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AUTHOR Reece, Shelley C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the inadequacies of elementary and college education, stating that since teachers expect students to write poorly, they do. Four risks which college writing teachers must take are: offering to help teach writing in grade schools and high schools; encouraging their colleagues to relax their standards; encouraging the acceptance and use of a variety of writing styles; and learning more about the scholarly tradition in composition.
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Notes on Taking Risks: A Rough Draft

Last year in Anaheim, a teacher from a state university spoke for us all: "we've been on a wild drunken binge in teaching composition," he said, "and now we're waking up sober the next day." He said "we've let it all hang out and done our own thing too long." That teacher's statement, I believe, more than the official resolution of students' right to their own language, was symptomatic of mood in the 1974 4C's, a mood that has intensified through the fall and winter that have followed. What I'll say here--background information, evidence, and advice--responds to that statement and that mood.

What does that teacher's remarks signify? That we have loosened our control too much. That our innovations have grown irresponsible. That they may lead us to the demise of our profession. That we'd better get back under control. We'd better get ourselves and our students back under control. We'd better raise our standards and get the boneheads into bonehead courses where they belong. And we'd better get back to teaching Adams Sherman Hill's version of composition, with its notions of grammatical purity and correctness. We have to face the music sober, even if it's loud and hurts our heads.

Since last April, other voices, inside and outside teaching, have joined the gentleman who spoke up at Anaheim. The Oregonian and the Oregon Journal have deplored in editorials how badly college students write; Time has reported--incredibly--that nearly half the freshmen at UC Berkeley have had to take bonehead English. ^{MALCOLM} ~~Marion~~ Scully has complained in the Chronicle of Higher Education how poorly prepared college students are for college writing and has given the situation a name in two inch headlines: "crisis in writing."

A member of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education is quoted as asking "when will we begin to deal with the deterioration of our mother tongue?" And finally, a textbook salesman who has never been in the classroom

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as a teacher, told me, two weeks ago, how much the students want a "good old fashioned textbook," not filled with a lot of theory, but one that gives students rules to write by, a practical text.

And all this hullabaloo is still going on, as if never before have teachers and the public turned their attention to writing and found the students inadequate to their tasks and the teachers inadequate to theirs, discoveries often made quite independent of the classroom.

Let me give three scattered examples from the elementary schools; they are model cases. Lori was out of control in her first grade class. She talked too much and her teacher told her to shut up. So she did. She stopped talking in school altogether, and the teacher couldn't get Lori to talking again. When the teacher called Lori's parents, they asked her why she wouldn't talk. Lori only said, "that teacher's just tryin' to trick me again." Or look at a second case: Dan wouldn't write anything down for his first grade teacher. She told him kindly that he needed to write down his work to get through school, but he openly refused. He also refused to tell his parents why he refused. But later in the year, he volunteered the information: "I'm not going to write anything down because then she can mark it wrong." Or a third case—I found out last year that it was ordinary for a student who misbehaved in a fifth or sixth grade class to have to copy ten or twenty definitions out of the dictionary as punishment, at least in the school that my children attend.

I'm not putting down elementary schools; I'm giving three model cases of inadequacies from different times. It wouldn't be right to claim too much with these cases, but for some children—maybe only like Lori and Dan—they offer a pattern, and an unfortunate one, of education. There's a role for the teacher, a role for the students, and a curriculum on which these roles center. The teacher's role is to set traps, mark the children's work wrong, and use the dictionary as a disciplinary tool. The students roles range

from Lori's silent wariness to Dan's open refusal, with the cramping tedium of copying dictionary entries somewhere between. Language, both spoken and written, is the curricular focus of all this correction. It might seem that education is already built to demonstrate how poorly people in school are doing their jobs--whether in the late 1950's, the time when Lori's incident took place; the early 1970's, when Dan wouldn't write for the teacher; or 1974, when students had to copy definitions for punishment. The point here is that inadequacy plays a large role in education. That's why I'm surprised at all the hullabaloo.

