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Carl Klaus

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Public Opinion and Professional Belief

CARL KLAUS

MY TITLE is occasioned by the sound and fury of all the news I've been hearing lately about bad writing and all the remedies about how to make it better. No matter where I turn, whether to television or newspapers or weekly magazines or institutional newsletters or professional journals or academic colleagues, I hear the same feverish cry: "Johnny Can't Write" (and apparently Jenny can't write either). Walter Cronkite says so, and so does the *Iowa City Press Citizen*, and the *Des Moines Register*, and the *New York Times*, and *Time Magazine*, and *Newsweek*, and the *Reader's Digest*, and the *College Board News*, and the *National Assessment of Educational Progress Newsletter*, and the *Illinois Alumni News*, and the *Yale Alumni Magazine*. And so does Paul Baender, a colleague of mine, who barged into my office while I was writing this paper, screaming about the miserable writing of his students, undergrads and graduates alike. Suddenly it seems as if the whole country is about to take arms against a sea of stylistic troubles and by opposing end them. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished. I hunger for its achievement, and I gather that teachers of composition feel the same way. It's a gloomy affair all right, and I don't think the troubles will end if we continue to oppose them in quite so undisciplined a way as we have in the past and as we appear to be doing in the present. I don't believe, for example, that the troubles will go away—or that they could have been avoided—simply by turning off the TV set or tuning out the culture. Measures of that sort, like the critics who imagine them, are escapist at best, mis-

anthropic at worst. And I don't think we will learn anything more about what's causing the troubles if ACT and ETS decide to add writing exams to their battery of aptitude tests. Their holistic methods, which bypass rhetorical and stylistic analysis, will merely produce another set of numbers to confirm the ones they've already reported from their verbal aptitude tests. And, believe it or not, I don't think we'll get rid of the troubles by the reinstatement of required writing courses or by the expansion of already existing courses or even by the development of large-scale writing programs. After all, how could we possibly staff all those new writing courses, when we don't have enough professionally trained people to handle the courses already in existence? Far from having enough, we have, in fact, only a handful of professionally trained writing teachers in the entire country. That last assertion is probably the most vexing, certainly the most insulting, claim I've made thus far, but just to take a bit of the sting out of it, let me add that I don't consider myself among the handful, even though I've been teaching composition for twenty-two years, have published a couple of textbooks on writing, directed a couple of NDEA Institutes in writing, and am currently directing Iowa's advanced-writing program. How, you might ask, did this guy make it so far in the field he professes, if by his own admission he's not professionally fit for it? How, in fact, did any of us composition teachers get where we are? I'd like to answer that question, explore the implications of the answer, and propose some ways of dealing with

the state of incompetence which I believe is one of the major ills afflicting our profession and thus one of the major conditions contributing to the bad writing we all deplore.

The answer to my question is fairly simple. A few of us majored in journalism, a few in speech, a few in philosophy, but most of us, in fact almost all of us, got where we are by majoring in English. Some of us stopped at the BA, others of us went on to the MA and PhD, but no matter how long we studied, nor how many degrees we attained, nearly all of us had pretty much the same kind of training. We took courses in literature. We read the great authors and their works. And we read the not so great authors and their works. We learned how to analyze them. We learned where they fit in the history of literature. We learned about all the cultural, social, and political conditions that influenced them. And we learned how to write papers about them. Maybe we also took a course in composition or a course in linguistics. But mostly we took courses in literature. That, at last, is what it means to major in English. Then, having taken all those courses in literature, we went out into the world to teach writing.

So, you might ask, what's wrong with that? After all, it's been the accepted form of professional training for as long as any of us can remember. The schools, colleges, and universities require it, and the public apparently goes along with the requirements, else they would surely have expressed their opposition sometime during the past year or so in which all the furor has been raised about the bad writing of our students and their children. But the public has been notably silent on that score, and so for the most part have the professionals. Oh yes, there have been complaints about the so-called creativity which afflicted writing teachers during the sixties, and there have been complaints that writing teachers don't make enough writing assign-

ments or that they don't read, comment on, and grade all of the assignments they do make. But those, after all, are complaints about the practice of writing teachers, not about their fitness to teach writing.

My complaint, by contrast with all the others, is that our professional training does not prepare us to teach writing. So as to make my complaint clear to everyone, let me put it in the form of a question. Why is the study of literature so basic to the teaching of writing? Well, I guess it's considered basic because we assume that a direct correlation exists between reading and writing. I accept that assumption, by the way, but it does not provide me with a satisfying answer to the question. I believe, of course, that people who have read a great deal and read it carefully are bound to be more proficient writers than those who have not. And I believe that people who have read a great deal of literature probably care intensely and respond sensitively to the ways in which language is used in writing. But proficient writers are not necessarily fit to be writing teachers. Neither, for that matter, are people who respond sensitively to language. After all, the capacity to respond sensitively to language and the ability to use it proficiently in writing are not virtues possessed by writing teachers alone. Those virtues are possessed by millions of educated people in this country—businessmen, for example, and doctors and lawyers and scientists and educators in other fields than English, just to name a few of the others who possess those abilities. Yet they certainly do not consider themselves fit to teach writing. Why, then, should we? So far as I can tell, the only reason we consider ourselves fit is that we've chosen to teach writing and chosen to believe that our training prepared us to do so.

