best students. If that is the case, if we do not know much more about writing than they do and if we cannot show that superiority to their satisfaction as well as ours, then maybe we do not belong in the writing classroom. The piano teacher who can barely get through "Chopsticks" would be ridiculed. Yet we as teachers of writing never have to give others assurance of our own mastery. Even if we can write very well but never let our students see how we can perform, our habit is one which teachers of any other art would find curious.

Another anomaly. The student of piano, once he has acquired certain basic skills, expects to be turned loose on works of the same kind as his teacher performs. He learns a Rachmaninoff Prelude and compares his attempts with his teacher's surer grasp of the work. However limited his skill may be as yet, he plays real music, not nursery rhymes.

Think of the situation of our writing students. I submit that the one thing a professional writer does *not* do, unless he is a columnist, is compose a series of short weekly papers on a wide variety of subjects. More to the point, I doubt if any of us writes papers of that sort either. Yet we blithely continue to ask of students what a more experienced writer would hardly ever undertake.

Suppose a professional writer were to have three or four months to write as he pleased. What would be considered a fair "output" for that period, if he, like our students, had several other obligations to attend to as well? For a slow and careful workman, perhaps one or two long essays might seem a reasonable expectation, if he writes non-fiction prose. Closer to home, we ourselves would probably be

satisfied with an article or a chapter of a book, especially if we are occupied with other duties like teaching or administration.

Why then should we not ask the same of our students? They already have the basic skills; they are ready to try Rachmaninoff. Not necessarily to do well at it, but at least to try it. Instead of demanding a series of short and probably unrelated assignments, we can organize a writing course around the creation of one or at the most two longer essays. At the same time we can hold to the professional writer—even, if we have courage enough, to ourselves—as a model of how such essays are written.

The effect of holding to such a model can be dramatic. We can show our students how the good writer allows his work to grow from a kernel of experience, crafting words, sentences, paragraphs the same way an apprentice writer must do. He also adds, cuts, revises. Our students, by seeing these processes in the context of the larger works they have in hand, works which are constantly growing and changing, can value them accordingly. Nor will the frustrating weekly search for “something to write on” any longer distort the relationship between process and product.

Can a course be devised according to this model which will be useful and teachable? My experience, and the experience of those teaching assistants who have taught under my supervision, would indicate yes. Let me describe the way these writing courses are now taught, to show one possible way of relating the model of writing-as-art to the classroom.

The course begins with several days of what Ken Macrorie would call “free” or “shotgun” writing. The student is encouraged to write out as many ideas or experiences as he can. Low pressure, the emphasis on capturing life in words, especially through sensory details. The

point to be made is that *all* writing comes from personal experience, if that experience is defined widely enough to include intellectual experiences (books, conversations, thoughts) as well as emotional or physical ones. We can only write about what we know.

But at the same time, we have to remember Frank O'Connor's caution about aspiring writers “who'd had affairs with girls or had had another interesting experience, and wanted to come in and tell about it, straight away. That is not a theme. A theme is something that is worth something to everybody.” From the very beginning the student is urged to search his experiences for the meanings they contain. The humblest event can speak, can, again in O'Connor's words, “say . . . what you think about human beings.” A paragraph on a grandmother's funeral, for example, might raise any number of fascinating issues: sociological (the unwritten etiquette for wakes), economic (the high cost of dying), moral or religious (the licitness of euthanasia). Even that hoary “my summer job” can give us people, places, ideas that absorb our interest. The student must be brought to see that what has happened to him is valuable material which can touch very closely the needs of his reader. We value the writer's experience for what it can tell us about ourselves.

After a week or two of free writing, the student begins trying to isolate a feeling, an idea, an experience that has for him more than usual significance. He is asked to focus, to clarify, then to write more about the subject. We have a germ out of which can grow a much larger body of writing. Perhaps the paper will develop a personal experience, its fuller implications only now being realized. Perhaps it will become what we like to call “expository,” as the student warms to a subject that fascinates him. Perhaps argumentative: an issue is defined, the

student feels strongly about it, he begins to explore facts, premises, conclusions.

Week by week the paper grows. New parts are added, older parts are expanded, revised, sometimes cut entirely. The class meets twice weekly for seventy-five minutes. On the first meeting each week the student is expected to bring some pages of new writing. There is no minimum or maximum length, beyond what common sense imposes, and the new writing need not be the "next" part of the finished paper. (Sometimes the overall structure of the paper does not emerge until very late in the course, sometimes—especially if the structure is chronological—the order is clear from the start.) At the second class meeting, the student brings a piece of earlier writing which has been revised. Again no specific requirements: it can be a paragraph now expanded to a full page as the author sees more of its meaning; it can be several pages tightened or made more vigorous or metaphorical. But the emphasis always is on simultaneously adding and revising. Creativity requires both.

Class time is primarily devoted to providing the writer with useful suggestions from his peers. The class is divided into four or five groups. Each group remains constant for the term so that the members can become familiar with each other's project. New writing is passed around for reading and then for oral or written comment. When the period is over, the writer usually has the benefit of written suggestions from four or five readers and several minutes of conversation with readers who wanted to question, praise, or criticize. These comments have more point than such class discussions usually have, because they will almost always serve as guides for later revision.

Sometimes the class meets as a "committee of the whole" and discusses a mimeographed paper. There is also time

for talking about general writing problems or about selections from a reader. But always the focus is on the student's evolving essay, the work of art which slowly, "with a little help from some friends," is taking shape.

