

What Do Writing Teachers Think?

George Otte

I don't know what seems more preposterous: that question, or the fact that I was six years a WPA before I had an answer to it that was not merely anecdotal. Chagrin besets me when I think of the times I would tell a close colleague, or a visiting book editor, or a grad intern (or anyone who would listen, really) about the deplorable lack of consensus among writing teachers about what really matters (whatever that is) or their inertia and ignorance in the face of what recent research demonstrates (however inconclusively) or their insensitivity to what changing demographics ask from us all (as if only I had ears to hear). What, besides dark suspicions perhaps ungrounded, was I basing such remarks on? Not much: things found lying about the photocopy room; assumptions based how much time most writing teachers have to keep up with current research; a few dozen students with problems who came (or were brought) before me in a term (while another five thousand slipped past me unseen).

I was, then, hardly in an irreproachable position from which to cry calumny when I came upon the statement, in Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987), that

lore and Practitioner inquiry have been, for most official purposes, anyway, effectively discredited. It is now a second-class sort of knowledge, rapidly approaching the status of superstition—to be held or voiced only apologetically, with deference to the better, new knowledges. Still, though the Practitioners have thus been “conquered,” the making of lore goes on, its internal structure making it quite endlessly absorbent. (328)

Now I should stress that my angle is not North's; as a writing director I tend to be less interested in the making of knowledge than in the applications it finds in the classroom. From that angle it is much more difficult to dismiss teachers (or Practitioners) and their antiquated lore as North does, the better to focus on researchers (or Researchers) who lift methodologies from the soft sciences and pursue them with varying degrees of rigor. From my angle, what gets taught has priority: it's not so much what the students need as what the teachers think they need that drives the enterprise. And what do the teachers think?

According to North, they think, teach, and preach “lore”—a vast unorganized mass of contradictory beliefs and heuristics, inertia ridden,

all-embracing. And he does not base that conviction entirely on the sort of guesswork I find myself guilty of: as he points out textbooks amount to a kind of codification of lore (31). The fact that, in my program, there is no assigned text for any of the writing courses would only mean, it seems, that what is taught in and thought about those courses is all the more lore-like: inconsistent, incoherent, apparently irreversible in its directionlessness (since nothing gathers momentum like inertia).

It's easy to see, then, why that passage in North's book might have provoked more despair than disagreement—and would have, had I not provided myself, more or less by accident, with a counteractant: a survey (done over the past academic year) of instructors in English 2100 (the first of my college's two required, credit-bearing composition courses)—and not just that survey but also the thinking it provoked (which is what, truth to tell, this essay really is about).

The instrument I used is available for your inspection (*see appendix*), but I should say a bit about why it was developed in the first place, especially since my goal was much more limited than finding out, in some general sense, what teachers think—and this limitation shows in the questionnaire. Back in the spring of 1986, a revised version of the composition sequence at Baruch College had been put in place, with most of the changes occurring at the developmental (now non-credit) level of instruction. After several terms had passed, the Provost's Office was inviting a report on how the new sequence was doing, particularly with regard to the developmental courses. Wanting the report to amount to more than a recounting of pass-fail ratios from those courses, I decided to poll instructors of English 2100, the course developmental students went on to. This survey was not, in other words, a disinterested, pseudo-scientific quest for edification. Bestirred by administrative higher-ups, I wanted data I could pass on to them, and quickly. I'm sorry I did not spend much time drafting the questionnaire (or give respondents much time to fill it out and get it back to me)—sorry, because the responses are well worth attending to, and would seem even more so had they been elicited with more care and foresight and rigor.

To appreciate those responses, you need a bit of background. The entrance requirement for 2100 is a passing score (8 or above) on the Writing Assessment Test (WAT) of the City University of New York; that passing score, signifying minimal competence, can be attained either on the initial test or on a retest serving as the exit exam for the non-credit developmental courses English 0150 and its ESL parallel, English 0152. (Though the number varies from term to term and section to section, about one-third of the students in 2100 at any given time are "alumni" of the developmental courses.) As for 2100 itself, a course in expository writing and researched argumentation, a fairly abstract course description specifies a certain quantity of written work (with a culminating

short research paper as the one must-do assignment) and gives general goals for the course, but the means of achieving these goals are left to the individual instructor, who has considerable latitude when it comes to course design and text choice. It is, in short, a plain-vanilla kind of course adaptable to a variety of pedagogical strategies and emphases.

