

IF I WERE KING

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Behold the composition instructor. It's about seven o'clock of a winter's evening. On his desk a single lamp glows, casting a warm light over piles of finished and unfinished essays. He is tired. Slowly, his head sinks to rest—just for a minute he assures himself—on the desk. He dreams.

A coronation scene, crowds cheering wildly in the square. The composition instructor, seated on a throne carved from a single block of lapis lazuli, surveyed those standing before him: The Provost, the Dean, the Department Chair. The Provost spoke, "Sire, The Board of Regents has unanimously begged us to proclaim you King of Composition. Whatever you desire shall be done. What are your wishes?"

The Instructor King stood: "We will make four changes in the composition programs of this kingdom. Take heed." Scriveners poised pens attentively, waiting to take the King's words down in all the languages of the world, including Esperanto and Fortran.

"Firstly," said the King, "Henceforth composition programs will take place not in the classroom, but in the offices of the teachers." There was a gasp from the assembled multitude. "But, sire," said the Department Chair, "We can't do that."

"Why not?" asked the King.

"It's never been done!" said one voice. "It won't work," said another.

The King raised his hand. Silence reigned, and the King began. "First let me answer your questions, which were sincere though ill advised. Not only does such an arrangement work, it works very well. In fact, it is superior to current lecture methods. Roger Garrison has a complete program which would work without a classroom and Donald Murray prefers to teach in his office." As a murmur broke out, the King said, "Let me explain further."

"Writing may be done collaboratively or in a workshop situation, but essentially it is a lonely art, each writer working out his text by him or herself. What the developing writer needs is to have a mature, friendly critic who will guide him/her through the process. I propose that a student meet with an instructor several times

during the creation of a paper, meet in the teacher's office one to one, discussing the paper, getting encouragement and feedback."

"Too much time—too much time!" cried a voice from the back of the square.

"Not at all," replied the King with a royal smile. "Let's do some math. Assume that a teacher has twenty student in a class. Let's further assume that each student has roughly two weeks to complete a paper, and will see his instructor four times during that period for ten minutes each meeting. That's four times ten times twenty, or 800 minutes, or 13 hours and 20 minutes. So, the teacher will spend just over six and one half hours per week in seeing students. If the teacher has four writing classes, that's twenty-six hours a week.

"On the other hand, suppose that same teacher lectures. That's twelve hours a week in lecture alone. Another eight in preparation, another six in grading papers. A teacher spends as much time with a class using lectures, but little of it is with the students."

"Yes, but will it work?" came a voice from third row center.

"The studies indicate that it is at least as effective as current practices, and probably more so," replied the King.

"But what about grading and preparation?" came a voice from the left.

"Read Garrison or Shook or Murray or Simmons," said the King, rather tiredly. "The fact is, writing classes don't really need to meet in a room at all. If students meet individually with the instructors, each student can truly move at his or her own pace. Students pass or fail depending on whether or not they fulfill a set of minimal criteria. Let me illustrate. Suppose a teacher decides that in order to pass, a student must write five acceptable papers in a school term. The slow student, the careless student, the lazy student, the student who will not learn, all will probably not complete the required number of essays. Thus they fail themselves. When is a paper acceptable? When the teacher, upon reading it in the office, decides it meets all applicable requirements (Note that this eliminates the dreaded stack of papers to grade at home)."

After the King stopped speaking, there was a moment's silence. Then the crowd began to cheer. "Barvo!" they said, "Excellent. What's the next point?"

"The second change we will make," said the King, "will be to eliminate textbooks in writing classes."

The crowd, which had been cheering just a short moment ago,

fell quietly aghast. Several publishers' representatives turned pale and one fainted.

"Sire," the Provost cried. "Why? Texts are the life of the class. Without them there would be no learning."

"Fiddlesticks," replied the King. "Texts are a crutch for the unprepared teacher. Very little of value is found in them, and one doesn't learn to write from a book. If a student gets \$2.00 worth of advice from a \$16.50 book, is that value received?"

