

“An Alternative to Revising: The Proleptic Grasp.” *Journal of Basic Writing* 6:1 (Spring 1987), 48-54.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO REVISING: THE PROLEPTIC GRASP

Much has been said about keeping classroom practice responsive to composition theory. I think we might do well now to turn our glasses around; in our studies of revision it is time to keep theory responsive to classroom practice. In particular, I propose a few alternatives to revising, since in the writing classroom, especially among inexperienced writers, revision remains an obsession of the teacher and an uncertain code of gesture and consent for the student.

In the past decade, we English teachers, by encouraging our students to slip draft after draft through the gears of the grading machine, have made progress in removing the suspicion that every piece of writing done for a college class conceals some kind of test. Students have taken to this change with varying degrees of discomfort: Well, they say, if you *were* grading this draft, what would it get? Will the piece ever be finished? How will I know? Somehow the teacher's new generosity is more like an outmoded practicality. In an age of disposable pens and instant copies the idea of redoing a piece of writing to make it more complete and durable carries the whiff of another, less technological, age. Nonetheless, we make it clear among our students that drafting is what we are doing, and that we all are to understand a draft to be organic and burgeoning, rather than merely adjustable and correctable. The students are very good about acknowledging this notion and dutifully write across the tops of their papers, *Draft #1* or *Draft #2*.

For many years, I went about making my assignments carefully, using class time to discover the indwelling potential of each assignment, so that students would leave the classroom already well advanced into the abundant possibilities of the essay in process. Then I expected the assignment on “A Confrontation with an Authority Figure” or “A Childhood Injustice” or “A

Turning Point in My Life” or “A Popular Misconception” to be turned in as a sequence of drafts, each successive one taking into account the observations I and the students in the class had made on the preceding draft. What I expected was the humanizing of a piece of writing through the responses of many readers.

What I got all too often, however, were identical essays, almost machine replicas of each other save for miraculously tiny insertions, and I have written elsewhere (Schor) about the monkish practices of students who faithfully recopy a text simply to insert “I was eight years old when we moved to Astoria” into the second paragraph, or to change “My landlord said” to “My landlord shouted” as a response to the teacher's specific request for tone and color. Everything else in the manuscript was unaltered--unalterable, in fact, to the mind of a student writer whose teacher has given no recipe, no exact ingredients in a vague, if wholesome, regimen of revision. After perhaps five years of such expectations, I recognized that my students revised only in obedience to what I wanted and were restricted in fact by whatever instruction I had actually phrased in the margins or at the end of the piece of writing. Unless I specifically wrote “How old were you when you moved to Astoria?” or “I'd like to hear your landlord's tone of voice when he threw you out,” my advice went unattended.

Since then I have been recreating the syllabus for my basic writing classes.

These classes more often than not are of basic writers who have a rudimentary degree of linguistic fluency but little experience in the intellectual development of an idea and less understanding of the requirements of academic writing. Their writing may appear grossly competent in syntax, usage, and the formal changes of words. Though their writing is far from error-free--exhibiting missing *-ed* or *-s* endings, inexact sentence boundaries, and unstable referencing--its medium is the sentence and English idiom is recognizable. However, these

writers are truly basic in their inability to confront an idea and pursue its rhetorical and intellectual sources and consequences. My evolving syllabus now depends little on rewriting as my students came to define it for me--repeating a drafted piece of writing for the purpose of making specific insertions of detail, illustration, or explanation. In short I am trying to get rid of increment as sacrament.

The new syllabus recognizes that inexperienced writers gain a good deal of insight into how writers behave by substituting real writing activities for the swollen expectations of "Revise this essay." First, I believe with Bruner and the Russian psychologist Zeigarnik (Bruner 119) in the so-called Zeigarnik Effect, that a task is best executed and remembered when it is interrupted. I have been asking my students to write a crash-through draft of a whole essay--a sort of nonstop fastwriting--sketching in whatever comes to their minds as they attempt to get something on paper. Then I immediately interrupt their attempt by asking them to write one piece of the essay as a way of producing in them a more exact anticipation of the whole, what I call the proleptic grasp. Their spontaneous choice of subject for this "piece" of the whole often directs them to their true concerns. I offer back-up encouragement to students who find it difficult to arrive at a partial subject by suggesting that they write their own definition for a term or concept that dominates their fastwrite. These preliminary forays take various structures and call on the imagination in distinct ways, the writing of the parts always strengthened by the crisscrossing supports of the partially seen whole. In Chapter 6, called "The Will to Learn," of *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (119), Bruner explains the Zeigarnik tendency toward completeness:

In brief, tasks that are interrupted are much more likely to be returned to and completed, and much more likely to be remembered, than comparable tasks that one has completed

without interruption. But that puts the matter superficially, for it leaves out of account one fact that is crucial. The effect holds only if the tasks that the subject has been set are ones that have a structure--a beginning, a plan, and a terminus. If the tasks are 'silly' in the sense of being meaningless, arbitrary, and without visible means for checking progress, the drive to completion is not stimulated by interruption.