All 66 instructors teaching 2100 in the past academic year were surveyed; 23 responded—less than I had hoped but still enough to constitute a representative sample. Those polled taught from one to three sections a term; some (but not all) taught both terms; some were oldtimers, and some were new to Baruch as well as to the course. The question inviting comments on the change from the old sequence (superseded in the spring of 1986) allowed me to see that the proportion of new recruits to veterans among the sample population and among the target population was roughly the same. Because the chief purpose of the survey was to look into how well developmental instruction meshed with instruction in the composition core, it's a shame I didn't ask the 2100 instructors if they had taught basic writing; that's one of those things hindsight let me see too late to change.

I am happy to say that the respondents disabused me of my suspicions at least as often as they confirmed them—happy because some of my suspicions were darkly pessimistic, if not cynical. In answering the first question, for instance, the respondents suggested that the alumni of the developmental courses were worse off than the other students by a 3-to-1 ratio—but I assumed that that verdict would be unanimous, or nearly so, and a significant minority felt either that there was no significant difference or that the students coming from developmental instruction were actually better writers. Since the WAT is essentially an invitation to produce a short, argumentative essay, and since the developmental courses are intended to help the students succeed on the WAT, I guess my surprise at the existence and scope of this minority opinion ought to be ascribed more to prevailing prejudice than to common sense.

There was an even more heartening surprise: I had supposed that the comments would be focused if not fixated on such things as sentence mechanics, but it was clear that, regardless of how the developmental alumni seemed to compare with the other students, the single most important point of comparison was what one respondent tersely and tellingly called "thought development." Whichever way the wind blew in the answer—whether the judgment was that "0150 students organize their essays better" or that they tend to be hidebound by "a mental format not necessarily appropriate to varied assignments"—development or organization surfaced as a (if not *the*) crucial distinction in all but three of the responses.

Among the majority of respondents who thought alumni of the developmental courses compared unfavorably with those who had placed

directly into 2100, the most common observation was *not* that the alumni were simply lacking in organizational skills, but rather that they were formulaic instead of flexible in developing their thoughts. A typical response had it that they "had not been trained beyond and cannot move beyond the three-paragraph essay stating and restating superficial points." Aside from pointing up the perils of what's called "teaching to the test," this comment represented one of many indications that the respondents considered not just organization but *reasoned* organization as their chief desideratum.

Answers to the questions under the heading "**adequate (?) preparation**" drove this home still more because, in addition to asking the respondents to think of *all* of their students, these questions essentially asked the instructors to spell out their priorities in terms of what, more than anything else, evinced adequate preparation or lack thereof. The pleasant surprise here was that, despite all the dismayed head-shaking and hand-wringing I've had occasion to witness, the call was close: 10 respondents actually thought most of their students adequately prepared, 12 felt most of them somehow deficient, and there was one yes-and-no response that managed to be typical of both groups. "Preparation is most apparent where it is both a plus and a minus," that one respondent wrote. "Students have a basic idea of how to organize a paper, but too many are locked into this one idea, this one approach, to learn with any ease how organization ought to evolve from purpose and content."

The comment is typical in that, whether teachers found their students adequately prepared or not, thoughtful development repeatedly emerged as the acid test. Lengthy and detailed but otherwise characteristic of those who found their students wanting was this: "All [are] *not* adequately prepared. Many have been 'prepared' according to a cookbook approach to writing (mechanical format, simplistic arguments, no independent thinking). This is the single greatest deficiency. The students vary so much that *other* deficiencies cannot be characterized as 'most important.'" A comment characteristic of those giving an affirmative answer to the question, "Do you feel your students are sufficiently prepared?" was this: "Yes. Although most have individual problems with usage and sentences in particular, they all seem to know how to write a short paper. Writing doesn't seem to frighten any of them." That "yes" is clearly a "yes, but . . .," and all the more typical for that: most instructors acknowledged what one called "various problems with language," but they defined adequacy in terms of writing as coherent thought-on-paper (rather than as due observance of conventions) with remarkable consistency.

