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ABSTRACT

Teaching techniques that induce high school and college students to write subjectively as well as objectively are briefly discussed and illustrated with examples. (DB)

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FILLING THE SUBJECTIVE SPACES

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I can see many of us English teachers reading Lewis Mumford's new book on *The Megamachine* [appearing in four installments in *The New Yorker* in the fall of 1970] with sanctimonious feelings. Mr. Mumford says:

> When one empties out the proper life of man, all that is left, humanly speaking, is emptiness. To find a rational answer to the problem of relating mechanization and automation to the needs of man, we must fill up all the subjective spaces that are left blank in the mechanical world picture. [October 24, 1970, p. 60.]

We teachers nod in agreement, and having finished reading, go back to *correcting* themes written in Engfish, the language of the schools, all the while pushing off any suggestion that we are partly responsible for the phoniness and emptiness of our students' writing. We are so used to breathing the poisoned gases of that kind of writing that we are dying without struggle, like a man sitting in a garage full of carbon monoxide. We read the first soporific lines of the student's theme:

> At the present moment, the United States is engaged in a war with the armies of North Vietnam, a country, or rather a part of a country, in Southeast Asia which has. . .

and think dimly that the writer should be given some credit — he has made a distinction there, remembered that North and South Vietnam were once one.

And we go on reading, lulled pleasantly by the Engfish.

> A soldier in this war may experience fear and impending doom while his friend at home is whiling away his or her hours in casual play. And yet when the friend at home reflects upon the experience of the soldier on the bloody battlefield, he or she can only realize that there is a vast difference between the two, and that if the world is ever to become a better place in which to live, such reflection must go beyond mere idle thought, and effectuate in deeds which end the scourge of war forever.

When we come to the end of this little theme, if our minds have not strayed to the possibility that we may be missing the opening of the Packers-Lions game or a TV comedy special, we may think, "I wonder whatever made that student compare the battlefield and casual play?" just before we figure the grade: "Organization, A; Grammar, A; Punctuation, A; Content, C;" and then speculate on how we can give the paper a C- grade with all those A's cropping up in our itemization.

Suppose we were to encounter a paper which opened up the experience behind those weirdly abstracted comments about Vietnam and life at home.

Got A Letter This Morning

I opened up the light blue envelope and unfolded the white paper.

". . . the whole world has had enough of me. I've lost too many friends in too short a time. I led my patrol into a Viet ambush. Three men dead. I'm sorry, but I don't really think I'll be coming home."

I forced myself to read it again, and put the letter back in the thin airmail envelope and laid it under a few sweaters in my drawer. Then I forgot about it. I went to work and came home. My brother Jim made some fudge. It didn't taste good since it was instant fudge out of a frosting mix. We sat down at the kitchen table and began modeling with it.

"Hey Tina, this is what my gym teacher looks like." It was a glob of chocolate with features carved into it.

"Yeah," I said. "And this is what he looked like after he got in a fight." I hit the fudge with my fist, flattening it. We both began laughing.

"Pizza." Jim flattened the fudge out on the table. Then after carefully scraping it up off the table, he tossed it up

so it hit the ceiling. The phone rang. Still laughing at the mess my brother had made on the ceiling, I answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello Tina. This is — (mumble)."

"Just a minute." I shut up my brother. "I'm sorry, who?"

"Mrs. Benson."

"Oh, hi."

"Have you heard from my son lately?"

"Well, yes. I got a letter from him just this morning."

"I did too. He said he's feeling awfully bad. He hasn't gotten any mail for about three weeks. Have you been writing him?"

"Yeah, that's what he said. I can't figure it out. I've sent quite a bit."

I always hate for her to call. She'll tell me he's dead.

Yesterday I got another letter, too. ". . . please write so I know what the world is like so I can get back to shooting little people I don't even know."

I think ahead to when he's going to come home and how long it's going to take to get him back to normal.

