

## Helping Ed

*Stephen North*

Ed Martin came to the State University of New York at Albany as a freshman in 1978 with some vague ambitions of being a writer of nonfiction prose. He did the sensible thing, and began taking writing courses. In the first semester, he took English 100, "English Composition." His teacher turned out to be a Mr. Wyler. In a way, Ed was lucky-Mr. Wyler was one of the ten percent of the full-time faculty who regularly taught the course, and a man with a great love for the English language. The class required four texts: *The Way of Language*; a collection of George Orwell's essays; Frey's *Early English History*; and a handbook of the student's choice. The class wrote five papers, each about four handwritten pages: "Development of My Own Language"; "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword"; "What's in a Name?"; a review of a television show (in Ed's case, "Lifeline"); and "A Problem."

Ed was not very successful with these papers: he received D-, D, D +, C-, and C-; which worked out to a generous C, for progress, and an S for the course (alt writing courses at Albany are graded S/U). I suspect Ed was most notable in class for a genuine garrulousness and a naivete about the academic routine. His writing reflected such a naivete; the essays were genuine, personal, and pretty heavily detailed-but without regard for any standards of correctness. Comments on his papers ran like this:

Paper # 1: You don't manage to say much and your sentence structures and grammar leave a lot to be desired.

Paper #2: A lot of careless writing-wrong words, etc. You don't provide a lot of necessary details, and yet you provide unnecessary ones.

Paper #5: (About a run-in with the police.) A good problem described in the essay. I think the problem is much more than just young cops-the oldest are occasionally the worst, having abused power all their lives. There are a lot of errors here-as usual; you have a tendency to write fragmentary sentences, and need a lot of personal work in the mechanics of writing.

After paper number five, however, English 100 was over. Ed managed an S, and, thanks to the increasingly positive tone of Mr. Wyler's responses, even a sense of growth. So he moved onto English 200, "Intermediate Writing." English 200 is an odd bird. Invented as a natural filler between English 100 and English 300, "Expository Writing," it had become-without Ed's knowledge, of course--a kind of 1.00A, a class for people who really needed two semesters of whatever it was that 100 was supposed to provide. Anyway, Ed got Ms. Silverstein, a part-time person with

anew Ph.D. and half-time job with the administration- Her training was in literary criticism: her dissertation on Roethke.

The syllabus for the course looked pretty ambitious: weekly papers, weekly workshops, and Sheridan Baker's *Practical Stylist*. In fact, it turned out to be a bad term. Class was cancelled altogether in favor of individual conferences. The students, including Ed, wrote four papers. Ed's first was a response to the statement "women should never have gotten the vote." He did not pass that one, though there is a single comment on the paper: "Rewrite." An in-class essay, "A Memorable Person," written early on, also got one written comment: "Consistency in terms-" The rough draft of a research paper, "Why Hitler Came to Power," got two remarks: "Check *Practical Stylist* for footnote form" and "Correct before 1-3 Friday." The corrected version, a typed, seven-page paper, was submitted on time but returned without comment.

Still, Ed got his S in English 200 and moved-after a semester off-to English 3(X), where he met Ms. Jansen. Ms. Jansen was an assistant professor in the midst of a rather bizarre political mess concerning her tenure: it was also rumored, without confirmation, that she was battling a lingering illness- Whatever the case, the twice-a-week class met irregularly, but the course held together well enough. There were nine regular papers and two hunks: Baker's *Practical Stylist* (again), and *The Norton Reader*. Ed's first paper was a description of SUNY Albany's architecturally interesting campus-3h-typed pages. The grade was C--/D+: and the comment, "You really have a comma splice problem and need work on your conclusions."

The second paper was titled "Should Women Be Included in the Draft": Ed's essay was heavily marked, line by line, in the margins: "This could be a stronger paragraph"; "Sp.": "grammar"; "frag.": "Unclear-"The grade was a D+, the final comment as follows: "Well, your point is clear but you really need to work on: "a) sentence fragments: b) comma splices: e) transitions."

I won't cover all the rest of the papers- The comments and grades were consistent: "Though it's an interesting narrative, you have such a persistent comma-splice problem that your thesis, if you have one, is totally obscure- D--" "Your sense of punctuation is still very weak. S--" Again, though, Ed got his S for the course.