An old man rose to his feet. Tottering, he stood, endowed with age, dignity, and tenure. "Most honored majesty. How can you say that people don't learn from reading a book? How else can they learn?"

"I don't say it," replied the King, "Researchers say it. But because you ask, let me tell you briefly why we don't need texts. First, it does not seem to be the case that we learn something like writing by talking or reading about it. If you doubt me on this, consult Ryle or Polanyi or Hofstadter or Smith. They will give you the background you need. Second, it does seem to be the case that the instructions in virtually all textbooks and handbooks are COIK—'clear only if known!' By this I mean that if a writer can understand the instructions in a handbook or text, then that writer probably doesn't need those instructions. If the writer needs help, the instructions, being COIK, don't help."

Again the aged man rose. "Could you give us an example?"

"Certainly," said the King. "A popular text says, 'Avoid separating a subordinate clause from its main clause by a period.' Now, for the person who knows what main and subordinate clauses are, this is a superfluous reminder. But for the person who really needs the advice, it is impenetrable jargon. Consult Hartwell or Rose for more on this whole topic."

"But," said the old man, "don't the students need books for directions on how to structure a paper, where to begin, how to proceed and so on?"

"Not really," said the King. "The two best ways to learn to write are, first, to review a lot of examples of the type of writing you want to learn. The human mind learns from example, from having an array of data presented to it from which it induces principles of organization, development, and even grammar. Second, the human mind is a sophisticated problem-solving mechanism. Give a person a problem to solve and the mind automatically builds routines

and sub-routines to solve the problem. So, why read *about* writing, when we can, by studying examples extensively and working out problems, learn much more thoroughly. You might see Hayes-Roth or Frank Smith or Anzai and Simon about this.”

There was quiet in the courtyard, and the King took this as a sign he was to continue.

“My third change,” he stated, “is not to require grammatical and mechanical correctness of beginning writing students.”

The Dean rose, his face ashen. “Does this mean that an English 100 student doesn’t need to know how to spell or demonstrate correct usage patterns?”

“Yes,” said the King. A giant hubbub arose in the crowd like a great wind and one or two scattered voices could be heard saying, “Abdicate.”

The King raised his royal hands. When it was quiet again, he said, “Must you be so noisy? I guess I’ll have to explain again. Writing is a complex skill, one of the most difficult to learn. Beginning writers, even at the college level, may not possess the necessary cognitive skills yet. As we teach writing, we should do so in a manner that will not overload our students’ capacities. So, why teach the whole process in one term? Why not teach part of it one term and the rest of it another? In English 100, we could teach invention, structure, and development. In English 200, we could teach that plus style and usage. If students in introductory classes knew that they would not be held responsible for SP or SVA or even AWK, they would be able to concentrate on learning how to write. And,” the King continued, “I have a feeling that the number of errors would probably go down anyway once the heat was off. In the course of their school terms, our students have been taught writing backwards, beginning with spelling and grammar, which have been overtaught anyway. I intend to reverse the process. Actually,” and the King paused for a moment. “I will probably eliminate teaching grammar and spelling altogether, on the grounds that it takes up too much time and doesn’t do much good. Instead, I’ll have all our students do their work on word processors, using programs such as Writer’s Workbench. You might consult Emig or Shuy or Petrosky and Brozick for some background.”

The King continued, “As part of this change, I’ll have graduate students teach higher level writing courses rather than beginning ones, and have experienced faculty teach the beginning courses.”

At this pronouncement, the courtyard threatened to boil over,

and one full professor of Medieval German Literature had a stroke. It took several minute to quiet the crowd.

"Look," said the King, "Who needs help most, the beginning freshman or the more experienced sophomore or junior? The freshman. And who can give help better, a raw teaching assistant or an experienced teacher? Let's face it; teaching 100 is harder than teaching 200. So, I'm going to have my most experienced teachers helping those who need it most."

