Writing As Interior Mirror

William Strong

Mirrors.

They provide us with reflections, a sense of our physical selves. Even more than this, however, mirrors are psychologically important. Since the image is obviously not the real thing, mirrors provide a kind of psychological detachment. We see ourselves as the world sees us; but we simultaneously perceive the inside of the image as well. This awareness of two worlds—a world of surfaces and a world of thoughts and feelings—nudges us from an egocentric perspective toward a more detached, "adultlike" one.

In a metaphoric sense, a liberal education provides even further detachment, helping us to inhabit different "frames"—historical, economic, scientific, religious, literary, and so on. In other words, information from these fields interacts with a necessarily egocentric perspective, enabling us to see ourselves in context. The constructs provided by modern psychology, for example, help us to view our own behavior and motivation from the viewpoint of a clinical outsider: the self examining itself. In the area of learning, such a double-focus—the self examining its own processes and presumably coming to understand them better—is called "metacognition."

I want to make three related points in this paper: first, that writing provides an "interior mirror" for students—one that reduces egocentricity and helps them to achieve a measure of detached, adultlike perspective; second, that this metacognitive perspective is engaged as students focus attention on their own writing processes; and, third, that the new perspective fundamentally changes the way that students regard both text and themselves as writers. My claim is that a "learning-about-learning" orientation provides context for collaboration between students and writing instructor.

In this paper I discuss how such learning might be orchestrated into a writing course and provide examples of students dealing with three tasks. All samples of student writing are presented in their original form, unedited by my strong-willed hand.

Writing About Teaching/Learning

The course, "Writing about Teaching," really began with a question: Why not design a writing course for prospective teachers that relates to their

career goals? More specifically, why not use the teaching/learning nexus as the center for writing, a place from which all assignments radiate? Pursuing answers to these questions, I have watched the course evolve over three years to its present shape, one dominated by the metaphor of *interior mirror.*

I begin the course by making my teaching assumptions explicit: that my job, as instructor, is to provide a workshop environment so that students can learn from each other as well as from me; and that their job, as students-training-to-be-teachers, is to pay attention to whatever emerges as writing, as advice about writing, or as skills introduction. I point out how, as children, we all construct for ourselves—without "teaching" in the conventional sense—an incredibly complex and detailed model of language, first by "paying attention," then by "testing out" language on those around us. The situation for writing is not so different, I suggest. Real learning—the kind that makes a difference in writing performance—is achieved not merely by attending class, though that is important, but instead by attending to writing. I insist that language is the real teacher.

In this early discussion we move toward a question, one that serves as scaffolding for the first assignment. "How is it that you learned to write?" I ask. What memories do you have of the process? Was it an experience that you found engaging or frustrating? What did early writing "feel" like? As you moved through school, did you have better or worse experiences? How about out-of-school writing such as diaries, letters, poetry, or essay contests? Is this kind of writing an important part of your "story"? And what about college experiences with writing? Have these deepened your understanding of the writing process and helped you with the various "moves" of being a writer?

Such questions point toward more general ones, of course, and it is these that I ask students to "reflect" on: What patterns do you notice in your remembered writing experiences? Were some kinds of writing typically more difficult (or more engaging) than others? Were some of the teaching practices of your instructors more destructive (or more constructive) than others? What do you think you know about writing or about yourself as a writer? And so on.

Thus, the writing autobiography assignment asks students to narrate—and make sense of—their own experiences in learning to write. The assignment is not an easy one, even for skilled writers, but most students like it. The task demands an ability to select relevant experiences, to create narrative/descriptive scenes, and to comment on the significance of experiences from a "reflective" or "detached" point of view. it is the decentering part of the assignment—the "so what" question following the narrative details—that many students find perplexing. To deal intelligently and truthfully with patterns in one's own life is a difficult task, of course.