It would be interesting to speculate but impossible to ascertain how much the character of 2100 itself had to do with this, particularly since

the respondents were actually least consistent with one another when responding to the nature of the course. They voted 16 to 6 (with one abstention) for the course's focus on researched argumentation, but beyond that not a lot can be concluded. Of the naysayers, two felt that (in the words of one) the "time could be better spent dealing with the basic problems of writing," two wanted the course devoted solely to short essays à la rhetorical mode, and two wanted an emphasis on literature that would be redundant in light of the course that follows 2100. Those in favor of the focus on research tended to fall into one of three groups: those who felt this focus needed no justification, those who felt it was necessary to prepare the students for written work in other courses, and those who felt it was something like good exercise for the mind. Afflicted, more than most, with an uneasy awareness of how little writing—especially researched writing—students do outside of composition courses, I'm inclined to agree with a member of that third group who said, "As far as I'm concerned, the idea that we should prepare students to do written research in other courses and disciplines (if they actually do any) is moot. Students need to make sense of data and opinions in the process of thinking for themselves. That's college, folks!"

In any case, it seems significant that there is the least consensus at precisely that point where the instructors are contemplating, not their students' abilities and their own priorities, but their institutionalized common ground. The implication is that there is something fairly free-floating about their insistence on thoughtful, flexible development as the prime criterion, that it is not tied to a particular course or conception of a course but is somehow fundamental, primary, essential. As one instructor (who took a fairly dim view of his or her students' preparation) put it, "Critical thinking and maturity of concerns seem most lacking and most central to their inability to write. Effectively using syntax, paragraphing, organization emerges from thinking, active thinking, not passive stuff that passes as thinking—memorizing, mimicking." Approaching the same point from the opposite direction, another respondent who did find students "sufficiently prepared in basic writing skills (focus and organization)" acknowledged the presence of "serious deficiencies in grammar, syntax, and mechanics." Many respondents referred to such deficiencies as "lingering problems," thereby suggesting that they were reconciled to approximations of formal perfection that were gradual and even distant—provided the students were seriously engaged in the expression of their thoughts.

This little, local, unscientific survey, seems to invite some sort of response to the responses it got, however tentative or circumscribed the conclusions must be. First, it is indeed local and so reflects the circumstances of its context. Chief among these is the impact of writing assessment as it is conducted throughout the City University of New York.

Though the causal situation is, as the saw goes, "overdetermined," the scoring criteria surely percolate well beyond the use of the WAT as a placement instrument. That test gives us an actual piece of writing, without which we could not measure what matters most to writing teachers at Baruch, yet the emphasis on adequate development and organization in scoring the WAT may have helped to shape that sense of what matters, however much these were deemed estimable features of writing before the WAT ever existed.

The implications for developmental instruction—even in courses over which a re-encounter with the WAT (or something like it) does not hang like Damoclean sword—seem clearer. Whatever the strategies embraced to get students past this hurdle, two means do not seem justified by their supposed ends. One is the workbook approach to such instruction, the focus on mechanics and conventions in isolation, attention to the boundaries of the sentence rather than to the extent and shape of the essay as a whole, insistence on getting things right rather than getting things said. The other is the inculcation of prefabricated formulae for organizing thoughts, formulae arbitrarily imposed rather than thoughtfully evolved, dissective rather than creative, lockstep rather than flexible. This is not to say that the presumed basics of usage or organization should not be attended to—just that they should never appear in a be-all and end-all guise. The problem with prescriptive approaches (skills-and-drills or formats-and-formulae) is less with what they foreground than with their sense of what comes first. Even and especially where there is much to be concerned with, there must be a hierarchy of concerns. And the development of thought, it seems, should have primacy, priority.