Let me take a step further. Let's suppose that the wary and defiant grade school children somehow find their way to the college composition class where the teacher thinks literacy skills are declining. Both the students and the teacher expect something. The students come in expecting to be trapped and trying to survive; the teacher expects banality and grammatical impurity. And each will live up to the other's expectations. We have evidence (Robert Rosenthal, Lenore Jacobsen, Pygmalion in the Classroom, H. R. W., 1968) that in grades 1-6, the teachers expecting high intellectual performance of a supposedly special group of students who were selected at random, led to a positive change in the students' intellectual performance. I see no reason why that principle wouldn't also work in college. Unfortunately, it may also be true that ^{teachers} expecting college students to write poorly will result in poorer intellectual performance. Whether the teacher's expectations of students ^{is} made the students write poorly or ^{make the} ~~locks~~ more closely for poverty of expression makes little difference; in either case, the treatment will bring an undesirable result. How can students succeed in such an environment that prepares for and anticipates their failure? How can teachers, even by successfully eliminating a number of student inadequacies, think that they have succeeded in making the students better writers?

I want to pursue these questions no further. The situation I have described for college composition leads to the failure of students and the frustration of teachers. It leads to the teachers' use of control as weaponry and the students' use of resentment as armor. That is not a context in which students--that is, people--can change and their writing can grow more like a professional's. I believe that education--more specifically, education in language (whether on a "know how" or a "know that" level)--need not be built upon a teacher's perception of a student's inadequacy. We all know that we fall short in some ways, and sometimes we fear that knowledge. To have someone else point it out to us often is not to make learning easier or more desirable. I believe that education can be built on our uncertainty without our needing to return to remedial classes, a narrow conception of standard English, or a scholastic aptitude test.

As a way of facing that uncertainty--along with the acceptance, arguments, and resistance that will accompany it--I offer four risks to Directors of Composition and others alike. These risks are nothing like resolutions (unless they're like New Year's resolutions), and they don't dress themselves as any formal program. Still, I believe they are crucial: in some ways they do hang together. First, ^{we} may offer ourselves to local grade schools and high schools, not for "articulation" or any other reason but to help teachers teach writing. Both grade schools and high schools will accept volunteer help; being in the schools is a good way for us to learn how teachers teach writing and how students learn it. Then we can easily help. If we want to go where we may be able to help the most, we could step into the elementary schools. ^{MALCOLM} ~~Marion~~ Scully's assertions in the Chronicle of Higher Education, that entering college students are more poorly prepared in composition than ever before, leads to the old accusation game: point-the-finger-at-somebody-else. In that game, "somebody else" is the elementary school.

A couple of months ago, a group of elementary school teachers asked me for help in teaching writing; they had just received word from the junior high school that its entering students didn't talk or write well enough. We met together, partly about manuscript form (capitalization, spelling, punctuation, legibility), partly about the contexts for writing assignments, and partly about the origins and results of those assignments. We talked some about what assignments to give, and I learned much about my poverty of knowledge here. Still Christensen's Notes Toward a New Rhetoric and James Moffett's Student Centered Curriculum, K-13 were at hand and were helpful. I made a list of assignments and we talked further about how to use that list. Those discussions were only a start, but they represent the way I have tried to work with the first risk.

Second, we can encourage our colleagues to relax some of their authority as lawgivers in composition. If we see our responsibilities as a set of rules, we are likely to pass the set on to our students. So with our responsibilities in composition too. In The Five Clocks, Martin Joos says a bit about teachers' sense of responsibility, that sense, I believe, that makes us hard nosed when we apply and interpret the "rules of grammar":

We need to identify the natural burden bearers of the community so that we can give them the responsibility that is the heaviest of all: we make them responsible for cooperation itself. Then the majority of us can function carefree in our square and round niches, free from the burden of maintaining the cooperation net which joins us all (pp. 14-15)