By the first semester of his junior year, then, Ed has taken three college writing courses- He's written about twenty papers in probably 100 hours of writing, sonic 15,000 to 20,000 words. He's paid over \$600 in tuition for his instruction: paid for-though not received, perhaps-some 140 hours of classroom and conference time. He's bought six books: a rhetoric, a reader, a handbook, two linguistics-oriented books, and a collection of Orwell's essays, at a total cost of maybe 535. And yet Ed feels-with some justification-that no one has yet taught him to write better- As we leave him in the fall term of his junior year, he is being steered from office to office in the Humanities Division in a frantic search for an independent study in-you guessed it-writing. Unfortunately, his experience with writing courses has left him believing that writing is not a subject worthy of study for its own sake, so he's cooked up a rather garbled project about studying the effects of television commercials on presidential campaigns. He hopes the study will lead him to do a lot of writing.

So far, the Humanities Advisement Center has sent him to the English Department chairperson, who has sent him to the English Advisement Center. He will eventually he moved to the Director of Undergraduate Studies, who'll send him to the Director of the Writing Program who will, because of Ed's chosen topic, suggest he see someone in the Rhetoric and Communication Department- Things look grim for our hero.

I didn't start digging into Ed's background looking for questionable teaching practices, and I don't pretend to have found any. His recollections of the courses, together with the syllabi and his graded papers, constitute only part of the picture. There is no way to find out what happened in the classes or the conferences, or how much Ed's account of what happened agrees with other accounts. And in some ways, Ed is an atypical student, persistent in global ways-he keeps signing up for writing courses-but not in details; he can't, or won't, learn to use semicolons.

What I was looking for, though, and what I did find, was evidence of a college writing curriculum that was disjointed and even, from Ed's point of view, incoherent. Three times Ed signed up to learn about writing and three times, in effect, he started over, from scratch. What's worse, the three courses he took were in no obvious way complementary. If we think of writing courses as being responsible, in some degree, for three aspects of writing-product, process, and productivity-then ideally, over three courses, each of the three might get some emphasis- Unfortunately for Ed, all three of his courses were mainly product-oriented. All three teachers, so far as I can tell from the evidence, assumed that telling Ed what bothered them about his papers would make him a better writer. They did not concern themselves with process-how Ed generated material for writing, for example, or how he revised-nor with productivity--when he wrote, how often, or under what conditions. And since the teachers didn't consult one another, nor look at the writing Ed did in the other courses, they had no way to build on his previous writing work

Let me pause here to say that I am not singling out SUNY Albany's writing sequence as being a particularly weak one. In fact, it is in many ways a superior curriculum: better, for example, than sequences that move from "The Sentence" to "The Paragraph" to "The Essay," or from "Narration" to "Description" to "Argumentation." Our holistic approach, if I may call it that, recognizes that whenever people write, they face all of writing's difficulties. And it allows us to take full advantage of our generally fine and talented staff. We don't lock ourselves into a syllabus that prizes uniformity overall else.

But it does leave us with a coherence problem- Because our backgrounds and training are so different, and because there is so much room for variety in the teaching of writing, it seems to students that we have nothing in common. We do share a theoretical context, yes, one most noticeable in the area of product. But our emphases-even within the area of product, and more obviously in process and productivity--can be so divergent that students not only fail to see how we might be complementary, but even see us as opposing one another. To compound the problem, we usually work in isolation, looking neither backward at students' previous writing experience, nor forward to their future work. So instead of operating as a team along a curricular continuum, we tend to be free-lancers, each trying to build a "whole" writer in our 15-week stint.

There are a number of possible solutions to this problem- The one I'll lay out here is one I've discussed before, in different contexts, but promote again because it seems most plausible, most flexible, and pedagogically soundest. What I propose is that students take with them, *from* every writing course and *to* every writing course (and maybe, someday, for entry into every course), a portfolio and what I call a composing profile. The portfolio is simple: each writer holds on to all the writing he or she does, including drafts, notes, and revisions, in much the same way that aspiring journalists assemble their credentials. The important difference, of course, is that writing students need to present their writing failures as well as their successes.

If the portfolio is the literal record of the writer's progress, the composing profile is the conceptual record. The portfolio takes care of product: the profile, process and pro-

ductivity. The profile is a shared construct, put together by a teacher and a writer, as far as possible in the writer's terms: a conceptual portrait of the student as a writer. It can take any number of forms, but it ought to address questions like the following:

### **Productivity**

*Prerequisite Skills.* Can the student hold a pencil? Can he or she write quickly enough/printing or in cursive-to sustain the flow of meaning? Can he or she read what has been written? Can he or she read and understand written directions? Oral directions'?

