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ABSTRACT

A variety of foolproof ways to avoid teaching composition while appearing to teach it may be divided into two groups: methods which actually teach something else and methods which allow the teacher to appear to be teaching writing while keeping instruction of any kind to a minimum. Some of the subjects disguised as writing are communications, grammars, linguistics and history of the language, current events, the novel currently popular among students, self-expression, ethnic studies, and participation theater (happenings) and "cinema verite." Each subject has its own approach and all methods and approaches have been tried in the classroom. However, the most prestigious way to avoid the teaching of writing is to make a career out of attending professional meetings and reading papers. (JM)

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HOW NOT TO TEACH WRITING

by John DeWitt McKee

From years of attending professional meetings and reading professional journals, I have gathered many foolproof ways to avoid teaching composition while appearing to teach it. Some of these are probably familiar to you and using the same diligence and ingenuity displayed by speakers and writers I have heard and read, you can probably invent methods of your own.

Those I have gleaned conveniently divide themselves into two groups: 1) those methods which actually teach something else, and 2) those methods which the teacher can appear to be teaching writing while keeping instruction of any kind to a minimum. Among the subjects sometimes disguised as writing are the following:

Communications

Grammars

Linguistics and history of the language

Current events

The current "in" novel

Self-expression

Ethnic studies

Participation theater (happenings) and cinema verite

Under the heading of teaching in name only come the following random admonitions:

Make very few, and very large, writing assignments.

Make sure the first draft is the final draft.

Don't waste too much red ink on corrections.

Forget correct spelling and punctuation. Too much attention to these matters inhibits creativity.

Don't teach your students to edit what they write.

Set aside one day a week (or month) for individual conferences on the students' work.

Rely strongly on objective testing.

Be a "resource person."

Make the writing session itself a period of "sensory involvement."

Several of these methods obviously overlap. Just as obviously, I have left out some methods which other practitioners have found effective. It is possible, for example, to teach philosophy instead of composition. It is even possible to substitute a semester-long bull session. However, if you master the methods I have listed, you should be able to go from the first day in the classroom to the day of your retirement without having to teach writing at all. Meantime, you will appear to be teaching students how to marshal words on paper.

You can call what you are doing "communication," for example. That involves reading, speaking and listening as well as writing. It also involves eyebrow-raising, shoulder-shrugging and nose-thumbing. But that takes us into seminology, believe it or not, and we need not go that far!

You already have enough other alternative in "communications" to avoid teaching people how to write. Speaking and listening are your best possibilities. Both of them take a great deal of time in class. That fact limits the number of times you will be able to include the whole class in recitation. And that, in turn, limits the number of lessons you will have to prepare. Speaking appears to be especially useful in this respect. If, however, you can provide yourself with a tape recorder, a stack of "spoken word" cassettes and a sheaf of duplicated, keyed and sufficiently generalized multiple-choice questions, teaching people to listen is perhaps the best escape of all.

A word of warning about using reading as a substitute for writing: You are likely to fine that many of your students simply cannot read. ADD You read the assignment, and you discuss the assignment, acting all the while as if they had read it and were participating in the discussion.

Each of these methods of solving the problem of literacy has its own advantages and disadvantages. A remedial reading program, if it is done well and actually produces readers, is at least as much work as a successful writing program. Nonetheless, such a program does involve the use of much educational hardware. Remember that educational hardware is visible evidence of a teacher's willingness to innovate.

On the other hand, the discussion system requires only that the instructor has read the material and has the knack of asking leading questions. It does not take 20-20 vision to see that this method can easily be used to slide back effortlessly into speaking and listening. If you use the system carefully, therefore, you can teach "communications" and at the same time avoid teaching both reading and writing.

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There are two solutions to this problem. One is to develop a remedial reading program, complete with film strips, projectors, screens and tachistoscopes. The other is to ignore the fact that the students cannot read.

There is also a fringe benefit. If you become an expert in "communciation," you will acquire a vocabulary full of terms like "input" and "output" and "feedback" and "noise." In this technological age, such a vocabulary can be useful as camouflage. By a bit of judicious term-dropping, you can convince your colleagues in the sciences either that English is after all one of the scientific disciplines, or that you are actually an electronics engineer.