Again there was silence in the courtyard.

"You know," somebody in the middle said, "He makes sense. Let's pay attention."

The King straightened a little when he heard this.

"Our final change," said the King, "will be to have writing classes be a part of other classes."

"Do you mean," said the Provost, "Writing across the curriculum?"

"No," said the King. "Writing across the curriculum is a step in the right direction, but it doesn't go nearly far enough. What I am going to do is eliminate writing classes altogether, and have the writing faculty be attached to various content classes around the campus. Writing teachers will teach the writing segments of classes they're attached to. Thus a writing teacher might teach part of a geology class, or a physics class, or a political science class."

"Does that mean," asked the Provost, "that writing teachers will have to become proficient in geology, or physics, or political science?"

"Exactly," said the King. "In practice, writing cannot be divorced from its content, nor can you really teach writing as *writing*. Professional writing consultants have discovered that if you want to teach writing to the oil industry, for instance, you have to become knowledgeable about the oil industry.

In addition, what I get from reading people like Polanyi and Ryle is that writing can best be learned as a means of accomplishing some other end. Thus, we will teach writing as a means to solving problems in geology, history, what have you. So, when an English Department in my kingdom advertises a job opening, it will mention that it needs a writing specialist in music and agricultural science, or someone willing to retrain."

The crowd was stunned, but at this point willing to accept what the King said.

Finally a math professor stood up. "Sire, your ideas sound

good, but don't some of them contradict others? If you have teachers work with content classes, how can you have senior faculty teach English 100? It won't exist."

The phone rings. The composition instructor awakes. Groggily he raises his head. He gropes for the phone. "Hello?"

"Honey, it's 11:00. Aren't you coming home?"

"Sure, sweet, sure." He hangs up the phone, looks at the papers on his desk, and exits, shaking his head.

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THE ANNOTATED ROYAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anzai, Y., and H.A. Simon. "The Theory of Learning by Doing." *Psychological Review* 86 (1979): 124-140.

In this rather limited study, Anzai and Simon follow one subject as she tries and re-tries the "Tower of Hanoi" puzzle (moving a stack of discs from one rod to another without moving more than one, and without ever having a larger disk on top of a smaller). The interesting thing about this study is the way in which the subject was able to create complex routines and sub-routines, planning sometimes far in advance in order to solve the problem.

Emig, Janet. "Non-Magical Thinking: Presenting Writing Developmentally in the Schools." In Frederiksen and Dominic, Eds., *Writing: Process, Development, and Communication*. Hillsdale, N.J.: L.A. Erlbaum, 1980.

In this essay, Emig limits herself to elementary education, but the principles are, I believe, applicable at higher levels. She outlines current ideas in cognitive development and ties teaching writing into it, stressing that writing is learned, rather than taught.

Garrison, Roger. "One-to-One; Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition." *New Directions in Community Colleges* 5 (1974): 55-84.

Roger Garrison is very nearly a cult figure by now, with writing instructors all over the country (including me) swearing by his method. Garrison doesn't present evidence for his method, simply outlines it, and assures us that it works. In this article and in his book *How a Writer Works*, Garrison gives succinct advice on running a writing class, spiced with blunt aphorisms about the various foibles and myths of current traditional rhetoric.

Hartwell, Patrick. "Paradoxes and Problems: The Value of Traditional Handbook Rules." *Pennsylvania Writing Project Newsletter* 3 (Winter/Spring 1983): 8-10.

A delightful and solid examination of how handbooks define and illustrate rules of grammar. His conclusion is that they are not very much help. I borrowed the example in the text from his (He got it from McCrimmon).

Hayes-Roth, Frederick. "Learning by Example." In Lesgold, Pellegrino, Fokkema, and Glaser, Eds., *Cognitive Psychology and Instruction*, New York: Plenum Press, 1978.