This is all the more true of the courses beyond basic writing, though the change of context invites a shift of emphasis. Just as it would be foolhardy to urge an inattention to formal conventions at any level, it would be naive to suppose (and wrong to imply) that there are not kinds and degrees of "thought development." Consider what was said by one instructor acknowledging "adequate preparation": "Students do reasonably well with general organization and paragraphing" but "can't be expected to reason with any sophistication." Just what do those relativistic terms mean? The effective expression of thought can be defined as a basic necessity or an impossible ideal depending on the ambition of the course and the instructor, though approaching either goal seems to mean heading in the same general direction, a route summed up by one of the instructors who found the alumni of developmental instruction better prepared than their more swiftly processed counterparts: "The students who come from 0150 and 0152 have a better knowledge of writing principles, fundamentals and organization because of familiarity and practice."

"Familiarity and practice." The words remind me that I'm hardly offering up stunning revelations. Perhaps it's time to be a little less safe and secure, a little more venturesome in pursuing the survey's implications. For one thing, there's the survey itself: not merely context-bound but crassly utilitarian in origin. Occasioned by a request from the upper reaches of one institution's administration for some sort of accounting, it represents a fortuitous, slapdash discovery of divergences and convergences other WPAs can go looking for with rather more thought and circumspection. I do think they're worth seeking out. For one thing, the results of the survey prove quite useful to me as an administrator, since, at the outset of each term, WATs and diagnostic writing samples are thrown down like so many gauntlets with the challenge, "How did this person get in 2100? Look at all the errors." The survey suggests that those so-called errors—and only those so-called errors—are called to my attention, not because of their overwhelming significance, but because of the incontrovertibility. If the accusing finger must be pointed, best to point it at something stable and specific. What really matters most to the instructors who have gone on record is something more difficult to pinpoint and define—what one instructor called the ability to "dig deeply and give examples, specifics and reasons for belief"—and now that they have gone on record and I have made that record public I intend to hold them to what they have said about what they think, to remind them that their priorities are more noble and ambitious than they sometimes seem to be letting on. The criteria and design of writing courses, like those of writing assessment tests, should be locally developed, communally determined, and I have been singularly blessed in the results of my little survey. I think you might think about doing something similar at your own campus, particularly because I do not attribute the results to serendipity or parochial concerns; I have asked writing instructors themselves to "dig deeply and give examples, specifics and reasons for belief," and I think the beliefs uncovered are deeply and widely held.

If this is indeed true, there are other implications to pursue, and one strikes me as more important than any other. If the development of thought does indeed have primacy and priority, it is time to acknowledge, not at the level of theory and research, but at the level of down-in-the-trenches practice, that students truly do have the right to their own texts, that, heuristics or no, they need to have (and need to believe they have) something to say worth hearing. We too often teach the constituents of the rhetorical situation—purpose, audience, context—without thinking enough about how they apply to the writing situations we preside over. Purpose is more often imposed than instilled and almost never self-generated; the audience is the very incarnation of authority (something the authors, defined by their need of instruction and correction, sorely lack); and the context (in which texts are produced en masse

and according to established procedure) generally constrains much more than it engenders in the way of writing—especially writing as a genuinely communicative act. Reading, which has enormous potential as (re)experience of text production and consumption, is considered ancillary and incidental, the source of something to talk about in a course that really isn't "about" anything. Regularly bypassing the **what** and **why** of writing as if **how** is all that matters, the continuum of instruction is actually experienced as a discontinuous series of onerous assignments, each of which might seem a whole new ball game were it not that abstract standards and personal preferences seem to play a decisive (if little understood) role in evaluation, so that a writer can feel branded as a "C" student after the first or second assignment. Writing is a job: the students are employees, producing work on demand for the teacher-as-boss, who in turn dispenses grades as pay or (more likely) punishment.

I'm purposely painting a bleak picture, but it's not an inaccurate rendering of much well-intentioned writing instruction—especially as the students perceive it, and they're the objects of interest here, the people whose thoughts teachers would like to see earnestly expressed and thoughtfully developed. If we want purpose and content to drive organization and development, we have to find ways of making our students' writing more purposeful, its content more rich in significance and implication, its reception a matter of more consequence to us, and it seems to me that would necessarily entail, if not a reconfiguration, at least a modulation of the lines of power and interest and authority in the writing classroom—surely something more than the persona-shifting and peer-reviewing that currently create some diversion but leave the instructor very much the One Who Stands in Judgment and the Giver of the Grades and so the Audience That Matters. The important thing is not to take authority from the instructor but give it to the students, to let them speak and write as authorities by tapping expertise they bring to the course or acquire during it—and so (it is fervently to be hoped) let their writing matter to the Audience That Matters.

