

“READINESS IS ALL”: THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEAKING AND WRITING CONNECTIONS

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The scene is a familiar one: reading late at night, I observe a freshman's paper starting well, but soon deteriorating into confusion. Rather than write a long, negative comment, however, I wait until the next day for a chance to ask the writer what direction he wanted the paper to take. After some hesitation comes the response, "I guess what I wanted to do is . . .," a statement of clarity that far exceeds the written form. Frequently, a writer will be able to articulate his meaning in speaking, but it will become twisted in written form. By leading them from the written page to oral expression and back to the page, teachers help students define, dislodge, and express their meaning.

This is one of several ways many of us frequently integrate the acts of speaking and writing to help students increase their facility with written discourse. Another is placing students in small groups and asking them to discuss each other's papers as an aid to revision or to discuss an assigned reading in preparation for an essay on a related topic. The procedures are so much a part of our teaching practices that we don't often stop and consider them.

My point is that we should be increasingly aware of ways speaking and writing complement each other, particularly how awareness of speech can improve our teaching of writing without

greater expenditures of time than we now spend in most freshman courses. Most of us lack sufficient time to devote attention to speech in freshman English, and many of us lack familiarity with the discipline of speech, yet we can have an informed and positive *attitude* about connections between the two forms of language. In the remainder of this article, I plan to describe several ways speaking and writing are related and then illustrate some of the ways a positive, aware attitude toward these connections can lead to effective teaching strategies.

Historically, speaking and writing are closely related. While Plato distrusted writing because it took ideas out of one's mind and put them on paper—or as Myron Tuman interprets “threatened to rob people of the power of memory” (769)—other classical rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian found the relationship a positive one. Quintilian felt that writing aided speaking and speaking aided writing: “But they [writing, reading, and speaking] are so intimately and inseparably connected, that if one of them be neglected, we shall but waste the labour which we have devoted to the others” (X.i.2). And, “as regards writing, this is certainly never more necessary than when we have frequently to speak extempore. For it maintains the solidity of our speech and gives depth to superficial facility. . . . Writing will give us greater precision of speech, while speaking will make us write with greater facility” (X. vii. 29).

Both rhetoricians were products of the *progymnasmata* or series of exercises that combined speaking, reading, writing, memorizing, and imitating. Practice of this interactive relationship in a single class continued into the eighteenth century when the exercises were infrequently used. Elocution, or dramatic speaking, attracted attention in schools, but to many its theatrical extremes were distasteful; when it died out, little interest in speech remained in American schools (Kitzhaber, 350,51). An increasing number of weak students, new interest in teaching literature, and graduate studies that offered serious research in literature made the burden of teaching a language-intensive freshman course more intolerable to English faculty. The freshman course grew exclusively into a theme-writing course with some attention given to literature as a model for writing. In dismay, individuals interested in speech and the classical tradition walked out of the 1914 Modern Language Association meeting and formed the Speech Association of

America. Since that time, English and speech have been housed in separate university departments, and many English classrooms are void of speech opportunities (Parker and Stewart). Laments William Riley Parker: "We cannot turn back the clock and bring speech back into English departments, but this realistic fact seems to me no justification for English abandoning all training in speech and oral composition for its majors" (300).

Developmentally, writing and speaking are also related. Walter Ong writes that "until writing, most of the kinds of thoughts we are used to thinking today simply could not be thought." While he favors an oral culture, he grants that "without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing." (2). Frank D'Angelo supports this sentiment in reporting that preliterate man was apparently unable to think logically. It was only the "breakdown of the bicameral mind, with the invention of writing" that permitted man to think as we define that word today (52).

How does such developmental theory translate into the classroom? Barry Kroll has described four "functional relationships between oral and written language" that change as the individual develops: preparation, consolidation, differentiation, and integration. By understanding how the relationships between speaking and writing interrelate in each stage, "we are in a better position, I believe, to understand and promote students' growth in writing" (94). While speaking is emphasized in the early years and writing in the later, both forms of language persist concurrently. In fact, Zoellner has argued persuasively that teachers should take advantage of a talk/write pedagogy at all levels to encourage natural language behaviors rather than teach a product view of writing when think/write and read/write are the predominant models.