*History.* (Questions directed to the writer.) How long have you been writing'? Have you enjoyed success as a writer? When? Who was the most influential person, for better or worse, in your writing development? What was the best thing that ever happened to you as a writer? The worst? Have you changed as a writer as you've gotten older? How'?

*Attitudes.* How do you feel about writing? Do you like writing in an academic setting"? How do you feel about sharing your writing, or reading it aloud, in class? What is your favorite part of writing? Least favorite? Which part of writing is easiest for you? Hardest" Do you think people are interested in what you write? How do you rate yourself as a writer on a scale of one to ten?

*Study Skills.* How successfully do you follow directions for writing? Do you understand the kinds of comments teachers give you on your papers, or make to you in conference? What do you think is the most frequent criticism of your work?

*General Habits.* When do you usually write? Where? How much time do you plan to spend on papers? Do you have any aids or rewards when you write: beer'? food? music? How long do you usually work in one sitting? How long before deadlines do you usually begin work?

### **Process**

*Conception of Writing.* Who do you usually write to? How do you decide how to present yourself? Do you know someone you think is a good writer? What about them makes you think that? How do you think they work? How does what they do differ from what you do? What do you think good writing is? What keeps your writing from being good writing?

*Invention.* Where do you get ideas to write about? Do they all come before you start writing? Is there some system or routine you follow to come up with ideas, or to begin a paper? Do you ever talk to anyone before you begin a paper, or as you are writing it? What about?

*Writing.* When you finally get rolling on a paper, how does the actual drafting proceed? Do you write one sentence at a time, slowly? Do they come in bunches? How much time do you spend on the first sentence of an essay? Do you ever go back and read what you have written? How often? How often do you make changes as you write? What kind of changes do you make? How comfortable do you feel with the kinds of sentences you can write-that is, are you ever afraid to write things in a certain way'?

*Revision.* How many drafts of a paper do you usually write? What kinds of changes do you make from one to the next? How do you decide what kinds or changes to make? Do you ever add new material? Throw whole pages away'? How do you handle the proofreading of your work?

It might also include a product summary-an error analysis, a list of punctuation forms not yet mastered-but this isn't essential. What matters is that each writer is aware, as far as possible, of how his or her writing gets done, and that this awareness can be articulated, probably with the aid of a form, to the next instructor.

To demonstrate how this system might work, let's turn back the clock. Ed is a freshman in Mr. Wyler's class again. But the course has changed. In the first five weeks of the course, the students write, think, and talk about writing: how they do it, how they learned to do it, how they feel about it. They try writing with different aims to different audiences: expressive, referential, persuasive, even literary writing. They save every bit of the work they do, every scrap, every jotting. The work culminates, around the fifth week of class, in a conference. There, Ed and Mr. Wyler will work to get Ed started on his composing profile. Mr. Wyler guiding the conversation using questions like those I've suggested. The profile will read something like this:

Ed thinks big words are best. He never writes two drafts. He has no method for, or senses of, arrangement (as far as he knows). He doesn't write for audiences, just "anybody." He tries to proofread, but he doesn't know what he's looking for. "My grammar has always been bad." He isn't comfortable using semicolons or dashes, and isn't really sure what a colon is. He usually writes after midnight, when the dorm finally quiets down, and figures that two or three hours is plenty of time to spend on a paper. He usually writes with headphones on, and he likes to listen to Bruce Springsteen. Sometimes he'll have a beer or two to get himself going. He usually writes the night before things are due because he "likes the pressure."

Ed is, in short, a typical C or D freshman writer. But now Mr. Wyler knows it, and Ed does too. Now Mr. Wyler can offer the same basic syllabus if he wishes-"What's in a Name?", "A Problem"-but he can help Ed to change so he can deal with that syllabus better.

Some things will be easy: find a quiet place to write, at a better time. Write on a more regular, measured basis. No stereo, no beer. Plan to spend four to six hours on each paper. Other changes will come slower, but can be made concrete: develop a proofreading checklist based on errors made, with Ed cumulatively responsible for their correction. Make Ed circle all words of three or more syllables, and have him be prepared to justify them in their context. Insist-after a lesson-that Ed uses four semicolons a paper until he masters them, then work on dashes and colons.

