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ABSTRACT

Teaching students to use specific details is perhaps the college writing teacher's most troublesome job. Much time and effort is wasted by marking students' papers with comments such as "specify," "details," "illustrate," or "demonstrate." Significant concrete details should occur to a writer before the generalization does, since the best kind of details that support an idea or suggest a feeling inhere in it from its beginning. An analysis of the mental operations which occur in the writing of details reveals that the student who is most proficient at this aspect of writing is able to put himself in the place of other readers even as he writes. To enable students to acquire this ability, teachers should assign students dramatic situations from which to write, spend time on pre-writing, and attempt to make students aware both of the tendency of the mature mind to generalize and of the difficulty of reversing generalizations to go back to the facts that led to them. (Author/DD)

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Frittered Away By Details: Some Thoughts on Teaching Specifics

Teaching students to use specific details is perhaps the writing teacher's most troublesome job. So a slight twist of a phrase from Walden I defines an essential aspect of our work: "Our life is frittered away by details. . . Simplify, simplify." In preparing this paper, I went back through a set of essays I had once marked to analyze the way that I urge students to be specific in their writing. There was no simplicity in the way I marked their papers. I must say immodestly that I have developed not only a certain flair-pen knack for marginal comments but also a distinctive style and tone nicely suited to the individual student: To the student who wants a no-nonsense approach, I write crisply, "Show! Demonstrate! Prove! Specify!" To the calloused, meaner-than-dirt student, I say, "Details, damn it!" To the tender-hearted, I invite specifics: "Can you think of any illustrations here, Joan?" Sometimes I have been tempted to be literary and quote Blake, "To generalize is to be an idiot. To particularize is the alone distinction of merit."[1] (I suppose that I have refrained because I am afraid of the literate student's reply from Oscar Wilde: "One should absorb the color of life, but one should never remember its details. Details are always vulgar."[2])

In making my glossary and in fantasizing the perfect marginal comment, I have revealed two false assumptions underlying that method of teaching. For I have assumed first that a student can go back and plug in details once the teacher as editor has tagged the generalization and secondly that details occur to the student after he or she has made an initial generalization. For instance, a student hands in a paper entitled "Diets Are Hell" with unsupported generalizations such as "During class, food is the only thing that occupies my brain." I send the paper back for revision and ask her to tell me what food visions she has. Or I scratch out food and write above it, "Paté?

Oysters? Granola?" The next revision comes back with one of my choices spliced to the generalization: "During class, pate is the only thing that occupies my brain." Did I ever think that this got the student anywhere?

On the evidence of other student papers, I have a new hypothesis now my false assumptions are out of the way: perhaps significant concrete details occur before the generalization; perhaps the teacher-editor is frittering away his time marking places for students to stuff in details.

Let's begin to look at that hypothesis in light of a brief narrative by a fourth grader entitled "A Dangerous Hike" and watch what appear to be the mental operations that produced this piece of writing:

> About one week ago Kyle Davis and I went on a hike. First we went to the flint tree in the foothills. Then went up higher to blue rock. Then we left our packs and coats there. After that we went to the cliffs. In the middle of the cliffs we got stuck. If we made one false move we would go tumbling down 50 feet of gravel and go over a 30 foot cliff. Finally we found a path and got to blue rock. Then we went home. The End.
>
> (Elmer Larson)

Since "A Dangerous Hike" was written in-class, Elmer had no chance to go back over it and add details to sharpen the effect of his narrative. Nevertheless, the paragraph has a sense of the specific we demand in good writing. "The cliffs," "packs and coats," "50 feet of gravel," "a 30 foot cliff," and "a path" tend to put the reader on location. "The flint tree" and "blue rock" contribute even greater effects because of their sensory appeal. But a college student would probably handle these details in a different way. For example, "blue rock" and "the flint tree" are not localized within a state,

a town, a farm, etc. in the way you might expect an older writer to fix an incident "at Bonners Ferry, Idaho," "near Springfield," or "behind Larson's Farm." Elmer sees locations familiar to him such as the landscape behind his father's farm as universally understood. So as he shapes his adventure into a narrative, Elmer does see the need to separate the specific blue rock from other rocks and the flint tree from other trees. But he does not see that in the audience's mind there might be confusion about where the adventure took place or that there are alternative places where it might have occured.

Piaget's description of the intellectual development of children confirms what I think I am seeing in "A Dangerous Hike." Piaget argues that a ten-your-old like Elmer can structure "immediately present reality. . .but cannot go systematically beyond that information to a description of what else may occur."[3] In other words, Elmer can differentiate trees according to the color of those he has seen. However, his power of generalization is limited to classifying what he has observed. Nor does Elmer go beyond his immediately present reality to show that he understands alternatives of location for his adventure, alternatives that an audience might find significant.

