DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 193 683 CS 205 953

AUTHOR Moran, Charles
TITLE Teaching Writing/Teaching Literature.
PUB DATE Oct 80
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (15th, New York, NY, October 16-18, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English: Course Content: *English Instruction: Higher Education: Literary Devices: *Literature Appreciation: Teaching Methods: *Writing Instruction: Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Believing that a course in the novel ought to include the making of prose as well as its analysis, a college English instructor altered his teaching strategy by treating both the novel author and his students as writers. Prior to studying a particular novel, the instructor gave students an assignment that would involve a particular literary technique used by the author of the novel. By allowing the students to do what the author had done, the instructor enabled the students to understand the author's writing processes and thereby to better appreciate the author's style and his or her particular novel. In addition to enhancing their appreciation of literature, the exercise improved the students' creative and expository writing by (1) providing contexts and audiences other than classroom and instructor, (2) assisting the students' imaginative identification with the author, and (3) freeing the students of many of the harmful restraints they may have been taught in earlier writing contexts by creating in them a sense of themselves as writers. Based on this experience, the instructor proposes a recombination of the presently specialized areas of literature and writing instruction. (HTH)

Charles Moran
Department of English
Bartlett Hall
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts 01003

Teaching Writing/Teaching Literature

It has always seemed clear to me that a course in the novel ought to include the making of prose fiction as well as the study or analysis of the finished product. Until last year, however, I never took the time and trouble to test my intuition. When I did, the test produced a remarkable result. Not only did the students become better readers, an outcome that was gratifying and expected--they also improved as writers of expository prose. In this essay, I will describe the experiment and its results, and I will try to account for the results.

In the past, I had taught English 261, "Modern Novel 1880-1930," as a lecture cum discussion course in reading fiction. The course had never been actively bad, but it had not been absolutely satisfying. I did the usual new-critical analyses, students wrote the usual new-critical analyses, we compared English and American writers, we talked about the pre- and post-World War I eras from standpoints sociological, economic, and psychological. This time, however, I changed my teaching goals and strategies dramatically. I determined that my guiding principle would be this: I would treat both the authors we were reading and the students I was teaching, as writers. I hoped in this way to improve the students' ability to read demanding works of prose fiction.

Treating the authors as writers was relatively easy. I mimeographed letters from the novelists in which they talked about their writing. I photocopied manuscript pages with the author's corrections clearly evident,

to give the students a window on the author's writing process, and to counter the impression that the book alone inevitably gives: that the finished book appeared just as it is, magically, or at least by a process absolutely distinct from the students' own writing processes. I searched for 'mistakes' the novelists made, not to suggest that they were in some way deficient but to demonstrate that writers are human and that in any human endeavor, as Samuel Johnson told us, "error creeps in."

None of the above was difficult, or particularly new. My attempt to treat the students as writers was difficult, however, and it does represent a new departure. To accomplish this, I brought into the course assignments normally given in creative writing classes. I attempted to discover for myself an essential component of a particular writer's performance, a component that the writer used often, and with variety, throughout the piece in question. The component might be "a short dramatic scene involving two people," or "a description of place," or "an interior monologue." I then asked the students to perform this same act, in writing, before they had read the writer's novel, and before I had made any reference to this author. The assignments were given in class, and took no more than 20 minutes. The product of the assignment, depending, of course, upon the instructions, the writer, and the weather, was more or less like the writing of the novelist we were studying. If it was close, so much the better: the student had for twenty minutes become a writer, and a writer like the writer we were studying. If not close, then the student had become a writer who had made choices the novelist had not, and we could examine those choices.

Let me illustrate. One of the novels on my old syllabus was Willa Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop. I had had difficulty teaching this particular novel in the past, but I thought I would have at it again. I

brought out my "Willa Cather as Writer" materials: letters from Stephen Tennant's Willa Cather on Writing, pictures of the New Mexico landscape, and so on. More important, I prepared a writing assignment that could cause the students to do what Willa Cather does so often in Death: bring a sense of history, almost legend, to the description of a place. I did not tell them to imitate Willa Cather; I carefully did not mention her name. I simply gave them this assignment: "Describe a scene, or part of a scene, that you know well. Describe it briefly, 25-50 words at most, and then go into its past. What has happened here in the past? What happened in the beginning? If possible, include a reference to another place, to an event that took place thousands of miles away, or perhaps a person who has travelled to this place from a geographical/cultural distance."