In the following excerpt, a writer-with-promise—Karen—solicits her readers' attention:

> Miss Hansen, a southern bell from Mississippi, was now our substitute teacher. She was a former english teacher, I think in the colonial period. She wore a high puffed bun on her head with ringlets out lining her face. Her dresses were out-of-this-world, frilly pinks, yellows, baby blue and white. Each day we were greated with, "Hi ya all, Please put your pencils in writing position and write for me." Writing, not one of my best subjects in the first place, suddenly became my worst. She insisted that we could all become "pulitizer prize winners", if we just highten our vocabulary with eloquence and style. As a result, I began substituting words like impecable for perfection, juvenile for youth, duplicate for copy, and myriads of other transliterations. I began to loath writing, up until the second day of March. I have this date written in my journal. I entered into Miss Hansen's class just in the nick of time, to hear the end of the usual high pitched "Hi ya all, lets write." I, lazily, began writing about "death." Upon finishing I handed my paper in and I started talking, laughing, and generally making trouble with my friends. Behind me I heard the airy laugh and tipped-toed pattering of Miss Hansen's feet, comming my way. Whispering, she said, "Karen, your paper was the best I've read, keep up the good work." I wasn't sure if I could trust my ears. For weeks I had been hearing; more body, details, spelling, and vocabulary, vocabulary, vocabulary! And not this, a compliment?

There are proofreading problems aplenty here, of course, but there is also a sense of a writer taking her own meanings seriously. It is this involvement that I seek. In this draft, Karen begins to generalize about the significance of compliments:

> It was just a small insignificant act on the teacher's part. But for me, it was the first time I could remember receiving a compliment of my writing. I was in a silent heaven, daydreaming a about the pulitizer prize I would be receiving. The ironic thing about my paper was, I hadn't even looked at my thesaurus once that day. The paper was totally me. Needless to say, I no longer payed attention to Miss Hansen's hightening vocabulary talk. But I did learn to be me when I wrote.

Karen then goes on to describe how the single compliment helped her on several occasions to continue writing, to keep a journal, and to "become more aware of my writing habits, good and bad." And then, in a well-written section, she relates how she went into a later English class with her head high and her ears cocked, "ready for the instructions on writing assignments."

Karen returns to the theme of compliments as she struggles to deal with the significance of her experience. Here she discusses an experience in fifth-grade student teaching:

> I tried to praise the good and work with each student to improve their bad habits. I made each child feel like his writing was important. I wanted them to feel like I felt when Miss Hansen had complimented my writing back in

ninth grade. I noticed a change in my students, their attitudes toward writing improved one-hundred percent. Because of this initial experience, and the others that followed; I feel that I have become a better writer. I feel more comfortable to express myself and I have a greater desire to improve on my writing. I also want to help others improve.

And so on. Once again, there is much that deserves attention, comment, and revision—not to mention, as Karen might remind us, compliment.

Workshops and Journals as Mirrors

The revision workshops that follow this assignment provide the context for collaboration. In other words, as students share their writing in response groups, attention inevitably centers on "making sense" of written texts.

Some students will have narrated several incidents but have sidestepped the "so what" question on the minds of their reader/listeners. Other students will have told stories that bring forth deep emotions—usually anger—that they cannot handle rationally. Still others will have generalized in a perfunctory way about the cosmic importance of good writing or "the need for effective communication in our increasingly complex and technological society," without really addressing the autobiographical center of the assignment. For all of these students, as well as for those who are more clearly on the "write track," response groups provide essential feedback.

Indeed, the response groups probably provide the essential "mirroring" function of the course, helping writers to internalize an image of how a given text is perceived by others. Students comment on both the substance and form of each other's drafts; subsequent revisions are checked (and rechecked) with group members as writers attempt to address various concerns of their peers. Conferences with me—and feedback on drafts-in-progress—also help students to see their emerging texts in a less egocentric way—namely, as reflections of them but detached from them.

This distinction is a crucial one for the course. Without it, students are more-or-less blocked from making real growth in writing. On the one hand, if they have little involvement in their prose—that is, do not see it as a reflection of personal meaning, a textual representation (or image) of their thinking—instruction is unlikely to take. On the other hand, if they cannot separate their sense of self from ink squiggles on a page, they will remain trapped in their own anxiousness, unable to profit in any substantive way from the comments of others.

Put simply, collaboration cannot and will not occur unless students realize the fundamental paradox of writing: that text provides an image of the writer but only an image. In looking into the mirror of reader response, one must first acknowledge the validity of that response—the real reflection it provides—and then realize that the image is not the blood-and-guts thing called "self."