That the whole is only partially and inadequately seen in no way limits its usefulness. Quite the contrary. We make our best inferences from partial information, inferences which lead us into a new partnership between information and intuition. Seeing the whole too soon mistakes coverage for completeness and miscellany for mastery. The practice of anticipating the whole at the same time that we avoid it engages the writer in finding expression for unexpected and surreptitious elements--too often mistaken for digressions--so that a work finally begins to express more than the writer knows. In "The Poet" Emerson says that the intellect "delights in detachment and boundary." I have seen that it does. We continually stretch ourselves in the limitations of a detached idea. Yet the preliminary attempt to set down some kind of whole imprints traces of the whole on our unrealized memories. The coherence of an inexhaustible subject is like the child's awareness of a higher adult life, inexhaustibly there, remote and misunderstood for a long while, yet inevitably structuring his outcome.

Here are a few examples of what I mean by a proleptic grasp. In a narrative essay about a confrontation with an authority figure, after the first fastwriting on the subject, I ask the entire class to write their definitions of authority. One class's impromptu definitions included these: someone who gives the rules; someone who has power or is in charge; a person whose knowledge makes her opinion more valuable; someone who forces his ideas on an individual; a figure who overpowers us; a psychological feeling we have about another person's power; power

because of ownership or money (this one led further to power because of good looks, athletic ability, physical strength, having a gun, being smart, etc.); an official appointed by the government to serve the public; someone or something with the power to decide the fate of others because of expertise or legal or official sanction; being a king or a queen; having power to do a certain thing at a certain moment. We throw all these on the board and together study the nuances, say, between “giving the rules” and “deciding our fate” or “having power” and “having power to do a certain thing at a certain moment.” Then I ask the students to bring to the next class a dialogue between themselves and the authority figure they have had to confront. These dialogues are acted out by pairs of students. The class’s responses to the dialogues intuitively invoke references to the stock of definitions the class has accumulated, each of us attempting to detect in the voice and circumstances of the characters one or another of the definitions, now suddenly in operation.

I make a point of introducing the next assignment before this one has been completed, being careful whenever I can to devise assignments in pairs, one of which resonates against the other. These pairs have been a rewarding dividend for me in that the written assignments that result from them show greater depth and significantly more private thought. So I next ask the students to begin thinking about a new assignment: to prod their memories for an instance of a childhood injustice. We interrupt our work on the authority narrative to hear exploratory freewritings on instances of injustice, the meaning of injustice, what it feels like to be the victim of injustice-raising questions along the way, such as, Is racial injustice personal? When does parental love become injustice?--only to discover that injustice can be laid to uncertain claims of authority over a victim (the injustices in my classes typically involve either a teacher who won't listen or a traffic cop). The “injustice” idea trails associations of authority misapplied.

Meanwhile, the students are still working to complete a draft of the narrative on authority, but they have by now become a bit shrewder about authority--earned, assigned, inherited, and purloined. They are able to make continuing distinctions because the entire class has been working in a collaborative intensity on abundant and recursive distinctions, keeping the interest suspended for the duration of the writing. They have had time to generate enthusiasm for their subject.

About two weeks after the first crash-through, a narrative essay on authority finally comes in. I find that the essays tend to be longer than I am accustomed to getting, and rich with the voices of the antagonists, acting out their inquiry into the meaning of authority. In short, the writer has an increased capacity to locate in several adjacent assignments an essay that shelters an idea already substantially developed.

In assignments that are not narrative, we apply the same principles. In an essay on “A Turning Point” students fastwrite the entire paper and then slow down. Again, we interrupt and divide our attention between this assignment and a related one. In this case, the seed sentence Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen use in *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (Ponsot 71-74), “Once I was-----; now I am-----” provides an important lesson in the difference between an essay whose parts are coordinate and an essay having a major part with subordinate parts. They write the “Once/Now” essays evenhandedly, both parts receiving equivalent emphases. But once they progress from that to the “Turning Point” they suddenly face up to the question, *Why?* Why did the turning point occur? What did it lead to? Does one period overshadow the other? The students suspend the unfolding of the whole essay until they clearly know, having discovered it in the writing up of the separate parts, whether one element is dominant. Usually it is.