Here is Willa Cather doing what I have asked my students to do:

> About a mile above the village he came upon the waterhead, a spring overhung by the sharp-leafed variety of cottonwood called water-willow. All about it crowded the oven-shaped hills, --nothing to hint of water until it rose miraculously out of the parched and thirsty sea of sand. Some subterranean stream found an outlet here, was released from darkness. The result was grass and trees and flowers and human life; household order and hearths from which the smoke of burning pinon logs rose like incense to Heaven.
>
> The Bishop sat a long time by the spring, while the declining sun poured its beautifying light over those low, rose-tinted houses and bright gardens. The old grandfather had shown him arrow-heads and corroded medals, and a sword hilt, evidently Spanish, that he had found in the earth near the water-head. This spot had become a refuge for humanity long before these Mexicans had come upon it. It was older than history, like those well-heads in his own country where the Roman settlers had set up images of a river goddess, and later Christian priests had planted a cross.
>
> (Death Comes for the Archbishop, I, 2)

And here is one of my students:

> At the end of the narrow footpath lie three or four log cabins high on the hill. Children climb up to the top bunks of smoothed wooden planks and pretend they are camping out for the night. Through the dusky light from musket holes in the cabin, the rest

> of the fort can be seen and tourists now peek in the windows of a nearby makeshift hospital.
>
> But the last time anyone slept in these small cabins of Jockey Hollow was in the winter of 1777, when Washington and his troops hid in waiting from the British armies and the harsh cold. Almost four hundred men made their camp in this area and hunted for deer in what is now a cross-country path....

And another:

> In the middle of the field, just ten yards to the right of the rutted way, lies the first circle. Surrounded by shade trees and tall grasses swaying and whispering in the wind, the round mass of dirt and rocks seemed unnatural....
>
> Several years ago this dirt clearing was a thriving pond, a source of life for the aquatic and plant community....

This twenty-minute assignment produced an effect that I did not predict, but will describe. After fifteen minutes, I asked the class "How many of you need more time?" and all hands went up. Then on impulse I asked "How many of you are having fun?" and all hands went up. They were having fun--and they were writing and having fun. After twenty minutes, I stopped the writing and began to work with the student prose in class. I called for volunteers to read their own work aloud, and a student read a piece on a New England church and its past. I asked "How many characters are there in this piece, and how fully are they developed?" Answer: "None, and not at all." I asked: "Can you have prose fiction without character and action?" Answer: "Yes--we just did it." After reading Death Comes for the Archbishop, last year's class had complained that the book was not a novel, and that it was dull--it had no character, no action. "Nothing happens!" they said. This year's class understood what Willa Cather was doing, and could therefore appreciate the fiction. They saw that she was writing what she herself had called legend, and that, as she had said, "In this kind of writing the mood is the thing----all the little figures and stories are mere improvisations that come out of it."

As the semester continued, I asked the students to be writers for twenty minutes each week, each week giving them an in-class exercise that derived from the prose fiction we were about to read. For Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, I gave this exercise:

> Remember a time (quiet and luminous) when you were 4-10 years old. Remember it as clearly as you can. There was an adult present. See the scene through the mind of the adult. Imagine what transpires in the mind of the adult. Record the thoughts in the third person (he/she thought) but keep the frequency of the "he/she thought" to a minimum.
>
> The adult mind should be fixed in space, watching you and the scene of which you are a part. You will be more or less incidental in the scene. Other things (objects, people) may be more important. The adult mind will think, in its own characteristic way, about the scene, objects, people in the line of vision. It will go from the scene on its own, in tangents or in reverie.

This was an exercise in point of view, and it produced some wonderful writing in which the students became writers remembering their own Talland House landscape, and seeing it through adult eyes--Lily Briscoe eyes, Mrs. Ramsay eyes, Uncle Butch eyes.