In this paper, Hayes-Roth suggests that people learn from seeing a variety of examples of the principles to be learned, each example containing all the necessary facets of that principle, and with enough examples so that irrelevant facets are not present in all examples. Hayes-Roth states that, given examples, an explicit statement of the principle is not necessary.

Hofstadter, Douglas. *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

A book almost impossible to describe, a puckish, brilliant look at math, art, and music, punctuated by conversations between Archilles and the tortoise. Though Hofstadter says he's dealing with recursion, he actually touches on almost every facet of information processing. Especially pertinent is his discussion of *Procedural Knowledge*.

Murray, Donald. "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference." *CE* 41 (1979): 13-18.

An explication of teaching writing as I would like to do it. Murray describes how he sits in his office and lets the students come to him, their work in hand, for advice.

Petrosky, Anthony, and James Brozick. "A Model for Teaching Writing Based Upon Current Knowledge of the Composing Process." *English Journal* 68 (January 1979): 96-101.

The title pretty well says it. The authors simply add up what we know not only about the writing process, but about how children develop, and suggest a class pattern. I'm interested in this article chiefly because it can be read to imply that we should teach editing, that is, mechanics, last. I simply extend the concept in this article to teaching it at a later time.

Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964.

I suppose if I had to recommend one text for graduate students in composition theory, it would be this one. Written in the fifties, this book contains insights that we are just beginning to rediscover and validate. Especially useful in his distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge. In composition, we try to teach explicitly things that are actually tacit. Polanyi, together with Emig, Hayes-Roth, Anzai and Simon, and Hofstadter make a good case for completely rethinking the way we teach composition.

Rose, Mike. "Sophisticated, Ineffective Books: The Dismantling of Process in Composition Texts." *CCC* 32 (1981): 65-74.

A dissection, neatly and surgically done, of the faults with modern composition texts. This piece is a companion to Hartwell, and both make the same point: texts don't really help the writer. Rose seems to feel that good texts *could* be constructed. I don't think so.

Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. London: Hutchinson, 1949. (Reprising, U. of Chicago Press, 1984).

It's an understatement to call this work seminal or classic. It's both of course, but it is a work like Polanyi's, which served as a beacon shining through the murk of behaviorism, letting perceptive people know that there was someone out there thinking. Ryle's contribution to current patter is the concept of *knowing how* versus *knowing about*.

Shook, Ronald. "A Tutorial Approach to Business Communications." *ABCA Bulletin*, June, 1981: 16-19.

My expression of how that Garrison method of teaching writing by conferencing could be taken out of the classroom and into the teacher's office. A lot of the how-you-do-it is covered in this article.

Simmons, J. A. *Testing the Effectiveness of the One-to-One Method of Teaching Composition*. Los Angeles Community College District, Office of Educational Programs.

A massive testing of Garrison's method, involving sixteen different composition classes at four community college campuses. The study demonstrated that conferencing is superior. I have one or two quibbles with the method, but none that would invalidate the conclusions.

Shuy, Roger. "Toward a Developmental Theory of Writing." In Frederiksen and Dominic, Eds., *Writing: Process, Development, and Communication*—Hillsdale, N.J.: L. A. Erlbaum, 1980.

The title is accurate; Shuy is not giving us a theory of writing, but simply pointing out what we would have to account for in developing such a theory. He does note, pertinently, that those aspects of the writing process that could be learned fastest, grammar and so on, are persistently overtaught and in the wrong sequence.

Smith, Frank. *Writing and the Writer*. Norton, 1982.

Every decade or so, Frank Smith comes out with a book that contains the keys to rationally approaching a discipline. In the 1970's it was his *Understanding Reading*, the most lucid and reasonable examination of the reading process I've seen. In the 1980's it's *Writing and the Writer*. I've taken my suggestion that we learn to write by reading and by writing from Smith. However, since his ideas on reading still aren't being implemented in the schools, I don't see any hope that this book will have the impact it should. At least not for some time yet.