In addition to response groups, writing process journals help students to consider what writing is, how it works, and why it requires "self-reflecting" practice. Students read Donald Murray's *Write to Learn* (Holt, 1984), a text that meshes with the learning-about-learning objectives of the course and its process assumptions. In doing this reading they try to summarize key points in the seven chapters—one way of consolidating them, of course—and also to react to Murray's content and/or style of presentation. While these journal entries are very uneven in linguistic sophistication and overall quality, I cannot overemphasize their importance for developing both interest in and knowledge about the process of composing. By repeatedly attending to the task of summarizing and reacting, students begin to internalize a model of writing. These shared "glimmerings," a regular part of the introductory routine for in-class meetings, often provide momentum for further discussion.

My contention, then, is that as students try to articulate their emerging conceptions of writing—conceptions that writing assignments attempt to foster—they begin to ask genuine questions and pay attention to what language has to teach. These insights are difficult to anticipate, much less to sequence in an orderly fashion. They are governed by the psychological individual learning connections, not by the course syllabus or a textbook's table of contents. In short, writing process journals help to make written language a major collaborator in the course—at least for those students who seriously attend to its lessons.

Here is a typical journal entry, again written by an average student, not one of the "stars." Notice that the writer refers to Murray as "Don," a friendly convention that the class developed; notice, too, that the writing gets stronger as Lori begins to deal with personal meaning.

Writing Process Journal (Chapter 3)

This chapter was very difficult to finish. It seemed to go on forever. The points made in the chapter were very good but quite often I felt like Don was repeating things. I also felt like I was being bombarded with questions. Many of the questions were related to some area but a reader can only take so much.

There were some very important points made in this chapter. "Experienced writers recognize that their feelings of confusion and despair are normal." This really struck me as I read it. So many times I think writing should be organized. When I can't get things to flow smoothly, it frustrates me. I guess these feelings really are a part of the writing process.

> The eighteen ways to find a focus were very interesting. I hadn't thought about some of them like Question, Design, Reader, and Face. These areas are very important when writing a paper. No one ever taught me about considering all aspects of what and how to write, so I found these new ideas very helpful.

For the most part, I find such entries genuinely fun to read. I insist that students do them, but I refuse to "grade" them. We talk frankly about the importance of getting comfortable with summarizing and reacting activities—how such skills might be among the most important that they will internalize in their learning-about-learning. Over and over I notice that students make weak starts before focusing on their "interior mirror." Here is Michelle at work—a loopy, open script:

> Writing Process Journal (Chapter 5)
>
> I was very amused by the drafting chapter. I enjoyed Don's ideas. His first paragraph was so good it reached out and grabbed my attention. This paragraph has so much truth and was so realistic to my writing that I was captured by it. I put off my writing so well, I'm glad other people put off writing.
>
> The 26 ways Don talked about getting started on a paper were so simple, but I don't think I could have thought of them. Sometimes I think that's what a good share of writing is, being able to dig out of yourself what you know. Because you can't write about something you don't know about.
>
> His draft at the end of the chapter I looked forward to. It wasn't what I expected. It had some problems that I guess I was surprised to see. I guess I had just thought when Don would write it all just came out beautiful. His third paragraph didn't work for me. I think it was to early in the story to talk about death, it confused me a little bit. But overall it was a good beginning. I know that's a good share of the problem of writing, getting a good beginning or draft on paper.

I will summarize my comments about the writing process journals by noting that other types of entries are also included. Typically, the journal provides a way to model prewriting techniques. But we also use the journal as a place to reflect on works in progress throughout the term. It is these "mirrorings," done week after week, that eventually form the basis for the final exam prompt—a synthesis of all the students have "reflected upon."

Further Reflections on Process

The exam alows students access to their writing process journals but not to their textbooks. Because the prompt is given to students a week in advance of the exam, they have plenty of time to get ideas organized. Here is the direction that students are given.

