

PROLOGUE

It is with some trepidation that I perpetuate the “Prologue.” It was to be used only once — to introduce the origin and philosophy of the JOURNAL and to credit those responsible for making the JOURNAL a reality. I have no great desire in each issue to sustain snappy editorial chatter, or solemn comment on the state of composition, or uplifting introduction to the articles the Board chose to publish, articles easily standing on their own. Yet on this evening prior to the morning that the second issue of the JOURNAL goes to press, several screaming thesis statements are fighting their way into a “Prologue.”

I can report now that the JOURNAL has been favorably received throughout the country. Its potentially problematic focus on the teaching of writing up and down the curriculum, from pre-school to college, is, I have been told, extremely innovative; that this publication has as its audience *all* teachers of writing makes it one of a kind. I tell you this not so we can pat each other on the back, but so we can understand the burden and challenge facing us.

Now the bad news. Unfortunately, in this number no elementary school teacher wrote an article, a disappointment for all of us, perhaps our first small setback. Each of us must support those premises that allowed us to form and fund the Indiana Teachers of Writing; each of us must practice what we preach: we must write, and by writing share our notions of how we teach writing. We can't give allegiance to a kind of “trickle down” theory of composition pedagogy, nor can we starve ourselves by being dependent on a bankrupt pedagogy, hoping, as our students do, that inspiration sustains us.

So much is going on with language in the minds of those four to eight year olds, patterns of language development essential to teaching writing at any curricular level. I firmly believe that, as Professor Barbara Weaver urges us to understand, Johnny and Jane *can* write only *if* we ourselves understand thoroughly what we are teaching; *if* we understand the hows, whys, and whats of writing from the first time toddling Johnny and Jane invent a text to the time when as soon-to-be adults they submit their final essay for elementary composition; *if* we center our instruction within

language and cognitive theories and not within a handbook or outdated curriculum guide; *if* we look at how Johnny and Jane might learn writing and language and not necessarily at what they have been told to learn; and *if* we understand why the Marci in Professor Weaver's article writes as she does.

Let me explain briefly — very briefly — some of the implications of the young child learning to compose. In *Thought and Language* Lev Vygotsky contends that egocentric speech, the language a child uses only for himself as a problem-solving device, does not become extinct when the child reaches seven or eight as Piaget believed, but it instead goes underground to trigger the language of thought, the voice we take so much for granted when we adult professionals write. Any *significant* (and that is the key word) writing must, if that writing is to be developed and incisive, engage the mechanism of inner speech, undergo eventual translation to a vocalized form of speech (see Professor Young's article), and then finally be converted to an acceptable form of written communication.

The problem, or challenge I should say, is that inner speech often is understandably a syntactical mess: it is highly predicated (the person knows his unexpressed subject), has a grammar all its own, relies on agglutination (word combinations, or even invented and wrongly used words), and always emphasizes the sense of things over lexical meaning. Its thesis is always implicit. Inner speech is often incomprehensible to others because it is meant for oneself and works independently from vocalized social speech and certainly from written meaning; it is semantically not phonetically constructed; and it can easily be avoided through mindless writing tasks.

If indeed these notions of inner speech research are correct, the implications are crucial for all teachers of writing and language. Certainly the "whole language approach," now predominate in the lower grades, is at this moment the best possible pedagogy. The young student must talk, write, talk, talk, read, write, and talk some more if he is to become adept at unconsciously manipulating the interplay of the four language processes confronting him: inner speech, vocalized language, written language, and decoding (reading). Any writing assignment at any curricular level that allows the student to bypass or not to engage the gears of inner speech is, it seems to me, going to be of limited bene-

fit for that student. The very theories of writing as discovery and process and learning as problem-solving and concept-making pay the valuable dividend we are after.

Let me tie inner speech very easily, I think, to an additional notion of how young children learn and write. That student, research tells us, first learns scientific concepts during the early stages of the educational process, scientific concepts being the general truths or causal connections formed during classroom instruction. Only later are students capable of forming significant spontaneous or everyday concepts involving themselves or their immediate environment. In short, young children are quite capable of reiterating and, to an extent, understanding general information concepts. The maturation process of the scientific concept first moves *from* the articulation of the whole concept and then later *to* comprehension of the data forming that concept, a general to specific rhythm. The spontaneous concept is just the opposite. The child's impressions of himself and environment are, at an early age, many. Think of his mind as a crowded room, full of furniture and people and conflicting impressions. The child has an incredible amount of concrete information but cannot place at will this data into appropriate abstraction until later. The movement of intellectual growth here is from the specific to the general.

