

A PHILOSOPHY ON THE PEDAGOGY OF COMPOSITION

Neither language nor its instruction occurs in a vacuum. Nevertheless, the traditional approach to composition has often addressed the *skills* of writing and reading in total isolation from the enormous context in which it coexists with the *abilities* of speaking and listening. This isolation, however, helped fuel a well-deserved appreciation for the distinction, enough so that their separation had often become a distinguishing feature of class, “good breeding,” and, ultimately, the bedrock of the expectations students must meet today. However, the previous century’s explosive growth in literacy has not only continually blurred this distinction, but in its riding tide, the increasing speed of accessible technology has also clearly cut much of the mooring that held them together. And the style that was a given conceit for the few who had time to practice the skill among like-minded peers has been left adrift in the ravenous currents of proliferating information. Now the ironclad standards of spelling have begun to sway before the waves of tweekteen texting and hurried messaging, and even the blades of punctuation have begun to lose their fine edge on the reefs of natural speech.

While we may argue as to what degree the post-industrial flood of literacy has permitted the written word to represent the impulsivity of spoken language more than trained thought, the fact remains that we are now reading and writing more than ever, and, because of this, we have more impetus to do so well lest our errors lead us to misunderstandings, missed opportunities, or obscurity. Thus, as the distinction fades for both the student and the teacher, the old handbook of “dos and don’ts” will no longer suffice. The moral authority which once empowered instructors with prestige and objectivity has been made weightless in the instantaneity of digitalized text. Where it was once an instructor’s task to merely shape a student’s writing with particular formalities and standards of address, they are now in the position of having to un muddy the waters and redefine the distinctions which were once clear and uncontested. Hence, students’ understanding of reading and writing as *technological achievements*, which are in few ways similar to the innate ability of speaking and listening, can only benefit the quality of students’ production as well as their ability to engage literacy as a component working within a larger system of language, culture, and individuality. An enhanced metalinguistic



awareness will further assist them in charting the subtleties of these distinctions and how each one best works in conjunction with rhetoric.

However, a more pressing matter in regards to modern instruction is that while current theories in Second Language Acquisition have found it difficult to untangle the precise role which motivation plays in a student's *success*, they have found it equally difficult to dismiss the evidence of how greatly frustration plays in a student's *failure*. Accordingly, an approach which treats the subjects of reading and composition as *second languages* in which to engage, rather than an unquantifiable set of rules to be handed down for memorization, can only bring greater clarity to lessons and to a student's appreciation of writing and reading as cognitive tools. While these tools realistically require years, if not a lifetime, of practice to ever achieve anything remotely deemed perfect, or even superior, the curse of modern students is the false impression that it is merely the failure of grasping a set of rules or guidelines that hold them back in their efforts of achieving such high standards. Therefore, instructors must *be honest* with their students of first their own expectations and then of those of the writing community in which they are working before they begin to cover and drill the standard checklists of prescribed expectations. Otherwise, students will all too often become prey to the frustrations, confusions, and inhibitions that so often plague courses in beginning composition.

These more humble perspectives are the only way to facilitate the vocabulary and the competence necessary for a classroom community that provides effective input and feedback at the peer level. Therefore, it is essential for the instructor to disengage from the one sided relationship of the lecture and balance the class with linguistic basics, peer work, group activities, and honest discussions. Drilling grammar and enriching formal vocabulary are fundamental, but only decorative in the primacy of the writing process. By sharing opinions in a more democratic atmosphere, students will not only develop their own editorial skills but will also be able to establish a more realistic threshold as to what equates appropriate and effective writing while maintaining an appreciation of the variegated linguistic environments in which they will be required to tailor those skills.

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