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ABSTRACT

The author of this paper proposes a method for teaching composition at the high school level with the objective of getting students to write as easily as they talk. Students are encouraged to write rapidly for the first half hour of class with no audience in mind and without worrying about grammar, spelling, punctuation, or coherence. Students spend the remainder of the class time in discussing their writing. On Friday of each week students reread what they've done and select one meaningful passage to work on in order to improve composition skills. The teacher does not help with this, but rather allows students to help one another. It is concluded that this program will help students sort experience, discover meaning, and create an identity. (TS)

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WRITING FROM THE MIND OUT

If we are going to talk about "Writing from the Mind Out," perhaps we had better come to an agreement on what we mean by "mind." Now, "mind" may be different things to different people. It is even different things to me at different times and in different frames of reference. For instance, if this paper were in the frame of grammar--transformational-generative, that is--and were entitled, "Deeper than Deep Structure," I should tell you that the mind is an electro-neuro-chemical digital computer, that its functions are demonstrably the functions of formal logic, that the processes of thought and action are logical choices which take place below the level of language, and that combinations of nonverbal primitive sentences finally cross the threshold of consciousness as the analyzable deep structure of the language.

That is the way I would see "mind" for that speech, but this is not that speech. This speech is a how-to-do-it on getting kids to write and getting them to like to write.

Again we are dealing with mind at a level below that of conscious recognition, and it is a storehouse of experiences. But "storehouse" is not a good word. We are apt to envision it as a library-like structure where experiences are neatly filed away and can be commanded forth at will. And indeed the memory

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bank is just such a system. Unfortunately, we too often cannot find the call numbers in the card catalog.

But the mind is not a quiet place. I think it was Penfield who called it a seething caldron. Again, the things seething are experiences, but strange combinations, changes, and collisions take place. And yet, the raw materials--the experiences--although constantly producing new things (nonverbal thought and language as well as commands) remain unchanged and indestructible.

But let's forget the definitions and the philosophy and get on with the how-to-do-it..

First the mechanics, which are quite simple.

At the beginning of the course, students are told to provide themselves with bound composition books (spiral-bound will do) and plenty of ball-points. These are their textbooks; there are no other. They are told that the purpose of the course is writing, and that the major portion of the course will be writing. The first thirty minutes of each fifty minute class period will be devoted to writing--their writing. Since composition is the only important concern of the class, what they do with the remaining twenty-minutes is entirely up to them--in other words this will be an open classroom.

So much for the mechanics. That is it, and that is all there is to it. Oh, no! I forgot one important item. They only get four days out of the week; the fifth day, Friday, is my day. Because of my day, and for certain other reasons which will appear later, they are to write only on the right-hand

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pages of their books; the left-hand pages are to remain blank.

Then, they are told to begin. They are given one, and only one, instruction, "write." For thirty minutes you allow yourself only one word repeated endlessly, "write." You answer no questions and stifle any comment or small talk and try to survive the chaos and frustration and even rebellion.

At the end of the half hour you give a second instruction, "talk." Hopefully, you will be greeted by something other than silence, but most likely you will not. Perhaps you can prod them into some discussion of the plan and how they think it will work or not work. If there is any talk, it will probably be about the fact that they didn't know what to write. Of course, what they mean is that they didn't know what you expected them to write. Now, you must convince them that you have no expectations, that you want them to write what they are thinking--to write from the mind out.

A technique that Lou Kelly suggests is to get the students to consider writing as talking to one's paper. I am willing to admit the great debt I owe Lou Kelly for the inspiration of much of my own recent teaching. If you are not familiar with FROM DIALOGUE TO DISCOURSE, I cannot recommend it too highly. I have had students who took the suggestion of talking to one's paper so seriously that they started each writing session, "Dear Paper." There is a danger here, because writing a letter (to yourself) on paper is not exactly the same as talking (to yourself) on paper. What students are going to come to realize

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is the need for an audience. Just as few talk to themselves merely for the pleasure of listening to their own voices, almost no one writes for the sake of writing--writing is always for someone. Even the most preciously guarded schoolgirl diary is intended to be read even if "only after I have died famous."

Writing is regarded by most students as an unnatural activity and, really, as it is conducted in most classrooms, isn't it? Students write, not because they want to write, and they write on imposed subjects that they know or care little about. In most cases they write spasmodically and irregularly. Our writing period is an attempt to divorce the notion of unnaturalness from writing by making it an everyday occurrence utterly different from what they have been accustomed to.

Students are encouraged to write rapidly and with no attention whatever to those impediments to composition--grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, organization, unity, or coherence.

Often, in spite of my admonition, "Hands off," I do direct. I insist on five complete pages in five minutes or less. The writer's real resources are experience and memory. Rapid writing makes possible the recall of experiences without being hampered by conscious thought. It also allows the automatic recombination of experiences. The swiftly moving pen demands the unimpeded flow of ideas from the mind. There can be no attempt to control emotion--no attempt to order. There is no

necessity to complete nor time to compete. There is simply the need to set down five pages in five minutes.

As the first week goes by, the frustration of the students decreases a little while yours increases immensely. Why can't they get the hang of it? Why can't they write anything worth while? Can't Bill think of anything but sports, Edith anything but boyfriend, Tom, anything? In every day's writing, Phyllis is attempting a theme as she was taught to write themes last year. Calm down, "Maybe things will get a little better in the morning."

This whole procedure is new to the kids, and you have forgotten your first objective which was to get them to write freely and uninhibitedly, no matter what. You wanted them to conceive of writing as a natural act--as natural as talking, only slower. Look to see if they are achieving to any small degree this proficiency. If you begin to notice an eagerness rather than a reluctance to approach the daily writing, relax, you're on your way. It is the process, not the product, that is worthwhile.