Now for my personal analysis — I'm messy. My bedroom is so messy that I've had to sleep on the couch in the basement for the past three months.

[This paper comes from the writing classes of John Bennett at Central High School, Kalamazoo, Michigan.]

Reading this paper we might very well be confused, even bewildered, and reach for our red pencil to write: "Organization, F." Because why the talk about the girl's room at the end? Lack of transition between last two paragraphs. Frightening digression from an ambush in Viet Nam to fudge in the kitchen. We might have read through the whole paper without sensing it needed slow reading; that like a poem it demands the reader see which pieces of stuff in it belong together, and what their brutal juxtaposition is saying implicitly. We might lay the paper aside, one more on the boring pile, without perceiving the terrifying control exercised in its tamping down of emotions, or the way it places the thoughts of a man killing in the context of childish, irresponsible play in the kitchen.

We might feel the overwhelming subjectivity — the presentation of playing with fudge as if it were simply a fact to be reported, not an example of disgraceful self-indulgence. And we might miss altogether the hard objectivity — in the revelation of this triviality when compared to the thoughts of the soldier who led three of his fellows to their death. And all that concern about what was happening to the young man, physically and mentally — the writer considering another person, the opposite of being subjective.

In the craft of the piece we might miss the skillful dialogue realistically recorded and interrupted. We might fail to appreciate the economy in the quoting of the soldier's letters, just a few lines, but telling. The very strategy we have tried for so many years to teach our students to employ in writing research papers.

Possibly we might have missed the whole point of the paper — how the sudden switches to the girl's life at home, far from war, where the main problem is a messy bedroom, underlines the horror of war and shows how hard it is to perceive that horror constantly and faithfully when removed from it.

Those of us teachers who read this paper badly have been schooled — by students who have challenged us so seldom we are not ready for surprise. We sit down to read the theme expecting the experience in it to be abstracted in the manner of a summary book report — the point held over the reader's head and then driven down with a mallet, once, twice, and a concluding blow to make sure.

We frequently do not understand that we are responsible for the abstracting and the pounding, for the Engfish. Because young persons do not walk in off the streets with such ability. It must be learned. Surprise must be driven out of the writing and speaking of human beings. It is natural for them to relate stories, to present salient acts in telling detail, to hold back and create suspense, to make the reader or listener work for what he gains.

Inevitably at teachers' conferences when I read aloud papers with this sort of subjective-objective power and liveliness, most persons in the audience are moved and delighted. A few are disgruntled, discomfited. Usually two or three speak up after my talk, saying, "But what we need to teach is more public and objective writing. This is a charming story, but writing it will not help a student get through college."

In the first place, this one is not a charming story; it is a deadly story and it zeroes in on all of us and our responsibility for maintaining systematic killing as surely as one of those deadly "defensive" missile projectors we are building across our western lands. In the second, if it will not help a student get through college, then God help the colleges. For then they are doing exactly what Lewis Mumford said, emptying out "the proper life of man." This paper about Viet Nam is precisely filling up "all the subjective spaces that are left blank in the mechanical world picture."

Some of us have found a Third Way of teaching which induces high school and college students to write a great many papers as powerful as this one about Viet Nam. We have quit denying our students their lives, and their expression has ceased to be Engfishified.

I cannot much abide patiently those few teachers who complain that the papers are too personal. If we in the field of English, committed to literature — which is at its essence the revelation of the individual through his deepest emotional and intellectual experience — are going to reject this kind of writing in our classes, then we will have to reject Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky and Thoreau, and even Henry's dignified friend, Ralph Emerson, who said:

> The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions, — his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, — until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers; that they drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. [*The American Scholar*]

(For descriptions of the Third Way writing program see Ken Macrorie, *Writing to Be Read,* 1968 [high school text]; *Telling Writing,* 1970 [college text]; and *Uptaught,* 1970, all published by Hayden Book Company; and "To Be Read," *English Journal,* May, 1968.)