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Mixed Tones: On teaching ordinary English

by Don K. Pierstorff

There hasn't been a whole lot of stuff published recently about *students* in English composition classrooms. I was rereading Dorothy Augustine's labyrinthine "Geometries and Words: Linguistics and Philosophy: A Model of the Composing Process" (*College English*, March 1981) the other day when it occurred to me midway through it that she had made no mention of anyone's doing any writing. She did, however, mention her indebtedness to W. Ross Winterowd. I carefully looked at his *The Contemporary Writer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), and I didn't find any students in there, either. I know that Mr. Winterowd has a new edition of *The Contemporary Writer*, but I haven't seen it yet. Let's hope for the best. Robert M. Gorrell and Charlton Laird's *Modern English Handbook* mentions students right off the bat, in the second sentence of its preface. Maybe that's partly why *The Modern English Handbook* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976) is in its sixth edition and has been around since 1953.

But getting back to 19-now, I have a hunch that the reason so many experts in the composing process ignore students nowadays is that they can not account for them. Accountability is the big thing in English composition, and there are many articles dealing with how sentences can be "embedded" (We used to call this "subordinated."), how to compound "T-units" (We used to call them "sentences."), and how to evaluate "propositions" (We used to call them "predicates."). But how do you get students to *write* all those things? It's simple. You use a teacher.

The first place to start in an English composition classroom is at the beginning, with the word. Students should start writing as soon as possible. As opposed to other classes, in an English composition class, motivation follows action. Students come to courses in computer

science full of motivation. They have seen the same advertisements we all have seen about how much the computer industry will pay them once they have graduated. In an English classroom, it is a bit different, as we all know. After students begin to write, they become actively involved in learning how to improve their writing. I know of only one English composition textbook that operates from that knowledge, Charles A. Dawe and Edward A. Dornan's *One to One* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1981). Its only small demerit is that it lacks a handbook to usage, but I believe that professors Dawe and Dornan are currently working on one.

After students begin to learn to write, sooner or later some of them will ask why they should learn to write. (Don't laugh. You know as well as I that the majority will leave that question to the gods.) The answer's easy. No matter what our students do later, in their professional lives, whether they become computer operators, engineers, chemists or floor waxers, if they are good at their jobs and if they work for someone else, sooner or later they will be promoted to a desk and a pen and some paper. How well they do with the pen and the paper will determine whether they will be promoted to a bigger desk. The person who communicates the best goes up the corporate ladder the fastest. That's the long-view answer. The short-view answer is that writing is a skill to be developed in an English composition class because that skill will help students in almost every other college course. In my opinion, in a freshman English composition class, there is no payoff in telling students that good writing promotes good thinking and that is why students should learn to write. That's too abstract. Give them an easily verifiable answer instead.

It also seems to me that the paramount asset in a good English composition class is rapport. Students and teachers have to get along well together. Educational journal writers in their jargony way have said it for a long time. Simply put, it's true: If students like you, they're going to write better or at least try harder than if they don't like you. Regardless of the noise we make about students writing for an imagined audience, students know very well who is going to read what they write. There are few times more rewarding to the writing student than when she talks earnestly and honestly with her teacher about her own writing. But she will have a difficult time approaching His Majesty, The Pontifical Presence. Classrooms, because they are classrooms, are poor places to write; we can make them as relaxing as possible by being relaxed ourselves.

One of the ways we produce needless stress in our students, stress which produces poor writing, is by assigning them quantitative writing tasks rather than qualitative writing tasks. We tell our students to write 250 words on this and that, when what we should be telling them is to do their best when writing about this and that. Every semester, every writing teacher reads a fistful of themes which trail off at the end. One of the reasons these themes trail off is that their authors were ballooning—they pumped hot air into their papers in order to satisfy the assignment's word-count requirement. Tell the students to say what they have to say and when they believe they're done, they're done. After they get something on paper, then you work with them to help them refine and augment what they've said. They'll appreciate your help much more than they'll appreciate your theories.

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