OE FORM 6000, 2/69

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ERIC ACC. NO.				IS DOCUMENT COPYRIGHTED? YES [X] NO
ED 032 347				ERIC REPRODUCTION RELEASE? YES [X] NO
CH ACC. NO.	P.A.	PUBL. DATE	ISSUE	LEVEL OF AVAILABILITY I [X] II [ ] III
TE 500 555		Apr 66	RIEJAN70	

AUTHOR
Simonson, Solomon S.

TITLE
The Teaching of Composition.

SOURCE CODE	INSTITUTION (SOURCE)
JIM56550	
SP. AG. CODE	SPONSORING AGENCY

EDRS PRICE	CONTRACT NO.	GRANT NO.
0.25;0.35		
REPORT NO.		BUREAU NO.

AVAILABILITY

JOURNAL CITATION
The English Journal; v55 n4 p472-475 495 Apr 1966

DESCRIPTIVE NOTE

5p.

DESCRIPTORS
*Composition Skills (Literary); *English Instruction; *Teaching Methods; *College Teachers; *Secondary School Teachers; Questionnaires; Composition (Literary); Rhetoric; Psychology; Grammar; Teacher Attitudes; Educational Practice; Writing Skills; Essays; Program Evaluation

IDENTIFIERS

ABSTRACT
A questionnaire designed to gather data on seven different approaches to the teaching of composition and disseminated among a sample of high school and college English teachers in the New York area forms the basis of this discussion. Form, thematic, grammatical, processes, creative, rhetorical, and psychological approaches are defined and discussed in terms of the teachers' personal emphasis and their opinions on ideal emphasis. Special attention is given to the rhetorical and psychological approaches. (AF)

FROM: THE ENGLISH JOURNAL
APRIL, 1966

The Teaching of Composition

Solomon S. Simonson

Professor of Communication
Graduate School, Yeshiva University
New York, New York

IN HIS "Mind in the Making," James Harvey Robinson characterized one form of thinking as a blend of random memories, images, and concepts flowing in continually changing relationships. He did not think very highly of this level of thought which he called revery; he classified it at the lowest rung of a ladder, the four main steps of which led to scientific method at the top.

During my own peregrinations in the realm of composition, I allowed my memory to take me through the many classrooms in which I have learned, taught, and supervised. The revery of memories made it evident that the teaching of composition is based upon widely varying content—ranging from the teaching of grammar and mechanics through linguistics and usage to rhetoric and logic. Each of the segments of this varying content carries great, if not exclusive, importance in a particular teacher's approach to composition.

If you will permit me to recall several such experiences with you, I can envision now and readily report recollections of the teachers who graded papers over our backs by commenting on and frequently crossing out the offending opening sentence, who collected narrative or descriptive papers assigned each day in class and invariably complimented each of us on the next day for a "fine" job which the teacher reported he had enjoyed, who used the opaque projector by throwing a sample composition on the screen which was marked with a flood of notations as $S \wedge sp\ gr\ P$ and the other more obscure abbreviations which gave the aura of utter professional competence, who talked and talked and talked about a subject of his special interest presumably to stimulate us and then requested reactions (such papers would be carefully filed in each student's folder but never graded since they reflected the inviolable rights of interpretation and opinion so zealously guarded by the democratic teacher), who listened to us as we rambled and babbled in that proverbial "pooling of ignorance" by which some critics have characterized discussion and then flattered this lack of care in expression by asserting the rights of interpretation and virtues of spontaneity, who demonstrated at the blackboard how to parse the sentence and diagram it for all to see the weakness or strength of the structure, who trained us to write

in syllogisms or in compact "basic English" or in economy of effort or in figurative display or in careful qualification of each assertion.

The approaches are too numerous to reiterate, but the search and discovery of a classification of approaches in the teaching of composition may prove to be vitally productive in guiding us toward a better understanding of the function and worth of composition teaching in our time. The author first hypothesized a system that consisted of seven fundamental approaches in the teaching of composition: form, thematic, grammatical, processes, creative, rhetorical, and psychological. A second hypothesis held that the approach of form was most emphasized by composition teachers, that the rhetorical and the psychological were least emphasized, and that the remaining categories were emphasized less than form and more than the rhetorical and the psychological.