Therefore, Piaget's theory of logical maturation as a process of decentering works out for the writing student as a description of his growing ability to understand audience.[4] Elmer's view is centered in his perceptions of a concrete world. He presents that view to an audience as he perceives it. For example, an older person might be tempted to identify his hiking companion more elaborately than Elmer does by saying "my friend Kyle Davis" or "my cousin Kyle," etc.. But Elmer doesn't present one of the several alternatives to his reader: he says merely, "About one week ago Kyle Davis and I went on a hike." He doesn't put himself in the place of other readers who might be interested in the significance of that relationship to the adventure. From Elmer's point of view,

significance lies in the presentation of details, not in interpreting their importance or in presenting alternatives.

Since his eye is on his immediately present reality; the fourth grade student discovers details fused with the incident that he is writing about. Since he is in one sense limited by his logical inability to infer except from his experience, the fourth grade writer is in another sense blessed because in structuring immediately present reality, he keeps the details from that perception immediately before his reader. And what is so fresh about "A Dangerous Hike" is that Elmer never tells us that he is scared. He shows us.

What follows from a description of the mental operations at work in the mind of the boy who wrote "A Dangerous Hike" suggests that the best kind of details that support an idea or suggest a feeling inhere in it from its beginning. They are fused in the selection of the incident that the individual perspective of the writer presents. Perhaps the best ones are presented to him at the moment of insight and can't be added later unless they look like those mentioned in "Diets Are Hell" or in Gilbert and Sullivan's famous lines from Act II of the Mikado "Merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative."[5] Since I think that I have been guilty of teaching "merely cooroborative details" to some students and since one fourth grader's paper is slim evidence to substantiate my hypothesis on the teaching of details, let's look at examples from a college freshman's papers.

Mark Tracy was a mediocre student in one of my composition classes. My journal entries about his early papers reflect the nature of his work, especially that he wasn't specific enough. For instance, my comments follow the course (I can't say progress) of a paper that contrasted the hypocrisy of his relatives

at the funeral of his grandmother with his own sincere grief. First draft: "Little sense of the concrete--can't separate one relative from another." Second draft: "Too general again--no appeal to the senses or emotions." Third draft: "Imprecise--writer's real grief as opposed to relatives' pretended grief isn't shown, only told." Notice the assumption in my entries: that revision should bring details out; but in fact each new version is as bad as the former since Mark hasn't at the beginning stages of his paper rediscovered the facts that made him generalize that some of his relatives were hypocrites.

About mid-quarter in response to an assignment, Mark turned in a gem of a paper. The class was to write in their journals a description of an aspect of their personalities revealed in a snapshot. I asked the students to capture in their journals the drama of the picture and to discover which of their several voices could be heard talking if the picture could suddenly come to life. Here is what Mark wrote:

Ellen

She had hair on her nose. I always had that on her. No matter what she said to others behind my back or muttered under her breath when I was present she had that stuff on her nose in plain view of everyone. You can't argue with fact and what grows on your face is fact. I'd have a pimple occasionally but unless it's a real good one who laughs at a pimple? She used to make me sit and wait for Ellen in the parlor. It was so damn hot in there and I could hear her upstairs screaming at Mr. Comstock because I said "Hi" when I came to the door, instead of "Hello." I would say "Hi" on purpose knowing that this and her nose were my big weapons.

Usually Ellen's fat brother would be in the parlor too, planted

there by his mother to report on what I had said and whether I had cigarettes in my shirt pocket. When the word was passed that 10-year-olds should be quiet, mannered and absent whenever possible this lad had been out somewhere, probably in the kitchen eating. In fact by looking at him, you'd get the idea that the only time he ever left the pantry was when he nightly seized the chance to help spoil my evening. There were times I felt like saying "Hey lump, your mother has a hairy nose." But I kept quiet thinking that having something funny on your face and not knowing it would be like walking around with your fly open.

Finally Ellen would come bouncing down the stairs grinning like a spastic, as if to hint that there was something pleasant about her home life. Come to think of it, Ellen had skinny legs.

Mark's paper was based upon a snapshot taken of Ellen, her mother and the writer, taken on Ellen's front porch one evening after he had gone to pick her up for a date.

Mark's voice emerges, as he remembers the drama of these evenings, mainly through his selection of specifics. Since he was disliked and distrusted, he focuses on sensory details that describe Ellen's family life, details that spitefully pay them back for doubting him: the hair on the mother's nose, the fat brother and his appetite, the suspicion of cigarettes in the pocket, and the mother's voice in response to the writer's own. Even Ellen becomes flawed in the writer's eyes as he analyzes her legs as skinny in the last line of this description of the snapshot.