Finally, get Ed started on the changes that will carry over into English 200, 300, and beyond. Introduce him, along with the rest of the class, to audience, purpose, and persona. In going over the assignments students do, focus on form, arrangement, and coherence. And, if possible, put Ed in a group that meets once or twice a week to work on developing ways to revise, while other groups work on discovery or fluency.

Now, when fifteen weeks are up, Ed is more in control as a writer. His prose is probably not much better-the spelling should have improved some, and the number of comma splices have been reduced. He might master the voice appropriate for, say, letters to the editor, but probably not for formal English or political science papers. He will have a sense of audience, an understanding of purpose; and he should have cleaned up his study habits some, at least for the first ten weeks of the semester. But he still won't be much of a reviser; he'll produce much more detail than he needs, and

will be unsure how to son it out.

Mr. Wyler encourages Ed to take English 200 with a teacher like Ms. Roberts. English 200 has been split into sections that emphasize discovery, fluency, or revision. All sections, of course, work on all of writing, and all continue to work on editing, but they emphasize one facet of the process Over another. Ms. Roberts teaches a revision section; the text is Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose*. Ed shows up for class with his portfolio and his composing profile, the latter updated with a conference near the end of English 100. English 200 begins with conferences it) catch Ms. Roberts up on where Ed is as a writer, and work *continues*-not starts over, but continues.

You can see what I'm driving at. The portfolio and profile help to generate a programmatic consistency. Ed can get fifteen, thirty, forty-five, even sixty weeks of essentially continuous-or at least coherent-instruction in writing, with an overall balance among product, process, and productivity.

There are, as I noted earlier, a number of possible solutions to Ed's kind of problem. One is to adopt a mentor system, whereby each student is "attached" to a faculty member for (ideally) the duration of the student's academic career. A second would be simply to have writing courses run longer than one semester, and be taught-for however long they ran- by the same teacher or team of teachers. A third might offer writing instruction in four- or five-hour-a-day blocks. Such an intensive writing course-it might run eight weeks, or even a whole semester-would provide single instructors, or teams, with time enough to deal evenly with product, process, and productivity. (The last, of course, would be artificial ly control led-all writing would be done on class time.) No one of these solutions seems inherently superior---each has drawbacks-but I don't think we need wait to see which is best to adopt one.

As you may recall, we left the real Ed frantically trying to hustle up a sponsor for his independent study, and getting the bureaucratic shuffle. As it turns out, he was lucky. Someone sent him to the Writing Center where, after being talked out of the need for the television project, he signed up for what eventually became six credits of writing and learning about writing. As I write this essay, he has two essays going: an export of the egg industry, and a *Parade* Magazine-style report an corporate diversification. He has become a much more conscious writer., he works on his writing every day: he does three, four, and even more drafts; he has taken, on his own, to using index cards to revise his work, shuffling and reordering them to try out different schemes. He still favors the big words, but is willing to try defending them, laughing when he bombs one. His work is now full of dashes, colons, and semicolons-indeed, he's already working on cutting down on semicolons, which seem to have taken him over.

So we saved one writer from our disjointed curriculum, and managed a plug for the Writing Center, And Mr. Wyler is still teaching English 100, Ms. Silverstein, English 200. Ms. Jansen is gone via her political squabble, replaced by a part-time person who has never taught writing outside of a structured curriculum before. I found out about Ed only because, as students go, he was remarkably stubborn. Surely there are a good many others who entered college in fall, 1978, who did not survive, or who were not so persistent. In either case, they are avoiding our classes and avoiding writing, no more literate now than when they entered. Meanwhile, they roll on with disjointed or

unbalanced sequences of writing courses. Not just "we" as in SUNY Albany, either-as a check of college catalogs in any library will demonstrate-but "we" as a profession at colleges and universities across the country.

We are getting better at the teaching of writing. We know more, instruction in reading and writing semis more coherent to us. Now, though, we have to translate our sense of coherence into curricular changes, so students can share it. Otherwise, we make it hard to help Ed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Not student's real name. The names of all involved have been changed, of course. Syllabi, texts, assignments, and comments, however, have not been altered except where they provided direct clues to teachers' identities.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, *Writing Centers: A Sourcebook*, unpublished dissertation (SUNY at Albany, 1979) Ch. 3, "Dealing with the Customer" or "Toward System in a Student-Centered Curriculum," *English Record*, Vol. XXXII, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), pp. 6-10.