I realize that I have coughed up the rule-coated pill, but I don't think it would have helped the headache I got from the man in Anaheim. I realize that I may be accused of not maintaining that cooperation net, and, as a result, of being irresponsible in my profession. I expect that that will be a common argument among colleagues if any of us suggest "relaxing our authority a bit" to others. I realize how much some people need that sense of authority. A colleague of mine, for example, ridicules the view I have set forward by

an analogy that goes like this: A patient visits a doctor's office, and the doctor says "What disease would you like to have today?" The patient tells the doctor, whereupon the doctor prescribes a remedy for the patient's chosen disease. Then the patient returns home and dies that night--in agony. What can I say? I'm glad that the use of language, in ^speech or writing, isn't a sickness; it's either a part of psychotherapy or a sign of health. Remember Lori, for whom silence was a kind of sickness.

Relaxing our authority may have some definite positive benefits. It may make students want to write more, not less than before. It may loosen their styles enough for a few new wrinkles.

Which brings me to the third risk: we need to encourage teachers to teach a variety of discursive prose styles. Three of Martin Joos' five styles may serve as a beginning here: consultative, formal, and frozen. When we define those styles, we will probably find that we have only begun to talk about them; nevertheless, here goes. 1) Consultative is that style we use to carry on our business with strangers, passing back and forth the necessary information to get the job done. 2) Formal is ordinarily the style used with large audiences (people usually read papers in the formal style) where close participation no longer occurs. 3) Frozen style is "literary style," where the text dominates. None of those styles is best and none worst; each works on its own ground. Clarity is possible in all three styles but not best for all occasions. Joos says much more. My intention is not to say what he says but to offer a way out: a three-line sketch of writing that does not have to be composition in clear, concise, complete, correct English sentences. Another way out is to look at the styles of current professional writing in Rolling Stone, Atlantic, Ms., New Yorker, or Black World. A third way out is to put current exhortations about writing up against the actual practice of the exhorters and others.

Fourth, we as teachers of composition need to know more about what is the case before we talk too firmly about "raising the standards." I'm not saying that we need to do more research before we can teach composition effectively; I'm saying we need to know about a scholarly tradition in composition that is already available to us. In talking about the scholarly tradition, I'm not talking about what Francis Christensen calls the "school tradition." That is, I'm not talking about composition as Adams Sherman Hill taught it at Harvard in the late 19th century. Hill, as far as I know, made the avoidance of bad usage (barbarisms, impropriety^{ic}, and solecisms) central to composition.

I am talking about a scholarly tradition that extends from Coleridge to the present. That tradition began to grow with the work of linguists like Charles Fries and rhetoricians like I.A. Richards, and it received its strongest support, in foundation and superstructure alike, from Francis Christensen. That tradition was not founded on laws handed down from on high or language from a classical or neo-classical past, but language as it is currently spoken or written. That tradition in America has come to be a strong one, though it has only grown significantly, to my knowledge, over only the last 40 years. Scholarly publications like CCC, Research in The Teaching of English, and College English have contributed significantly to this tradition. Frequently, articles in those journals now ask "what is the case," rather than preaching from concepts intuitively assumed to be true. As a result, those articles help to establish methods of teaching writing and broaden concepts of written edited English that will help us feel more comfortable (though certainly not complacent) in facing students with open uncertainty.

This tradition is one we can use to examine some of the concepts of our profession, whether they be the validity of the scholastic aptitude

test, the "decline in standards of literacy, or the "crisis in writing."

What I have suggested in this paper is that teachers and students are not served by continually pointing out their limits, each to the other, and that the reenforcement of those inadequacies leads to a ~~dead~~ end. If we as teachers and students are to look at the seventies without retreating into the fifties, then we can take the four risks I outlined: offering ourselves to help teach writing in grade schools and high schools; encouraging our colleagues to relax their standards a bit; encouraging the acceptance and use of a variety of styles; and finally, knowing what is the case before talking too firmly about "raising the standards."

I have not offered an agenda for reforming the schools; I doubt that the schools need reform and they certainly don't need more agendas. I only offer four risks so that instead of pointing the finger at somebody else's inadequacy, we can say that we're people preparing for examinations together.