Here is the beginning of one student's work:

> "Hold the rod tip down and watch that bobber. When it goes under---yank! Then you've got one," Uncle Butch said. It was his first time fishing, not like before where he watched, but this time for real. He stared at the bobber. It swayed just barely with the tiny ripples caused by the rain. The red side was on top and half the white bottom was submerged.
>
> Butch stood behind Todd, his own rod in hand, staring not at his own but at Todd's bobber. In his mind he cursed the rain....

The student-writer moves from the boy to the uncle, sliding easily, like the master-writer herself.

When we did Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, I gave them this problem:

> Do a family tree, going back as far as you can, to the person you see, in your mind's eye, as your Ancestor, your beginning, the essence of some part of the gene pool that has again expressed itself

in you. This Ancestor, and series of ancestors, may or may not be blood relatives. Write a paragraph about each, or about some. Here's mine, or my beginning:

CHARLES READE: A Philadelphia playboy who became a Vermont farmer, sheriff of South Hero. Who lost his left arm in the corn-chopper and would still lift a full grain bag with his right alone. Who....

CHARLES MORAN: His nephew, who learned from his uncle where to find bass, northern pike, and the occasional eel on the reef between Cedar and Fishbladder Islands....

And here is a student response to this assignment:

AYA MARAN: a small, dark-eyed, olive-skinned child of thirteen who was married off to the son of a well-to-do olive farmer in Bagda. The dowry consisted of fifteen of the best goats and ten of the best olive trees from the estate, a fair trade considering that Aya was big-boned for her age and would bear many children.

SADIE MARAN: the third child to be born to Aya Maran and the first one to live past the age of one month, making her the eldest. Because there was no son, she would go with her father to Beirut twenty miles away to trade olive oil from her grandfather's farm for cloth and other goods....

Clearly this student, and you will simply have to take my word for the others, has understood much about Faulkner's prose directly---not by my telling her about it, but through the assignment, which allowed her to do what Faulkner had done. In the past, when I had taught The Sound and the Fury I found students angry at Faulkner for having confused them so thoroughly with the several Compson generations. This time they were able to read the novel with much less difficulty, some of them even able to appreciate Faulkner's humor in giving the name Quentin to two characters in different generations, one male and one female. "If we had done that in ours, would you have believed it?" one asked.

And so it went for the balance of the semester, novelist after novelist: Wharton, Toomer, Joyce, Hemingway, Lawrence, James. Some assignments were successful, others less so. I did not do D.H. Lawrence justice, nor did I advance Ernest Hemingway's reputation. I did well by Henry James,

however, and I will describe the James assignment because it proved to be so effective. We had read Daisy Miller and were about to embark upon The Beast in the Jungle. I gave the class this writing assignment:

> Write from the point of view of a man, or a woman, who is in a psychic fog, who cannot see out clearly, if at all, whose mental energies are so consumed by subliminal conflict that the conscious mind is stalled, blocked, partially paralyzed. The sentences should include verbs that are themselves blocked by modifiers (she hardly knew) and verbs in the passive mode (she was conveyed) and the sentences should appear to be long and aimless in their progress toward a point but dimly understood, perhaps not understood at all.
>
> I give you a situation. A man or woman sits at a breakfast table. You, the writer, have direct access to his/her mental processes. Across the table is a person of the opposite sex. The breakfast is a social occasion. The food: toast, coffee, strawberry jam. You are on your own.

Here is a student response:

> Her smiling and rather wanton movement of her shoulder as she delicately tasted the strawberries seemed to be a vague enticement, yet appeared to include the entire table, or at least the other male that was present. But wasn't the slight, almost sly gleam in her eye pointed directly towards him as she posed the necessary mundane questions? Wasn't their prior social intercourse changed, electrified by some scarcely-hidden passion that boiled within, rising up in response?

This piece was typical, as most of the class threw themselves into the task of creating with language the illusion of a mind in dynamic stasis.