The instructor's role is also important. He is first of all a sympathetic but frank reader of student papers. In this instance, he does not differ in kind from the other readers in the class, except that he reads all of the papers rather than four or five, and his greater experience should enable him to make comments that are more than usually helpful. But in addition, he is willing to assume the role of authoritative advisor, even almost of collaborator, like Pound helping Eliot with *The Wasteland*. Conferences are used to discuss each writer's particular difficulties. If the paper narrates a personal experience, how can that experience be made more vivid, how can its implications be seen more clearly? If the paper is an argument, how can it be restructured to make it more effective? What cogent opposing arguments has the writer not yet taken into account?

The instructor now has a natural forum for the creative use of his own talents as a writer. For example, he can take the raw data of the student writer's experience and work up one or two vigorous, dramatic paragraphs which show the student the exciting possibilities which those experiences can offer. Of course a tactful line must be drawn between demonstration and actually writing the student's paper for him, but we needn't be so afraid of involving ourselves actively in the student's work. We are writers, not correctors. The teacher might also bring to class examples of his own writing, perhaps an article he is working on, and ask the class for constructive criticism. He becomes participant as well as advisor and judge.

Another important advantage here is that rhetoric or logic is taught on an

individual basis, when the writer's situation demands it. Rather than simply hearing about it in the abstract, the student sees how a certain rhetorical device helps him to surmount a problem he has encountered. "Definition" becomes not a category of essays but a tool that must be acquired before the writing can continue. Even research methods can become absorbing at the point where a writer discovers that he must learn more before he can write more. The best learning takes place when the need to know is pressing.

Textbooks assume a new (albeit smaller) role, and choices are therefore easier to make. If our model is that of a professional writer, the significance of an anthology, for example, becomes clearer: the book offers examples of good writing that a student can admire. It's the joy of hearing Oistrakh play the violin, of watching Nureyev do an *entrechat*, of tasting a superbly prepared crepes suzette. Consequently, the most useful anthologies of essays will be those which emphasize good writing. Not "relevant" writing (how issue-oriented are our students anyway?) or student writing (although these are not necessarily excluded) but writing chosen for its stylistic excellence.

Surely it will be objected that, if we find it difficult to teach a student how to produce a vigorous and coherent paragraph, we can hardly hope to succeed with a twenty-page essay. How does greater length in an essay solve the problems encountered in shorter papers? Moreover, the possibility of sheer boredom, for both student and teacher, seems all too clear. And even if we grant the desirability of such a method, might it not place intolerable burdens on the instructor?

One can only test a theory empirically. My experience would indicate that, paradoxical as it may seem, students do learn

to write better sentences, better paragraphs, when they focus on a longer paper. This happens I think because they can now see a word or a paragraph, not as some isolated and mysterious entity but rather as a constituent of a longer work. They see in context. To borrow from a former analogy, they appreciate the importance of mastering middle C because without it the "Minuet" is impossible.

I would also contend that greater length does solve some of our most common difficulties in teaching writing. Instead of the usual snip-and-pad that often passes for revision, the student revises constantly, going over the same piece of writing two times or six times—whatever is necessary to get it "right." He can even start over again if he has to. I have had students scrap the whole essay in mid-November and begin it afresh, usually with good results. Moreover, the barrier of constantly choosing a new subject is removed entirely, so that the writer is free to concentrate on the "how" rather than on the "what." His writing may be personal experience, exposition, or argumentation, or a mixture of all three, but the choice will be a natural one, determined by the subject and the writer's own bent rather than by the instructor. And above all, greater length is a step toward curing what seems to me the most characteristic fault of the young writer: his lack of vivid detail, his preference for summarizing an experience rather than giving the texture of it.

Nor does boredom seem to be a frequent difficulty. The apprentice writer, perhaps for the first time, is at work on something which absorbs him and the creation of which seems to him valuable. The only problem I have encountered, and that rarely, is when a student plunges excitedly into a subject which absolutely benumbs his readers (including me). Occasionally a student will not understand, despite many tactful and a few

blunt hints to the contrary, that an essay on "my training as a dental hygienist" does not strike quite the same sparks as Thoreau's account of his year at Walden Pond.

One might question the feasibility of such a program because it seems as if it might make excessive demands on an instructor's time. What happens in practice, however, is that the teacher, rather than spending additional time, finds himself distributing his time in new ways. For example, he spends fewer hours than before on class preparation. A teacher of the piano does not work up a "lecture": he comes to the lesson so thoroughly imbued with his subject that he can talk about it easily, extemporaneously. Nor does he march in with a textbook in hand, expecting the book to do his work for him. There is nothing in our art which should make us specially dependent on lectures or texts. Our time is far better spent in dealing, from our own experience as writers, with specific students and specific problems.

While he spends less time in preparing lectures, the instructor, according to this model, spends more time than before in reading papers and conferring with students about their essays. Since each student submits two writings each week, there is a good deal of reading. But even here, the burden is lightened by the fact that each new writing has already been read and commented on at some length by several student readers. Approximately three conferences, of perhaps a half hour each, augment this reading during the course of the term. Occasionally, when the need dictates, conferences can be scheduled in lieu of class meetings.

To teach writing as an art asks for a redirection of our thinking rather than the imposition of extra duties. In fact, when we see the essays that our students can create when we hold to this model, what burdens there are can be joyously borne.

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Words

There is more than I can tell you,
Words would stumble, words would creep.
I would spiral like a comet,
I would sparkle, I would sweep.

I would soar beyond the ether;
Words are heavy, words are lead,
Words are sooty smoky grey
Instead of fire burning red.

JACQUELINE BERKE
*Drew University
Madison, New Jersey*