In an assignment that deals with the analysis of a popular myth or misconception, I again

ask for a fastwrite. The misconception essay develops as a result of careful class discussion into a two-part essay: the misconception and the reality. We throw on the board as many topics as there are students in the class: "It is a misconception that courage involves death in battle and acts of heroism." "It is a misconception that money brings happiness," as well as its popular converse, "It is a myth that the best things in life are free." After a page or two stating the misconception, including a student's illustrative examples from life, the overpowering drift is towards the writer's clarification of the reality. Here it is imperative that the writer phrase the reality as an assertion and not a denial: "Happiness comes from love, respect, and work" and not: "Money doesn't bring happiness." "Courage requires facing up to dread through duty" and not: "You don't have to be heroic to be courageous." Then I take as one day's writing assignment the development in full of the misconception. What is it precisely that you believe to be the mistaken view of courage? of the clergy? of money? We do not dwell on narrations or descriptions first, as basic tasks--they are not basic tasks. Rather, we try to behold the center of the miscue, that courage, say, has too long been associated only with death in battle and acts of heroism. What happens after several writings is that the writer can accurately describe the misconception and displace it--in this case displace the obligatory heroism with a two-part notion of courage, as one student did: courage requires first, that dread be inflicted upon us, and second, that despite the dread we face up to our duty, thereby opening the essay to a more personal rendering of the meaning of courage. This kind of care in analysis emerges from the inside out. The struggle to describe what courage is not, matures the writer's understanding of what courage is.

In these assignments writers can come to understand intuitively that an essay is an organism. They come to rely on having several opportunities to individualize their writing

through patient composition but just as often through sudden sparks of insight that link up the parts. Erratic shortcuts and loving longcuts evolve into presentations that go beyond the usual slapdash beginner's essay. Questions of motivation are natural as one's characters carry on a dialogue, the exchange of talk insisting on question and answer; classification inheres in writing definitions; relationships surface as soon as two parts are put side by side; a page describing the setting of an event is often a graph of the writer's emotions; an abundance of particulars implies what is general and overarching; and the repertory of the class extends the habits of the individual. And so these proleptic forays teach a good deal of what it means to anticipate a piece of writing by grappling with the parts that are exhibited, even in the weakest and most provisional whole. One of Confucius's tenets shows a connection between the completion of a thing and self-completion, effecting a union between the external and the internal. Our students begin to project a self as they gather elements of thought into completion.

Secondly, I have also discovered that students need the support of certain heuristic elements of grammar *as* they conceive their drafts. Here I part with many of our researchers into revision who advise delaying the correction of grammar until the draft is closer to the writer's satisfaction. Yes, delay the teensy inflectional forms until the content is defined, but certain large grammatical provinces, such as tense, point of view, modalities of should/would/could, and large structural parallelisms assist the inexperienced writer to make a construct out of what he or she thinks. This grammatical blueprint gives form to the earliest construction.

For example, the essential distinction between the present tense of the generalization and the past tense of an illustrative anecdote is crucial. That trip between present and past describes the two parts of the essay. In a similar way, working within a parallelism rewards the writer who seeks order for her ideas. In a work of art, such a parallelism may be the expression of the

artist's uniqueness in his or her unconscious bringing together dissimilar forms or intensities and yoking them into identical service. The framing language, on the surface a trivial and seemingly accidental thing, similarly becomes the unmistakable form of the speaker.

And, finally, inexperienced writers gain insight into how writers behave by writing several adjacent essays about the same subject (White). Students are often embarrassed because they have only one interest or one idea, but which of us has not prayed for the blessing of one subject in a lifetime? They unfold their subject gradually through the formal requirements of an appropriate structure, thereby developing the writer's ability to expatiate on an idea. Continued exploration of a subject permits the writer to feel the changing relation of content and form. It discourages the stock response. It fights facile attitudes. It discovers the connection between feeling and mind. The intensity of sustaining effort over several assignments provides the writer with what is often his or her first mastery over a subject. Thus, during one semester Joan wrote about her parents as authority figures, then on the injustice of her parents who unwittingly dulled her childhood curiosity. Confusing love with overprotection, they muffled her in stories and inaccuracies about such natural events as death and tonsillectomies. Then she did a turning point essay on her realization that she had a scientific bent and that her parents would have destroyed it had she not insisted on going to a science high school. Jay on the other hand wrote narratively about his experiences wrestling; described his involvement in wrestling as the turning point in his life; and wrote eloquently and analytically about the myths that wrestling is (a) a sport for human baboons and (b) a gay sport. Neither student nor teacher tires of the subject as it becomes richer and more complex with each new form. The freshness of each attempt does away with psychological perseverance, which occurs when a piece of writing freezes into an immutable form and the writer is incapable of repossessing it, already disowned as it is by the act of having

been handed in too soon as a completed assignment.

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