Another very effective way to avoid teaching your students to write is to teach grammars. This method has also gathered about itself a scientific aura. The trick is to teach the grammars as a ~~serapate~~ separate discipline and an end in themselves, having no apparent relationship to writing at all. If you concentrate on the differences in nomenclature among traditional grammar, generative grammar and transformational grammar, the chances are excellent that you can even escape teaching grammars. Notice the word is plural. The value of the plurality of grammars, particularly to one who seeks to avoid teaching grammar, is that it legitimatizes naming as a substitute for doing.

It is best not to go beyond naming in that study. Chances are good that you will not have time anyway. By the time you have confused your students by using three terms where one has always served before, and have covered the whole front board with a transformational formula for a simple sentence, you may have used up the entire semester.

Assuming that you do find time to go beyond naming, however, don't! If you do, you might become involved with the content of the sentences you are analyzing. That would never do. It would lead inevitably to a consideration of meaning. To consider meaning at all is to inject into the study of grammars the ideas of subjective judgment and of function in context. Furthermore,

to consider context leads directly to thinking about the use of grammatical structures in the expression of ideas. You must be very careful if you take this tack in you teaching. Otherwise, the next thing you know, you will be teaching people how to write about those ideas!

Safer than grammars, if you want to avoid teaching people how to write, is the study and teaching of linguistics. That linguistics is essentially an anthropological tool, useful mainly in the study of non-literate languages, should not bother you. If you can keep your students interested in such things as agglutinate and inflected languages, back-forming words, dental fricatives, aspriants, low-back vowels and/or the International Phonetic Alphabet, you should have no trouble avoiding even one writing assignment in the whole semester.

There is a whole area of linguistics that gets into such esoteric matters as the meaning of meaning and the levels of linguistic abstraction. If you want to make absolutely sure that your students will remain divorced from the communication of their own ideas, build at least one teaching unit on levels of linguistic abstraction as promulgated by Korzybski, transmitted to academia by S. I. Hayakawa and popularized by Stuart Chase.

Study these methods in summer school, preferably in four-week workshops. If you study them during the regular semester, you might assimilate something that will be of value in the teaching of writing. If you encounter them in four-week workshops, on the other hand, you will be inundated in a short time with apparently new ideas and strange terms. You will be overcome with the impatient expertise of a professor riding his scholarly hobby. Under the circumstances, all you can do after the course is completed is go home and disgorge undigested what you have learned.

This is not to say that such studies are of no value to the teacher. The more you yourself know about the inner workings of the language and how those workings developed, the better teacher of English you will be. But as the teacher of a high school or freshman college course, you will be tempted to use what you learn about such subjects as substitutes for what you do not know about writing.

Another escape hatch by which to avoid teaching writing is the history of the language. This is a fascinating subject, and it can be made fascinating to your students. Ransacking dictionaries can be as instructive as it can be fun. You and your students should chart the courses of some words, and if you work it right, you can substitute elementary philology for writing.

If you think that a discussion of current events belongs in social studies, you think correctly. But if you are looking for ways to avoid teaching people how to write, you can have your class bring newspapers and turn at least one period a week to the discussion of the news.

This ploy is not too hard to justify. The students have to have something to write about. What better source could there be than the students' ideas and opinions concerning the news of the world? The trick here is to allow the discussion itself to take up all the class time and to be very careful not to make any out-of-class writing assignments based on the discussion.

Teaching the novel that is currently number one on the students' hit parade has had a long and successful run over the past fifteen or twenty years. Depending on the year, the novel might have been Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies, The Ring, Steppenwolf, or God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. To use

this device, you really have to be with it. You have to know what the current campus reading is, and you have to read the novel and build your course around it.

Literary value should be no concern of yours. What is important is that interest in the novel be current among the students. It does not matter that this year's great hit may be completely and deservedly forgotten next year. The point here is to be with your students in their current interest, and to remember that anything that happened last week is ancient history.

There is a danger in this approach, of course. You might be tempted to ask your students to write papers concerning the novels or their authors. Resist the temptation! That way lies the strong possibility that you will be forced to teach your students how to write.

There is, however, an excellent way to have your cake and eat it, too. You can teach novel. You can experiment with all the critical theories you learned in courses in literature and criticism. You can have your students write about the novel. And you can still avoid teaching them how to write.