This is not a call for more expressive writing, though there are more interesting ways of taking that tack than are generally acknowledged. (One instructor I know makes a regular practice of inviting students to write, from personal experience, position papers on their choices from Blake's Proverbs of Hell.) I do think that a writing course might take, as a kind of general focus or overarching theme, some subject immediately relevant to the students' range of knowledge and experience. A couple of writing teachers at Baruch, for instance, acting on the fact that ours is a midtown Manhattan campus, teach writing (and reading) about the "urban experience." Another instructor has her class investigate stereotypes (especially gender-based ones) current among the student body. I myself have had some success giving schemes of cognitive development and identity formation to students and inviting them to see and say what

they think of the applicability of, say, William Perry or Erik Erikson to their own lives. Ideally, such projects should not be one-shot deals but invitations for cumulative "thought development" resulting in evolving bodies of shared knowledge that give focus and purpose to a course that might otherwise seem to be about form but not content.

I don't suppose for a moment that you can't call to mind similar enterprises from your own program and perhaps your own teaching. What interests me is that they appear in my program (and, I presume, elsewhere) as "experiments" (as if all writing instruction were not in some sense experimental), interesting aberrations despite a widespread sense that it's the thought that counts, that motivated expression and reasoned organization matter more than conventions and formal proprieties. Teachers who hold this belief should act accordingly by giving the students an honest chance to teach *them*—not about days-in-the-lives or roommates or hobbies but important stuff: social typologies, structures of belief, patterns of experience. Expecting interesting content may mean communicating interesting content, especially in the form of reading, but it may also mean letting the students overstep the usual institutionalized bounds by having some say in the very structure and content of the course. If that's scary, consider the alternative—having no good answer to the student who asks (as a student who thought her teacher a boring classroom presence once asked of me), "Why do we have to go to class? Why can't we just read the chapters, do the assignments, and have them graded by someone?"

Administrators who would aid and abet instructors inviting the students to "have a say" in the most important sense would need to combine *laissez faire* with quiet struggle against the tautologies we sometimes teach our student teachers as well as our students: things are done a certain way because that's just the way they're done. The need for reasoned organization is our need as well. Why do we do what we do? How well do our practices mesh with our goals? How well do (or should) our goals mesh with those of our students? What can we do to break down the egregious artificiality of the writing situation in the composition classroom? How much, given the inflexibility of the institutions we inhabit, *can* we do? I don't know—what do writing teachers think?

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH 2100

You should feel free to keep your response anonymous if you like, but it is vital that you respond. Thank you for your input.

1. Alumni of 0150 or 0152.

In the section(s) you're teaching, roughly what percentage of students are fresh from English 0150 or 0152? _____%
What would you say most commonly or obviously distinguishes the writing of remediated students from that of those who passed the WAT on the first try?

2. Adequate (?) preparation.

Thinking of all your students now, do you feel most are sufficiently prepared for a first-year, first-term college course? If so, what aspect of their writing best reflects this preparation? (vocabulary? usage? syntax? paragraphing? general organization?) If not, what are their most important deficiencies?

3. Focus on research.

Do you think the emphasis on researched argumentation in 2100 makes sense and seems do-able? If so, why? If not, why not?

If you taught in the old sequence, do you think the new sequence (and particularly English 2100) can be fairly said to represent an improvement on the old? Please remember that the true point of comparison for the new 2100 is not the old 2100 but the old 2050 or 2052/53.

YES _____

NO _____

NOT APPLICABLE _____

If you answered yes or no, please explain why below.

If there are other things about English 2100 that you would like to praise, censure, or just mention, please do so here.

Please return the completed questionnaire to writing director's box; he will see to it that the results are tabulated and shared with the other members of the Composition Committee. This questionnaire is part of a year-long, data-gathering process culminating in a thorough review of the new remedial sequence. That review, requested by the Provost's Office and conducted by the Composition Committee, will be available to you at your request.

Thank you for your cooperation.