At the end of the course, I sat down to examine the results and to determine what, if anything, the students had learned. I had for my data my own subjective impressions, attendance records, student course evaluations, student essays written at the beginning and at the end of the course, and the final examinations. My own impressions were supported by attendance records and student evaluations: this had been a good English class. Students liked it and came regularly; I liked it and thought it had been a useful enterprise. Furthermore, students had learned to read prose fiction with great sensitivity. Here is a student writing

about a "spot" passage on the final examination, D. H. Lawrence's description of the Morel's house in Sons and Lovers:

> This house in Paragraph D is of little importance. It is ugly, the street is ugly. Inside, it is gloomy. Man's creations are ugly. Beauty is nature. Outside, everything is better. The sunshine, the trees, the grass and the gardens are "good" in the context of the fiction. The final sentence, "One looked over a few red-roofed cottages to the hills with all the glow of the autumn afternoon," really brings this point across. Despite the cottages, the afternoon was still beautiful. This seems to be in line with Lawrence, who finds the beauty of the world in nature and in a human's animalness, while all his creations are mere trifles.

The student has decoded Lawrence's paysage moralise and discovered what is "'good' in the context of the fiction." This examination paper, and the others like it, suggested that I had indeed helped these students to read. I could multiply examples, but will forbear, for reasons of time and rhetoric.

So the few instruments we have agree: the course was a good English course, and it taught its students to read. But the course also improved the students' expository writing. I have the evidence in my files: the students' final examinations. The expository writing in these examinations is several cuts above the expository writing usually found in final examinations. The students' essays are daring, personal, confident, some almost aggressive. The writers perform with voice, with range and power. They makes mistakes, certainly, but error-free writing is not necessarily good writing. Here is a student concluding an essay in which he argues that Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury was the best novel read during the semester:

> The point is that an author is limited by his own beliefs and background. His/her characters perform in ways which correspond to the attitudes of the author. Favorable characters do what is favorable to the author, the non-favorable do the unfavorable. It could be no other way. Faulkner's idea is the most beautiful. Love people for believing and doing what they do, for then it is possible to love the authors of novels for what they have written.

This is good expository writing. We may not agree with the sentiments expressed, and we may not see this as a jewel of Faulkner criticism, but it is good expository writing. The writer is taking risks, yet holding the prose together, maintaining control.

If this literature course did improve the students' writing, it becomes necessary to account for the improvement. How did the course accomplish what it apparently did? How did this amalgam of reading, creative writing, and expository writing improve the students as essay writers? What connections may legitimately be made between reading and learning to write? Between creative and expository writing? Here we venture upon waters largely uncharted. The more-or-less standard Freshman English course, one that might use the Martin and Ohmann texts as its basis, assumes that when one learns to analyze expository writing, one learns to produce it. I find myself arguing that a properly designed course in reading novels will improve students' expository writing. Furthermore, I find myself asserting that writing assignments normally given in creative writing courses will, when given in conjunction with the reading of fiction, produce an improvement in students' expository writing. In a recent issue of College English S. L. Weingart has found that the writing of poetry improves his students' expository writing, but he is "not yet prepared to theorize about why such dramatic improvement occurs."[1] I am not prepared; indeed I think that no one is prepared, given the state of our knowledge at the present time. Reading through the annotated bibliography Creative Writing in the Classroom, edited by Robert Day and published by NCTE, I come upon a study that discovers a relationship between the acquisition of typing skills and measured creativity.

But that way madness lies, or at least a surrender to the destructive element. I think I know why in my Modern Novel course I improved my students'

expository writing, and I will offer three answers which I believe to be true simultaneously and in approximately equal degree. I suggest that the novel course improved the students' expository writing by altering the perceived context of the student prose, by facilitating the transfer of technique from the reading to the writing; and by liberating the student writers from the writing instruction they had already experienced.

First, I suggest that the literature course I have described altered the perceived context of the student's expository writing. Undergraduates in general have an impoverished definition of the genre student essay. The student essay 1) is artificial, bearing no relationship to other uses of language, and 2) is a verbal performance in which one must be careful. The essay is written by a student, for a teacher. This audience insists upon error-free prose, wants specificity, and requires reference to materials included in the course. The genre calls for a careful and discreet manner, a voiceless voice that will not offend, and the subjugation of personal opinion to those of the authorities in the texts or behind the podia.