However, by no means are speaking and writing identical in nature. Many empirical studies have shown that speaking is often more interesting to an audience and more clear: its vocabulary and sentence structure are simpler than writing (Gibson *et al*). However, as Peter Elbow has shown in a fascinating article, there are several ways in which writing can be described to reflect stereotyped speech attributes and several ways in which speaking can be described to reflect stereotyped writing attributes. His conclusion is that a good writer is aware of shifting writing styles he needs

to master at different stages of composing. Sometimes he writes in a dead heat to keep up with his ideas; other times he writes slowly, painfully, searching for just the right word that will help his audience understand. It is our task to help student-writers realize some of the power at their disposal because of the relationship between speaking and writing.

On one hand, writing can be viewed as less permanent than speech. For example, once someone has verbally insulted another individual or group—as Agnew did in his “effete snobs” speech—it is very difficult if not impossible to forget. The voice lives on internally, while a written insult can be filed away and more easily forgotten. If writing is viewed as ephemeral, students will feel more comfortable with frequent writing and rewriting, not being afraid to throw away words in search of meaning. Through the process of free writing, a finished product emerges. On the other hand, we are all familiar with the prevalent view that writing is more permanent than speech. A written constitution will withstand the passage of time while spoken words are forgotten. From this perspective, writers compose with care and precision, being mindful of audiences’ needs, both immediate and long range. Both composing styles are important and should be mastered.

What are some of the effects of having a positive awareness of the special relationships between speaking and writing? I suggest there are at least three areas in which we may see effects: in our classrooms, in our oral and written communications with students, and in our assignments.

In our classes, such an awareness might lead us to:

- (1) Compose as a class. On an overhead or blackboard, the teacher or a student might begin talking aloud about a subject of interest and translate that on-going talk into a tentative written document, jointly authored. This is a direct application of incorporating speaking as an aid to writing. Also, students can be grouped and given writing projects to complete together, allowing ample opportunity for on-going talk during different stages of composing.
- (2) Read papers aloud to students and ask them to read their papers aloud in groups. Have students paraphrase and summarize sections of a text, both orally and in writing.
- (3) Pair students and ask them to talk out a recently assigned paper. Record their conversations, encourage students to

transcribe them, and refer to the transcriptions as aids in composing their papers.

(4) Encourage more individual participation in class discussions by using small group activities rather than maintaining a single discussion. If speaking calls forth one's ideas so they can be shaped, then all students should have this opportunity, not just a few.

In individual conferences, we should put more emphasis on listening rather than talking to students. Have students talk out their concerns about a paper and help them articulate problems and tentative solutions to them. Tape conferences and make them available to writers. The same listening style might characterize our method of writing comments on a paper. Rather than tell a writer what to do, we can rephrase what we read to help the writer determine if he has indeed said what he intended and ask questions that might influence the writer to talk out his ideas with us or a friend, or explore his ideas in free writing before continuing with another formal draft.

In forming writing assignments, we can do several important things:

(1) Emphasize that each paper describes a rhetorical situation just as speaking does, whether stated or implied. Be sure to allow writers options in their audiences and purposes as well as in topics.

(2) Help students become more aware of their written speaking voices and help them understand their importance in addressing an audience. Power exists in the spoken voice, and a sense of voice in prose often commands attention.

(3) Stress that writing is ephemeral, at times even more so than speaking, and provide assignments that include an exploratory element where students use up multiple sheets of paper to write through their ideas. Demonstrate that writing is a form of learning. One way is to ask students to record an opinion that is the opposite of their own or assume a role and write from that perspective before turning to write about their own opinions and perspectives.

(4) Since speech often assumes power because of the immediacy of an audience and speaker, create assignments that provide students with live audiences. Have them write dialogues to one another or to different groups within the

class. Have one class write letters to another or a community group—retired citizens or convalescents—who may be able to sustain an on-going correspondence. Have students write letters to the editors of newspapers.

These are only three areas in which a positive awareness of how speaking and writing relate to one another can influence our teaching of writing. We need not have degrees in speech communication or a second semester added to our writing courses. The methods I have described are natural ways of making our classrooms more language intensive, thus increasing chances that students will continue to grow as writers.

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