But shouldn't we demand of ourselves and of those who follow us in our calling not only the ability to read and write

proficiently but also a form of training, a kind of knowledge, that uniquely fits us to teach writing, as surely as medical school prepares doctors to practice medicine, or law school prepares lawyers to practice law? If we genuinely believe in the dignity of our calling, then we should assure it the dignity that can only come from our being truly professional about it. And I cannot for the life of me imagine any other way of being professional about it than to know as much about writing as we can. That seems like a fairly simple and undemanding requirement, and it is, if you believe writing to be merely an inert phenomenon which can be equated with marks on a page, rules of grammar, forms of expression, or any other arbitrary system which isolates the use of language from the mental processes that give rise to it. Then all you have to do is memorize the rules and apply them in your teaching. Avoid the passive, for example. And don't begin sentences with a conjunction. And never use sentence fragments. Never. But if you conceive of writing not simply as a product but also as a process, if you conceive of it as a complex mental activity, which brings together, through language, a writer, the universe of experience, and an audience, then you will find the requirement to be very complex and demanding.

When writing is understood as a process, the study of it necessarily demands an interdisciplinary approach. For example, a writer in the act of using language is drawing on a unique set of verbal possibilities (idiolect) which is the product of the writer's interaction with shared sets of verbal possibilities (dialects). Understanding these phenomena and their impact on the process of writing requires the expertise of such disciplines as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. Likewise, a writer in the act of using language is inescapably discovering and forming experience, for the words which a writer uses

to define experience not only communicate but also shape that writer's perception of experience. Understanding the interaction of language, cognition, and perception requires the expertise of such disciplines as cognitive psychology, semiotics, and transformational linguistics. Furthermore, a writer in the act of using language is communicating experience for one kind of purpose or another to one kind of audience or another. Understanding the interaction between a writer's social intention and language requires the expertise of such disciplines as rhetorical theory and communication research. Finally, of course, a writer uses language to produce a piece of writing which embodies in its particular selection and arrangement of words the interaction of all the phenomena I've described thus far, and countless others, such as a writer's aesthetic intentions; or mental and emotional associations that transpire during the process of writing, or distractions that interrupt the process, or the technical demands of a particular subject matter—too many in fact to be listed here. Understanding the relationship of that selection and arrangement of words to the phenomena that brought it into being requires at last the expertise of stylistic analysis, which in turn depends upon a variety of disciplines, such as literary criticism, rhetorical analysis, psychoanalysis, and statistics. Clearly enough, one discipline or another can provide only one perspective on only one element or stage in the process of writing. If the process is to be wholly understood, if we are to know as much about writing as we possibly can, then we must bring to the study of it as many disciplines as are possible and appropriate.

By this point, no doubt, many of you are wondering how you could ever become familiar with research in all those disciplines and what difference it would make to your teaching even if you did. So let me cite just two examples, two of hundreds I might offer as being directly

applicable to the teaching of writing. One question that concerns psycholinguists is how the mechanical implements necessary to writing affect the writing process itself. How, for example, do pen, pencil, or typewriter and paper influence the flow of language that takes place in the process of writing? One possible answer is that these mechanical implements impede writing, that they get in the way of the flow of words, simply because they cannot keep up with the speed of language arising in the mind, and that the mind therefore must adjust itself to the clumsy and slow-paced movement of pen on paper. Acting on this assumption, we might be moved, as many teachers have, to free the language flow of our students by having them dictate their compositions, rather than transcribe them by hand. But dictation, of course, does not necessarily produce written discourse. Unless it is preceded by deliberate mental composition, it merely records oral discourse, lacking all of the grammatical and stylistic modifications necessary to approximate speaking in writing. An alternative approach to the impact of mechanical implements might be to assume that they constitute an external storage device which supplements the writer's limited short-term memory, that pen and paper enable a writer to capture the words and generate other words suggested by them, that pen and paper at last enable a writer to control the chaotic flow of language as it arises in the mind. If this be the case, then teaching students to write by dictation may very well be subversive in its effects.

Another vexing issue that concerns psycholinguists and sociolinguists is the activity of style-switching. Teachers of writing, for example, often speak confidently about developing stylistic flexibility in their students, without recognizing the numerous problems involved in the concept of style-switching. To what extent, for example, is the ability to switch styles comparable to being poly-

lingual? Is it possible that even the ability to shift from oral to written style—an ability that most of us writing teachers take for granted—depends not only on mechanically following a set of rules pertaining to usage in writing, rules which are simply extensions or modifications of oral usage but which, in fact, entail learning and mastering something like another language, acquiring, that is, an entirely new vocabulary of perception, thought, and feeling? Is it possible, then, that the grammatical, lexical, and syntactical features of written style are so different from those of oral style that we cannot legitimately expect our students to acquire them and use them by a rote process of learning?