> You have just received a note from a very close friend or family member. It reads as follows:
>
> I'm enrolled in a college writing course. The instructor is nice enough but hasn't given us any instruction on how to write. As you know, I have a real hangup about writing—and now, with no instruction, I really don't know if I can handle it. I'll take any help that I can get. Could you please—in as clear a fashion as possible—tell me how to do papers from start to finish? Thanks. I owe you one.
>
> Write a letter to your friend, offering your advice about the writing process.

To say that I am pleased with this exam prompt would be an understatement. Either by accident or design, this exercise in imaginative collaboration has generated some terrific in-class writing.

Let's look, for example, at Karen's work, just seven weeks after her writing autobiography. In her exam, she writes roughly 1,000 words of neat, clear script—all tightly organized, all neatly edited. Her writing exudes both confidence and control. After explaining that "having a mental picture of your writing process will help solve many writing problems," Karen opens her second paragraph this way:

> I'm going to explain a process for writing that, for some, may seem complex, challenging and difficult. But, with practice, this process can open your mind and release skills beneficial to writing that you never thought possible. As I explain a five step writing process which consists of collecting, focusing, ordering, drafting, and clarifying, picture in your mind a well-built house. This house would have a strong foundation, with the necessary materials and measurements. These materials allow the final structure to stand straight and have a completed wholeness to it. As in a well-built house, a well-written paper has a completed wholeness to it. Through using the techniques that will be discussed in this paper, you can learn and build your own "foundation" freeing your inhabitions and enabling you to build your way to success in writing.

Karen develops her paper in a straightforward fashion, moving systematically through her five major points but taking time out to discuss "cohesion," an emphasis in her conferences with me. She is doing many things well and even showing off a bit. And why not? Her interior mirror is illuminated. Here, for example, she is discussing "leads," a subtopic of the ordering stage:

> Leads, taking about thirty seconds to read, capture the reader's attention. You can start a lead by using a quotation or describing a story or experience. In this paper I use the umbrella approach. I gave you a five point list of equally important elements, the elements in writing. The most important thing to remember in writing leads is to be quick, accurate, honest, simple, write information, and read the paper aloud for clarity. An ending to a paper uses the same qualities that a lead uses. A conclusion ties the paper

together. A conclusion does not make a general or broad statement. You want your paper to flow and connect into a whole.

This, I contend, is "reflective" writing—prose "mirroring" its own functioning. Thanks to collaborative classmates and hard work on her assignments and writing process journal, Karen has begun to achieve a metacognitive perspective, an adultlike viewpoint. She uses writing as interior mirror.

A Series of Mirrors

In summary, the "Writing About Teaching" course that I have been describing centers on the following assignments and activities:

1. Diagnostic Essay, "The Literacy of Teachers." This paper, written out of class but without response groups, asks students to define the problem of teacher literacy in the U.S. and to suggest possible solutions.
2. "A Writing Autobiography." This assignment, described earlier, is the first experience with response groups.
3. "A Comparison of Two Teachers." This paper, a comparison/contrast piece focused on the teaching styles of two influential teachers, mixes narration/description with analysis.
4. "My Philosophy of Education." This task, probably the most difficult of the term, asks prospective teachers to construct a clear, coherent set of assumptions about the teaching/learning connection.
5. "An Analysis of Writing Progress." This assignment, which involves close reading and citation from the earlier papers, helps most students to "see" what has happened to their prose.
6. Final in-class exam, "Letter to a Friend." This experience, unlike the others, structures a personal context to guide writing and has proved very successful.
7. A minimum of two (ungraded) entries in writing process journals each week—one tied to *Write to Learn*, the other open-ended but often done in class.
8. A variety of (ungraded) skill-building exercises in sentence combining, text cohesion, and writing mechanics.

And so it is that in concluding this paper, I collaborate with Karen, asking her for advice on how I might know that it "flows and connects" into a whole. My goal is a conclusion that "ties the paper together" but "does not make a general or broad statement."

Her advice for the first reading is to "make sure you have one dominant theme or meaning." *Check. Writing as interior mirror.* "The second reading," she advises, "is a bit slower. Read the draft in chunks to see if the main ideas are supported." *Check. Examples from one assignment, journals, and the final exam.* "In the third reading," she concludes, "you read line by line, editing the text to make sure it is ready for the final proof reading."

Proof reading?

Check again.