Following upon this foundation of hypotheses, a number of experimenters embarked on a two-pronged attack to test the hypotheses:

1. An open questionnaire was forwarded to a representative group of teachers in high schools and colleges of the metropolitan New York area, inquiring about the basic content and approach they relied upon in the teaching of composition.

2. A second questionnaire, which enumerated the seven categories, was presented to another representative group of teachers in the same area, requesting the respondents to indicate the order in which they emphasized each of the categories of approach in the teaching of composition, the order in which they thought that *other* teachers emphasized each category, and finally, the order in which they thought teachers *should* emphasize each category.

The findings verified the hypotheses. The summaries of these findings are presented in Table I.

Table I

Approach	*Personal Emphasis*		*Opinion as to Emphasis Rendered by Others*		*Opinion as to Ideal Emphasis*	
	H. S.	*College*	*H. S.*	*College*	*H. S.*	*College*
1. Form	1	1	1	1	7	7
2. Thematic	2	4	5	3	4	3
3. Grammatical	3	5	2	4	3	6
4. Processes	4	2	3	5	6	5
5. Creative	5	3	4	2	5	4
6. Rhetorical	6	6	6	6	2	2
7. Psychological	7	7	7	7	1	1

THE FIRST and the predominant emphasis in the teaching of composition resides in *form.* The correction of error in grammar and usage, punctuation and spelling, and the punishment for disregarding of other mechanical rules are the most frequent concerns of most teachers in both high schools and colleges. Such philosophy of composition teaching is based upon two assumptions: first, that negative treatment will prevent incorrectness and second, that correctness will foster effectiveness. Neither of these assumptions has been proved. Those who have warred against form argue that absorption of interest in form stifles creativity and lessens effectiveness. Nevertheless, the temptation to rely upon standards of acceptance in form, coupled with a frequency-count of noted

errors, is such that very few teachers resist this category.

The second most frequently used approach in the teaching of composition among high school teachers is the *thematic*, sometimes called *rhetorical*. The stress here is on the fundamental principles of unity, coherence, and emphasis. The allegation that these principles must be followed to gain effectiveness is countered by the argument that the fulfillment of these principles does not insure any psychological advantage, that the thematic approach centers on the material, not upon the reader.

The third category is the *grammatical*. High school teachers attached great weight to sentence-analysis and structure of language. Some teachers relied heavily on one pedagogical technique or another —identification of parts of speech or mood or tense or clause-relationship—but almost all teachers found a good word for the science of language as an instrument for effective composition. This trite worship of the word "science" falsely links knowledge with application. The equation of understanding a language with a wise adaptation of its use is fallacious. Neither skill nor power nor effectiveness will proceed automatically from a deep and canny knowledge of language. The more contemporary followers of this approach assume that the logic of language, the avoidance of ambiguity and semantic confusion, the soundness of inference based upon accuracy of observation, will yield a high measure of effectiveness. This might be true if man was primarily a rational being, but, at best, the human is an admixture of psychological drives and motives coupled with rationalizations to satisfy the requirement of rationality.

THE college teachers have bypassed both the thematic and the grammatical approaches to give greater place in their hierarchy of content to the *theory of processes*. This theory revolves about the notion that there are certain patterns in composition that lend themselves to the attainment of special skills. The processes—narration, description, exposition, argumentation—are deemed to be natural patterns in composition. It is claimed that narration cultivates ability to win interest, description to report accurately, exposition to demonstrate clearly, and argumentation to infer soundly. But the unfortunate truth is that the acquisition of all four virtues—to be interesting, accurate, clear, and sound—will not in itself make for effective communication. Many high school teachers have downgraded this approach because they have felt that the processes do not yield the skills claimed by the adherents of this approach.