So what? Again the implications are many, and certainly a "prologue" is usually not the place to expound and enumerate. Suffice to say that we cannot teach writing effectively by separating it from thought; we cannot teach freshman composition at college as if the student had never attended the second grade, had never taken part in these natural processes. We cannot, as Professor Applebee's study explains (reviewed by Kurt Jordan in this issue) teach writing by using writing only as a vehicle by which students feed-back — routinely — the scientific concepts taught in the classroom. And we cannot expect students to easily understand our superficial dictums when we say "Find concrete detail for your thesis" (in essence go from the easily formed scientific concept to the complex relationships of the data); or "Construct a provocative thesis" (classify and generalize from the specific data of the spontaneous concept). Unless students call upon their inner speech constantly and see through practice the intricacies of concept making, then we will continue to have student writing that is vacuous writing

such as that done by Marci for her teacher. We will continue to receive assignments like the one I received this year in elementary composition:

Population comes from many things in our society, such as cars, factories, and dumping of our waste. Factories let out smoke, which has chemicals in it, these chemicals get into the air in which we breathe. Cars do about the same, but because there are so many it becomes worse than factories. The dumping of our waste populates the rivers and lakes, fish are killed, and all sea life is destroyed.

Do we really think grammar is the problem here? Do we really think that fixing the spelling, punctuation, and verb endings will — *at this time* — carry over to her next assignment when she is so removed from the writing that she pathetically (but for us pathetically *and* humorously) confuses her general concepts — pollution with over-population? Why does she do this? We might say she didn't proofread, but I imagine she proofread the paragraph several times. We teachers often get the kinds of assignments we deserve without understanding why we get them.

And finally, I want to say that a writing process best suited to accommodate inner speech and concept formation is, amazingly enough, almost intuited by the young child. Those elementary teachers encouraging frequent writing in the classroom *know* that their students are eager to compose, to revise and to communicate to others something, unlike the author of the above paragraph, they have discovered through thought. We must not forget that younger children often “name” their drawings only after they complete the drawing; that they often sense in the middle of the drawing process what it is they want to sketch; that if they care about what is expressed, they want it to be perfect. Is this intuited process any different from the writing process when we allow our students time to compose, to create a written text, to find what is most important to them? Then, and perhaps only then, does a student really expose himself to the learning of the necessary principles of language refinement and acceptability that we know we must ultimately demand of him.

I continue to be amazed at how young children innately understand and carry out the writing process. Professor Marshall Gregory in his JOURNAL article makes a jocular

reference to assigning epic-writing in class. The suggestion is not so far-fetched. My daughter, who as of yet cannot form any letters, and her nursery school buddies have now a seemingly ongoing text concerning their Herculean struggles with the class bully. The written product has grown to ten pages, is illustrated, and is full of squiggles and hieroglyphics that no adult can decode. From the beginning, we understand, *meaning quite naturally precedes form*. Even more astonishing are our children's early assumptions of how and why writing is done. Without teacher intervention Samantha and her co-authors brainstorm daily among themselves before adding new pages to the text. They certainly have decided on purpose: to plan their assault on Bobby Webber, or, as Samantha says, "to get back at him." They have a specific audience: themselves, or the attack, if made public, would not be successful. They even have a sense of structure — first the reasons they are going to initiate atrocities on Bobby and, second, a descriptive process of how the plan is to be put in motion, including a map that charts the way to Bobby's house. I discovered all of this as Sam tried to smuggle matches into school. After a long questioning period, she told me about the epic, led me to her cubby, showed me ten pages of surprisingly linear manuscript, took out a middle page, pointed, and whispered, "This is where I burn Bobby's buns when he's sleeping. That's why I need matches." Her cohorts, ages three to five, gathered around and made me promise to keep the epic a secret.

What this long, "editor's freewrite" means to say is that regardless of what level we teach writing we must always see writing as an ongoing language activity; we must talk to each other about it. The only negative response I received about the initial issue of the JOURNAL was from someone who lamented the lack of articles written by high school teachers. Likewise, the only substantial criticism from our conference in September was that at a specific slot there didn't seem to be much for "college teachers" or at a different time "not much for middle school teachers."

We are all teaching the same thing, and we owe it to ourselves to see the abundant relationships, relationships that illuminate what we are doing, of our writing classes. I challenge you not to pigeonhole yourselves. I challenge all you elementary, middle, and secondary teachers to read the outwardly most complex article in this issue, the one by Professor Anson, and transfer the implications of what he says to

your own classroom experiences. Furthermore, I challenge you college instructors to see the connections of Mrs. Matthew's article on eighth grade book reports and, perhaps, my Samantha's epic to your own college writing classroom.

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