Simply let the student express himself. This is perhaps the most beautiful avoidance mechanism in the collection. Other such mechanisms may seem to have less to do with writing (after all, the student is actually putting words on paper in the exercise in self-expression), but that very seeming is the beauty of it. Nothing looks more as if you are really teaching your students how to write than a great scrawled sheaf of self-expression. Nothing, on the other hand, takes less effort on the part of the teacher.

If the student has expressed himself, he has fulfilled the requirements of the assignment. It does not matter that his vocabulary is minimal, nor that it is heavily larded with the Anglo-Saxon terms for certain bodily

functions and other intimate activities. It does not matter that his spelling, at its best, is strictly phonetic, and at its worst fades into unfathomable mystery. It does not matter that his writing is as fragmentary as his thinking, nor that he perpetrates a complete sentence only by the merest accident. It does not even matter whether or not there is any discernible content in what he puts on that paper. In self-expression, anything goes--or nothing. If the student hands in a paper at all, he is off the hook--and so are you.

The newest, shiniest, gaudiest way to keep from teaching writing is, of course, ethnic studies. The term is so delightfully broad that it is almost as serviceable as self-expression. But there is one major difficulty with it from our point of view. It puts the burden squarely on the teacher. For here there is apparently not even the pretense of teaching English. I sat in a meeting not long ago and heard a speaker tell a room full of high school English teachers that it was their responsibility to learn the language of their students, whether it be lingua Chicana, the language of the Black ghetto, or the language of the Navajo.

The purpose of this linguisitic exercise was not only to provide a bridge across which the teacher could communicate the intricacies of English. Indeed, the teacher's communication was of secondary importance. The real purpose was to make it possible for the student to communicate with the teacher without having to resort to English.

And look at the ways that are open to you from there. Consider these as substitutes for the teaching, not only of writing, but of English itself: Ethnic (supply your own branch) history, culture, folkore, art, literature, even language. The possibilities for avoidance appear almost endless.

Several years ago I watched a roomful of high school English teachers eagerly write into their notebooks the suggestion that they stimulate their students' writing by encouraging the performance of what were then called "happenings" in the classroom. Ostensibly, the happening was to stimulate writing, but we all know it would not have to do so. If we really want to escape, we can allow participation in the happening to substitute for writing about it. After all, a happening is a kind of communication. And our main concern is communication. Never mind what we communicate.

Recently, though, the happening dodge has been refined, technologically. It is no longer necessary that the student be an actual participant, much less write about the participation. If you have a relatively affluent and indulgent department, the latest, most innovative thing you can do is to equip your students with movie cameras and film in place of paper and pen. This may sound frightening if you have never had anything to do with movie-making. It need not. Remember that you are dealing with cinema verite, Life, with a capital L, and telling it (you should excuse the expression) like it is. All the student has to do is point the camer and shoot. It is self-expression without the arduous necessity of writing. And look at all the paper checking it saves!

The one great danger of using the devices discussed above is that if you rely on them exclusively, you might not even appear to be teaching writing. Not to teach writing has long been acceptable practice; not to appear to be teaching writing has never been. It is necessary, therefore, not only to know the methods of avoidance, but also to be able to go through

the motions of teaching composition when anyone is looking.

Since behavioral psychology is now in the saddle and the ghost of John B. Watson walks the land in the guise of B. F. Skinner, there can be no better way to seem to be teaching students how to write than to substitute a battery of objective tests. If the results of the instruction cannot be objectively evaluated, according to the latest encyclical the instruction is faulty. The corollary to this, of course, is that is the results can be so evaluated, the instruction is doing all that it is supposed to do. In other words, teaching need not result in education. It need only result in information about the students, information which can be objectively tabulated.

Though this does nothing for the student, it moves the behavioral psychologist one step closer to his dream of standardizing human personality. It is also, of course, a boon to English teachers who otherwise might be forced to teach writing.

The real beauty of the objective approach is that it looks so much as if the teacher were concerned with the writing skills of the students. Vocabulary, spelling, grammar and mechanics are undoubtedly part of the equipment of a writer. The students' skills in the use of that equipment can be tested objectively. It takes no great leap of the imagination to substitute these necessary supporting skills for the actual writing skill itself. It does not matter that a student may be able to spell faultlessly, diagram sentences in his sleep, decline the personal pronouns without a hitch, conjugate verbs all the way through the future perfect, and still fail miserably at the actual writing. If he can pass the objective tests in the auxiliary skills to writing, he appears to know how to write. The benefit to the teacher is

obvious: It is easier to teach the auxiliary skills, especially on the basis of objective testing, than it is to teach writing itself.

