

THE DISCOURSE OF SELF-ASSESSMENT: ANALYZING METAPHORICAL STORIES

Speakers: *Barbara Tomlinson*, University of California, San Diego
Peter Mortensen, University of California, San Diego

Introducer/

Recorder: *Anne O'Meara*, University of Minnesota

Barbara Tomlinson and Peter Mortensen gave conferees attending this session an opportunity to become students of their own writing processes. Much of the session was devoted to composing, sharing, and analyzing our own metaphorical stories about how we write. Tomlinson and Mortensen feel that using metaphorical stories in the classroom provides a means for students to take responsibility for their own writing, to balance personal with external assessment, and to center attention on the writing process rather than the product.

Tomlinson began by sharing some of her own metaphors for writing as well as some of those she found in her study of over 2000 professional writers. Handouts gave further examples from both professional and student writers. The metaphors were sometimes relevant to for the process of writing as a whole and sometimes symbols focusing on one aspect of writing. They ranged from clear analogies (e.g. building, giving birth, cooking, mining, gardening, hunting, getting the last bit of toothpaste) to metaphors that needed elaboration like a "gusset" (a small, irregular piece of material necessary for the construction of a garment, but hidden) and the "lost wax process" (a way of making a mold which then melts away when the product is finished). Tomlinson stressed that metaphors can reassure and guide her through composing problems as well as help her describe these problems.

The speakers then simulated their technique for using metaphorical stories in the classroom. As the participants began to compose their own metaphorical stories, Peter Mortensen asked some guiding questions to get us started, encouraging us to think of metaphors we might use for beginning writing, finishing writing, writing under pressure, writing badly, writing well, generating ideas, and so on. He suggested students could also use the guiding questions (distributed on the handout) in interviews or in collaboration to get started.

In the discussion that followed, Tomlinson and Mortensen stressed that metaphors should be accepted and explored, rather than judged. They may be original, adopted, or enforced; they may be idiosyncratic, contradictory, or even strike us as "bad." The important

thing is that we and our students look at what the effects of writing metaphors are, what they imply about writing, and how they match or might amplify our experience. When they have students compare their metaphors to those of professional writers, Tomlinson and Mortensen minimize possible intimidation by emphasizing that the purpose is to find similarities and common problems.

Finally, the speakers summarized their reasons for using metaphorical stories in the classroom. In addition to taking authority for their own writing and balancing personal with external assessment, students also need to develop better self-monitoring processes because many do not have a language for thinking about their processes. (Tomlinson's survey of 23 secondary and college writing texts showed that there was very little figurative language in these texts). The speakers have found that by comparing metaphorical stories, students can gain confidence and learn that other writers (including professionals) may encounter similar problems. Students begin to talk like writers and develop a stronger interest in writing.