On subsequent days the writing period will assume somewhat more of a semblance of order. Remember though that if the writing is really to be from the mind out, it must be from the student's mind and not from the teacher's. Anything that smacks of an assignment must be avoided. You as teacher will most likely be troubled and dissatisfied with the first efforts which are bound to impress you as trivial and inconsequential.

Be patient and keep hands off. Don't seem concerned and don't urge students to do better; they have a difficult transition to make. They are accustomed to writing for teacher; they cannot believe that they are really going to write for themselves. And they have real problems in deciding what to write about. Actually they are experimenting with a new technique, that of writing from the mind out.

The free twenty minutes of open classroom time will prove valuable. Most students are unaccustomed to real freedom and will spend much time goofing off. But goofing off soon becomes boring, and they will turn to you for direction. Wait till they ask, but be ready to suggest that they might discuss the class itself and writing. From this discussion will come some usable suggestions for those who don't know what to write about, but more importantly, interaction begins which will lead to group involvement in each other's writing.

And now to Friday which you will remember is my day. I announce that there will not be regular writing today. Instead, each student is to re-read what he has written and select the passage he considers most worthwhile, which he finds most meaningful, or of which he is most fond. These ideas were set down in white heat to capture them before they could vaporize. Now it is time to re-express them in the best English prose they can muster. All the things that didn't count before must count now. On the blank left-hand page opposite the original effort, they rewrite in "correct" English. They must, however, retain

the flavor, the individualism of the original. It is still their voices speaking.

You will tell me that if these students are capable of rewriting correctly, then they could better be employing their time at something else, and that my whole course is useless. And, indeed, you are right--except for one thing. The individuals (for the most part) are not capable of translating their hurried writings into acceptable English prose. But the class, collectively, is quite capable. Therefore, you get the class involved. Any student who is not sure of mechanics or expression may ask any other student for help. Before you know it, students will be reading, discussing, criticizing and evaluating each other's work. As teacher, you may be an arbiter but only if asked. Otherwise, let things go even if grievous (to you) faults are passed over by the helpers. This evaluation is a skill activity experience and like any other skill, accuracy in it will improve with practice. Also, you will be catering to individual differences and achieving class leveling through tutorship--your brighter and quicker students will be the ones most called on for help by those most troubled.

The only real criterion for evaluation of the content of the writing is, "does it satisfy you?" Of course, "you" is the writer himself. It is surprising what harsh critics students become of their own efforts when they know that they and they alone can judge the success or failure of what they have written. Later, others especially their fellow students in addition to helping with errors do evaluate certain specially prepared

writing, but this evaluation is more in the nature of editing or proofing--the aim being to help each other make sure that the writing communicates with others with the same efficiency that it communicates with the self.

Occasionally you will take a student's composition book and read through it. You will make no corrections, only encouragements. Congratulatory remarks on worthwhile ideas and well expressed thoughts are much more therapeutic than pointed out errors or condemnations.

If you can find the time, or if you have secretarial help, when you take a student's notebook, type a page of his uninhibited writing for him exactly as he set it down and give it back to him. This practice may seem cruel, and it is, unless you explain your purpose. Point out that you are not concerned with errors any more than he was in his original writing, but the ultimate goal of any piece of writing is the most efficient communication possible. Students develop the same blindness toward the faults of their writing--their hand-written writing, that is--that a mother develops toward the faults and shortcomings of her firstborn. But the typescript is no longer the student's baby--it could be anyone's, and the writer can view it with a critical and impartial eye. Only if you can get kids to discover for themselves that the ability to communicate well in writing (to say nothing of speaking) is a key to academic success and social recognition, is an insistence on "standard English" justified. It is much more pertinent that you limit

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your role to one of helping them achieve that goal once they have accepted it.

Writing from the mind out is totally uninhibited writing; the only shackle is that which the mind itself imposes. Any successful writing depends on the student's ability to draw from his accumulation of sensory experiences that have been registered in his mind and which will remain there until they are recalled by some stimulus. The student writing from the mind out is sorting experience, discovering meaning, and creating an identity. While he is creating, he is actually creating himself.

Writing is a form of behavior--human behavior--just as is speaking, but it is not as spontaneous and not as easily learned as is talking. We do not know and cannot know each student's attitudes, capabilities, interests, intelligence, confidence, background, or self-esteem. But he knows! I do not mean that he can express any of them clearly and coherently--but they are there, tucked away in his subconscious or nonverbal mind, and they will beat their way out when the student is engaged in uninhibited writing. Neither can the student state his loves, his hates, his prejudices, his fears, or his aspirations, and we do him a great disservice if we attempt to command their delineation. But they are also there, produced by the amalgamation of experiences, and--like murder--they will out unless one tries to force them out.

The only source for writing is experience; however, this

does not mean simply the recall of events. Experience is also the material from which interpretations, feelings, and beliefs are made. Not now, but a little later, students will want to share experiences with others, and still later they will write from the unformulated and unexpressed question in the nonverbal mind, "what does experience mean?" In spite of themselves, they will begin to express their emotional reactions to experience.

What has been accomplished in my course? If nothing else, writing has become an accustomed and natural activity. Almost without exception my students have learned to approach writing with the same ease with which they approach talking. It would be downright false to claim that they all become expert or even competent writers. But they are able to write with a certain fluency, and they are able to express to a greater or lesser degree that which flows from the mind out.

No matter what happens in the rest of their lives, students are going to write their way through high school and college. Making writing a familiar act is going to make their progression easier.