Suppose, however, that in your system, objective testing is not enough. Suppose that your students must produce a specific number of papers a semester. The best way around that problem has two steps. The first is to announce that you are going to allow your students to exercise their creativity in your class. What you mean, of course, is that in your class the students may write anything they choose, any way they choose to write it. Having established the creative intent of your class, you will further announce that your function will be that of a "resource person." If nobody questions this, let it lie. If someone wants to know what it means to be a resource person, you tell him you will be in the room as he writes and available if he asks for help. Make it very clear, however, that unless the students ask for help, they will be left to their <u>own</u> resources.

Your justification for such a pronouncement is that you do not want to interfere with the creative process. Only in the teaching of writing will you hear this justification pronounced and accepted seriously--not in music, painting, cooking, or choreography. In no other creative activity is it seriously suggested that the student be left to decide for himself whether what he is doing is what he ought to do to make his creation strong and effective.

The idea is taken seriously be English teachers, however; and time is given to its expression and discussion at national meetings. Since it seems to be very nearly the ultimate in non-teaching, it is a strategy you can adopt with confidence.

If, for some reason, you cannot manage such a complete disengagement from your class, your next best bet is to arrange for "sensory involvement" in the writing process itself. Two ways in particular offer opportunities for the teacher to retain his amateur status. First remove the chairs and desks from the classroom, clearing the floor. Next, cover the floor (and the walls, too, if you are that energetic) with old-fashioned butcher paper. Now supply your students with an assortment of writing instruments, such as ball-point pens, marking pens, crayons, pencils, and colored chalk, and turn them loose on the paper. Let them roam around, sit, stand, or lie down, writing what they will, where they will. This method purports to release the students' inhibitions about writing. It allows them physical freedom while they write and provides them with a variety of tactile experiences through use of the various writing instruments. It has another advantage, as far as the "resource person" is concerned. It is physically impossible for the teacher to do anything with the result except to admire its colorful variety and then throw it away.

The second way to provide students sensory awareness of the writing process is less messy but more expensive. It involves taking movies of the students while they are writing. The purpose is to show to the students, by way of a not-so-instant replay, that writing is too an activity. It's a physical activity full of squirming, twitching, and pencil-chewing, not forgetting that tactile experience of putting pencil to paper and actually writing! More expensive or not, this method is technologically innovative, and in the present dispensation, technology is even more important than innovation.

If, even as a "resource person" who provides his students with "sensory involvement," you are constrained to show some physical evidence of the semester's activities, make as few actual writing assignments as you conveniently can. At the beginning of the semester, you can tell your students, "After today, we shall not meet as a class. During the semester, you will write six papers. These are the due dates. If you have problems with any of the papers, make an appointment with me, and I'll see you in my office. When you have finished a paper, you may bring it to my office or deposit it in my box. I won't interfere unless you ask me to. After all, you are an adult now, and the responsibility is yours."

Such an announcement should just about complete the disengagement. Yet there may be some students who take you at your word and show up at your office, papers in hand. Talk to each student about his paper, make as many suggestions as you need to and as few as you can manage, and send him away to do his own editing. Remember, he learns to do by doing. Besides, if you operate otherwise, you will end up teaching the student how to write.

It may happen that you get most of your students coming in, cluttering up your office hours with conferences. In that case, you must plan for efficiency. Make a checklist of possible problems and most frequent errors, then organize your interviews at three-minute intervals. That makes it possible for you to see many students in a short time. More important, it eliminates the necessity of editing and grading the papers. Besides, it insures that any student who wants to can see his instructor at least once a semester.

All the methods detailed in this paper have been tried in the classroom, and, if one accepts the enthusiastic reports of their authors, they have succeeded even beyond those authors' understanding. One method of avoiding teaching the young how to write still remains, however. It is simple, it is sure-fire, and it eliminates the student from consideration altogether. The best and most prestigious way to avoid the teaching of writing is to make a career out of attending professional meetings and writing and reading papers like this one.

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