Now then, I grant that those are only two examples, but I think those examples are enough to suggest how beneficial, indeed how basic, an interdisciplinary study of writing might be to our teaching of writing. In fact, I would go so far as to say that without such a study we are at best dedicated amateurs, who for all our dedication may well be doing our students more harm than good. How do we know, when we don't even know the answers to such basic questions as those I've just considered?

Given the appalling state of our ignorance, what can we do about it? After all, most of us are well beyond our college years, and besides we have jobs to maintain and families to support. For those of us with years on our backs and hostages to fortune, the best we can do is to start reading in our spare time, familiarizing ourselves as much as possible with the work in those other disciplines, as some among us have already done. I have in mind, for example, Ross Winterowd, whose book called *Rhetoric: A Synthesis*, which was published by Holt in 1968, represents an early formulation of the position I've been arguing and also provides an excellent bibliography for anyone wishing to do reading in rhetorical theory. Mr. Winterowd doesn't at

last urge a wide enough interdisciplinary framework to suit my fancy, but I recommend his book just the same, particularly his seventh chapter, on pedagogy, in which he describes what he calls the "new breed of cat" he envisions as the future teacher of writing. Eight years have now passed since Mr. Winterowd first described that breed of cat, and so far as I can tell, the critter, alas, must be a lonely critter. I haven't seen his pet cat—or mine—spreading its maker's image through the land.

Beyond getting ourselves into professional shape, we are also going to have to urge our colleagues, and the departments they represent, to put their own professional houses in order. The only way that can be done, I think, is by bringing intense pressure to bear on university English departments throughout the country. They, after all, are the original source of the problem, for they determine through their graduate programs the kind of training that is available for writing teachers. And not only do they train writing teachers, but even more importantly they train the people who go on to train other writing teachers, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Yet very few of them make any real concessions to that basic obligation. In fact, so far as I can determine only two graduate departments—Iowa and Southern California—have been offering programs which provide specific interdisciplinary options for persons wishing to prepare themselves as writing teachers. Thus we will have to tell all of those university English departments throughout the country that we will not any longer accept the guiding premise of their professional training programs. We will have to convince them that the study of literature alone is not an adequate form of preparation for the teaching of writing. We will have to convince them that literary study must be supplemented with work in other areas, in linguistics and rhetorical theory at least but pre-

ferably too in the philosophy and psychology of language and in educational theory. And if they are not convinced by rational appeals, then we will have to confront them in the marketplace by refusing to hire their graduates unless they are properly trained. I noticed, for example, in the December MLA job-listing a total of 57 openings for college teachers of writing, yet only a couple of those actually specified interdisciplinary study as a prerequisite for the position. The rest were content merely to itemize the usual conditions about having a PhD or ABD and a few years of teaching experience. As for those of us who teach in undergraduate programs, where we are training teachers for the grade schools and the high schools, we too will have to broaden our programs. Even though our own enrollments may be declining, we will have to be less proprietary about our students. We will have to encourage, if not require, them to take courses in other departments than our own, where they can pick up some of those other perspectives on writing. And once they have taken work in those other areas, we in turn will have to offer them a course in which we show how those perspectives can be synthesized and applied to the teaching of writing. In short, I believe that all of us who are involved in the teaching of writing or the training of writing teachers are going to have to take a wider view of our professional obligations.

What I am proposing is that we regard writing as a basic academic discipline. By that I mean that we consider it not only as an activity that people carry on in their lives and that we teach them to perform but also as a subject to be studied, an area of enquiry, a discipline, which can be carried on only in an interdisciplinary manner. The substance of my proposal is of a piece with recommendations that were made at the Carnegie Conference on Undergraduate English, a conference which took place

in 1974, involving staff members from MLA, NCTE, and selected department chairmen from throughout the country. But so far as I can tell, those recommendations have not attracted much more attention than Mr. Winterowd's eight-year-old cat. Until they do, writing will continue to be considered less important than literature, and writing teachers will continue to be treated like second-class

citizens, like dedicated amateurs, which we are, rather than genuine professionals, which we are not. And until we become professional, I do not see how we can hope to take arms against that sea of stylistic troubles and by opposing end them.

*University of Iowa
Iowa City*



FRAG

I'm tired of writing FRAG
in the margins of essays
by people who don't know anything anyway.

Writing FRAG is not my bag
(as they say).
I will stop this now
and journey to Acapulco
by motorcycle, casting off
my former self, abandoning
the margins for the real thing.

Leaving me behind,
I will roar across the plains,
stopping occasionally in scattered,
unknown, dirt-road towns
to scan the horizon,
to take note,
to piece myself together again.

Failing, I will return
(half man, half machine)
stupid in my progress,
pursued by traffic cops,
drivers of sedate sedans,
legislators of the open road.
I will return,

knowing that in this world
are people like me, fragmented,
racing between margins.
Who don't know anything anyway.

*B. H. FAIRCHILD, JR.
Southwest Texas State University
San Marcos, TX*