As in the case of "A Dangerous Hike," what interests me about "Ellen" is the implied set of mental operations. Obviously what distinguishes "A Dangerous Hike" from "Ellen" is the latter's power of implied generalization and abstraction. That is, "Ellen" follows Piaget's description of the development

of human logic as toward abstraction: the adolescent can manipulate ideas to solve problems, not merely objects.[6] In Ellen, for example, there are general observations abstracted from the writer's experience or from what he has heard: "You can't argue with fact and what grows on your face is fact." Unless a pimple is "a real good one, who laughs at a pimple?" "10-year-olds should be quiet, mannered and absent." That "having something on your face and not knowing it would be like walking around with your fly open."

These general observations abstracted from Mark's experience in "Ellen" also suggest a different set of assumptions about audience than were found in "A Dangerous Hike." As the decentering process occurs, the writer is more able to see things outside himself that others will need to know to understand his point. In other words, Mark sees that facts have no importance until he can demonstrate their significance: he is careful to point out to his audience that he says "Hi," not "Hello," to Mrs. Comstock because it would infuriate her to the point of going upstairs to tell her husband about it. Besides, he tells us, saying "'Hi' on purpose. . .and her nose were my big weapons." Mark goes beyond the immediately present realities to tell the audience what were the alternatives available to him and why he selected those he did for what purpose. Mark is operating at a level of making generalizations not available to the fourth grader. Mark first senses that we might not understand fully why he prefers "Hi" to "Hello" in greeting Mrs. Comstock. Secondly, Mark senses that he must guide our conclusions about his word choice; otherwise our deductions might differ from his. Finally, he senses that the audience may only suspect him of being vengeful; he wants it to <u>know</u> he's vindicative and glad of it. These senses in Mark indicate that he can put himself in the place of other readers even as he writes and can provide information that can correct the gaps between his perception and

those of his audience.

What Mark was able to accomplish in "Ellen" that he couldn't in his paper on the funeral was a sense of detail. Even though his perception and generalization were potentially interesting in the funeral paper--people can counterfeit grief--it was never satisfactorily rendered because he couldn't recapture the experience. What didn't occur to me as I sent Mark back through those painful revisions of the paper was that perhaps he could never reverse the generalization and go back and pick up the details. Certainly not in the way I asked him to revise the paper or gave the assignment.

But let's look for a moment at what happened in the photograph assignment. Before he ever wrote, Mark had to go back, look at the experience in a detailed study of the snapshot, and recreate the drama of the situation: the unhappy expression on his face, the mother's hairy nose, and Ellen's skinny legs were all details that implied the attitude of revenge toward Ellen's family; but he did not begin with or even perhaps perceive his vengeful tone until the facts of the photograph had been discovered. He had to begin with facts, and as he himself says of "that stuff" on Ellen's mother's face, you can't argue with facts.

My new hypothesis seems to me sound enough to make three general recommendations concerning the teaching of details that may help students find a more efficient way of discovering details for papers and that may allow teachers more time for matters besides details in student writing:

1. Attempt to give students dramatic situations from which to write. That is, find assignments that put students in some vivid moment--either at the location and in the mood of an experience if they are writing narrative-descriptive compositions or in front of a real audience if they are writing argumentation or exposition. If the experience can't be recreated or the audience imagined, students may rest content with the generalized

sum of their thinking and have neither motivation nor method to present a fresh, detailed look at the idea.

2. Attempt to spend time on pre-writing. Once dramatic situations are found for writing assignments, suggest how to discover material that might go into the first draft of the paper. Point out that revision can improve the shape of a paper, but it seldom produces new details.
3. Finally, attempt to make students aware of the tendency of the mature mind to generalize and also aware of the difficulty of reversing generalizations to go back to the facts that led to them. In short, attempt to push college students back toward a child's fresh, detailed vision before they deal with the complexitives of the significance of that vision.

Footnotes

[1]Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 777.

[2]The Portable Oscar Wilde, ed. Richard Aldington (New York, The Viking Press, 1946), p. 72.

[3]Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 37. Bruner is drawing from Piaget's Language and Thought of the Child and Irving Sigel's Logical Thinking in Children: Research Based on Piaget's Theory, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1950).

[4]Language and Thought of a Child (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, reprinted 1952), pp. 101-118. Piaget speaks of "the ego-centric character of childish style" and goes on: to say that the child doesn't succeed in placing himself in another's point of view when talking or listening. Hence the child prefers to talk in factual descriptions rather than to explain causal relationships since telling "why" demands taking into account someone else's attitude.

[5]Poems and Plays of W. S. Gilbert (New York: Random House, 1932), p. 410.

[6]Bruner, 39-40.