The creative assignments that I gave the students increased their ability to imagine contexts. The assignments all provided full or partial contexts. As students worked through the assignments, they became able to imagine with greater intensity a variety of contexts: particular audiences, voices, and subjects, and attitudes of each to all. The essays written for the final examination, while still careful and restrained, took on at intervals the coloring of particular contexts that were fresh and true: "conversations with a cranky pedagogue," or "argument with my father," or "prophesy and history, spoken on a beach, in the morning, to the rising sun." Along with the fully-imagined context came a richness in rhetorical strategy, an increased range of vocabularly and sentence pattern, and a sharpening of that elusive concept, voice,

which John Hawkes has called "the summation of style."[2]

Second, the course facilitated the transfer of technique from the author of the literature being read to the student writer. Most Freshman English courses that include literature at all assume that we learn to write by reading. Until this year, I have belonged to the other school, those who believe that you learn to write by writing. But I now begin to see that transfer of technique from reading to writing is possible, although not inevitable or automatic. I suggest that the transfer will occur to the extent that the student reader becomes, in the imagination, the writer. This imaginative identity with the writer will not be facilitated by the assignment of critical essays, for in the critical essay the critic must assume a distance from the subject. Nor will the imaginative identification with the writer occur through the study of the finished text alone: the text as icon, the writer as superhuman, able to produce without correction or hesitation a Masterpiece of Western Literature. The exercises I designed, and my steady emphasis upon the author as writer, assisted the student readers' imaginative identification with the author and thus speeded the transfer from author to student of creative wildness and control; of range of tone, voice, mood; of sentence structure, rhythm, knowledge, and power.

Third, the course helped to undo some of the damage that had been done to the students in their earlier training. Here I align myself with Kenneth Koch, Ken Macrorie, and those who have been called by Richard Young the "new Romantics." The child arrives, we agree, at elementary school trailing clouds of glory. Shades of the prison house, in the form of precepts and workbooks, gradually darken and restrict the prose. When the child arrives at college, there are hardly intimations of the writer that might have been. To support this position I have the evidence provided by Janet Emig in her work with Lynn, reported in The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders. I have also the evi-

dence of my own experience as a writing tutor in our cou.se in Advanced Expository Writing, one that we teach entirely by tutorial. By the time students arrive at the University, they have become the victims of a great deal of well-intentioned and destructive advice: "do not use the first person," "use strong verbs," "vary your sentence structure," "be concise." In their search for a quick-and-easy route to good writing, they have fastened upon one or more of these bits of advice and the seed, falling upon soil that was wonderfully rich, has attained malignant growth. "Use strong verbs" has become "always use strong verbs, even if the subject or situation calls for something rather different": "do not use the first person" has become "leave yourself entirely out of your writing--do not even offer an opinion."

The course I have described allowed the students to expand, to grow, to write in ways that they could, but thought they should not. The course helped them to throw off destructive inhibitions. It created in them a sense of themselves as writers, and allowed them to write the expository prose of which they were capable. As Kenneth Koch has written, "Teaching is really not the right word for what takes place: it is more like permitting the children to discover something they already have."[3]

The results of my experiment suggest answers to two questions that have plagued me and my profession for the past decade. The first question: "How can we best help our students, this generation that was raised on television and for many of whom reading is a difficult and unrewarding enterprise, learn to read difficult prose?" Given the evidence of the past semester, I would hazard this reply: "By integrating creative writing assignments with the study of literature." The second question: "How can we justify our literature courses to administrators, taxpayers, and alumni who think we should be teaching writing?" Given the experience of the past semester, I would offer this reply: "When we teach literature, if we teach it in the ways I suggest,

we are teaching writing." I am advocating a reintegration, or perhaps better a recombination, of elements that have been separated. In the normal run of English Department course offerings, there are literature courses and writing courses. Furthermore, there are creative writing courses and there are expository writing courses. What began as a difference in emphasis has become a difference in kind, and we now have specialized courses, and specialized teachers, and the students are left to assemble the pieces as best they can. I propose that we include, in our literature courses, relevant aspects of what is now considered creative writing. When we do, we will find that our students become better readers, and we will find that they become better writers of expository prose.

Footnotes

[1]"The Redbook Experiment," College English 41, 1 (September, 1979), 57-67.

[2]"The Voice Project," Writers as Teachers/Teachers as Writers, ed. Jonathan Baumbach (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 91.

[3]Wishes, Lies, and Dreams (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 25.