The third of the college teachers' approaches in composition teaching is the *creative spur*. It is probably the most modern approach, in the same way as the processes-theory approach is the most traditional. While the processes approach was at the core of English studies at the turn of the century and exemplified so well by Percy Boynton's *Principles of Composition*, the creative approach has gained great impetus recently. Hosts of college texts, comprised of essays and documents, have been published in the last decade with the explicit purpose of stimulating and encouraging creativity in composition. The easy flow of ideas and the spontaneous fluency of expression, however, are hardly the implements for effective communication. The flux and the fluidity are frequently too annoying, distracting, or overwhelming to be effective as composition. The speed and the spontaneity may embarrass the ego of the reader or listener.

The high school teachers take a dim view of the creative and the processes approaches to composition teaching.

THE two approaches that were not understood or clearly misinterpreted by the teachers in both the secondary

schools and in colleges concerned the *rhetorical* (understood in its classical sense as the art of discovering all the available means of persuasion or communication in a particular case) and the *psychological* or stage of audience-readiness for response.

The *rhetorical* approach distinguishes substance from form. In the five steps of composition preparation—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—the rhetorical approach emphasizes the substantive elements of invention and arrangement. The forms of style, memory, and delivery are stressed only if they distract from the substance. They are not significant otherwise, since mere embellishment and forcefulness of style and delivery are considered relatively inconsequential in comparison to the discovery and selection of ideas. Some teachers held that they stressed substance rather than form on the ground that they were wont to challenge the student to support his assertions or stimulate him to reorganize his material according to audience reactions. The classical rhetorical approach, however, relies upon a systematic employment of appeals (*ethos, logos, pathos*) for particular audiences; the mere discussion of ideas is not an authentic rhetorical approach. That the rhetorical approach is rarely used by composition teachers is due in part to the fact that the speech discipline (a rebellious child who seceded in 1915 from NCTE) embraced the principles of Aristotelian rhetoric as a constitution for composition teaching. The English discipline cut away from the doctrine of its speech prodigy and centered its instruction on those approaches now still heavily adopted by the majority of composition teachers. Many speech teachers, too, have neglected the rhetorical approach for composition in favor of the development of the speech personality, the reduction of stage fright, and the improvement of voice and diction. If a renaissance in the teaching of composition is to be achieved, it would have to be based on the rhetorical approach, one that both English and speech teachers of composition can share.

The seventh approach, the study of composition in *adaptation to audience-readiness*, guides us in sundry ways to realize that silence is frequently better than speech, that a few well-chosen words may be far better than a remarkably well-organized brief, that a look, a grimace, a smile may do more than a mellifluous phrase, that an emotion may be enlisted better by an act of friendship or a bribe than by appeals of *pathos*, that the status and press-agentry of a person may secure him more approval than any direct appeals of *ethos*, that one photograph or one statistical illustration may do more than the most adroit combination of appeals of *logos*, etc. . . .

The *psychological* approach in the teaching of composition is currently an exercise in sporadic ingenuity on the part of many teachers. But it is in the vanguard of future emphasis. To name the psychological as a going approach in the teaching of composition will seem to some readers that it is this author's invention or pretension to prophecy. It was the eminent psychologist, Harry Hollingworth, who classified the five stages of audience-response as pedestrian, passive, selected, concerted, and organized. Each of these stages of readiness requires a different invention on the part of the writer or speaker. If, for example, one's audience is an organized one such as an army group or a football team, in which the responses of attention, interest, emotional and intellectual impression, and belief have already been won, it would be wasteful to attempt to elicit any of these responses again. The only wise recourse in composition, written or spoken, in such a situation of readiness, is a clear direction for overt action. Research in the behavioral sciences should prove immensely helpful to the uses of

the psychological approach in teaching composition. But such research needs cultivation and guidance by composition teachers. Both the questions and the probable answers are to be found in the experiences of our teachers of composition.

The most significant result of the questionnaire was the view, shared by more than 70 percent of the respondents, that greatest emphasis *should* be placed on *rhetorical* and *psychological* approaches. This result is all the more impressive, since the respondents admitted to giving greatest emphasis to *form* which they thought deserved least emphasis.