

How We Construe Is How We Construct

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[NOTE: *The philosophical argument for the claims made here about the centrality of interpretation is developed in *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers* (Boynton/Cook, 1981). The "dialectical notebook" is described at length in *Forming/Thinking/Writing: The Composing Imagination* (Hayden, 1978; Boynton/Cook, 1981).]*

Literature has lately been exiled from many a composition classroom and for reasons which are all legitimate (in one way or another) and all pernicious. One doctrinaire contention is that the students' own writing should supplant literature because students can learn best how to write by learning to read what they and their classmates have written, treating their writing as they would printed texts. Some hold that there is simply not enough time to teach both reading and writing. And there is a strong conviction among composition specialists that no writing teacher should be permitted to teach literature because all writing teachers, even those certified as composition specialists, are literature teachers in disguise; and, since their first loyalties are to the printed page, to poems and stories by authenticated writers, they will — given half a chance — desert the spurious for the real. The assumption seems to be that in teaching literature the teacher would be engaged in an enterprise which has nothing whatsoever to do with composition and, furthermore, that the only role literature could possibly play in the writing class is to provide prose models for imitation or to generate topics. It follows that if there is to be any reading in the composition classroom other than that of student texts, it should be of informational articles written in that "effective" prose proclaimed by rhetoricians as ideal, identifiable by its high readability rating and its decidedly unliterary character.

It is a delusion, however, to think that reading that kind of expository writing will necessarily teach those who read it how to write it. I like to remind my colleagues that when T.R. Henn, a Yeats scholar, was asked shortly after the Second World War to do something about the problems science undergraduates were having with their writing at Cambridge University, he chose to teach them to read tough poems.

The point is that critical reading can be a way of coming to know, of learning to learn and thus discovering some important things about writing, but *only* if it is taught as a means of making meaning. Arguably, that approach is most profitable when what is read is worth the trouble, when the text is literary. Even more crucial than the character of the text, though, is the *method* of teaching critical reading. Calling literature back from exile is fatuous if the reason is

only that the "message" is more valuable than that of a *Reader's Digest* selection: The heuristic power of literature will not be released by asking "What is the author trying to say?" That non-question is generally matched by others: "What do you want to say?" "Who is your audience?" "Where is your thesis statement?" Literature taught as dressed-up message and writing taught as effective communication deserve one another.

Critical reading can replenish a student's repertory of syntactical structures and can create an interest in ways of deploying them; it can awaken the moribund auditory imagination, the chief cause of sentence errors. But the centrally important reasons for returning literature to the composition classroom is that it is a form of knowledge. The critical reading of literature can turn on the mind to its own powers of making meaning; it is the best means we have of raising consciousness of the heuristic powers of language itself. If we can teach reading so that the mind is actively engaged in seeing "how words work" (Richards' definition of rhetoric), anything and everything that is learned in reading will be transferable to learning to write. The reason is that how we construe is how we construct.

Positivists enjoy derailing the argument I've been making by wearily noting that "literature" is hard to define; that some people might consider the instructions for cleaning a fish tank as beautifully textured as any poem; that students should not have to suffer the tyranny of their teachers' conceptions of just what is literature and what is not. The answer which must be vigorously returned to the weary positivists and others who see such skepticism as the true scientific spirit is that real scientists don't agree with them. As Robert Oppenheimer puts it, Einstein did not sit pondering the question "What is a clock?" Real scientists do not contemplate the meaning of such concepts as *Life* and *Time* and *Purpose*; they form hypotheses which they then test experimentally. I suggest that we follow the procedure set forth by C.S. Lewis in that excellent little book which all reading and writing teachers should read and re-read, *An Experiment in Criticism*. Lewis says that instead of declaring that we must read literature in a certain way, we should take as our premise that what we read in a certain way is literature. Put the fish tank instructions on the reading list if they can be read rigorously, energetically, thoughtfully, heuristically. Paulo Friere shows us how we can indeed convert anything to a genuine "text" — pictures, lists, aphorisms, slogans — by raising consciousness about the ways meaning is being made.

Constructing and construing: at the heart of both reading and writing is *interpretation*, which is a matter of seeing

what goes with what, how this goes with that. Interpretation is a process analogous in many important respects to what we do when we make sense of the world. It has survival value: We and all our fellow creatures must interpret in order to stay alive. The difference between them and us is language: It is language that enables us to go beyond interpreting, to interpret our interpretations. This spiralling circularity empowers all the activities of mind involved in making meaning. We continually use meanings to find other meanings, use forms to find forms, use whatever intellectual activity in which we are engaged to find other intellectual activities. This is what I.A. Richards meant when he said that "all studies are language studies, concerned with the *speculative instruments* they employ." Our **speculative instruments** are the ideas we depend on in order to interpret our interpretations. They are our means of making meaning, in writing as in reading. Keeping reading and writing together will enable us to teach interpretation, to take as our point of departure what Vygotsky calls "the unit of meaning." That way, to strengthen one kind of meaning-making will be to strengthen the other.

I believe, with I.A. Richards, that what our students need most when they are studying English is "*assisted invitations* to find out what they are doing and thereby how to do it." What that means is that consciousness in reading and writing is not a debilitating self-consciousness but a method of thinking about thinking. Language is not just "verbal behavior" and it is not adequately modeled by motor skills. Language is our means of form-finding and form-creating, and it involves us in looking and looking again; in stating and re-stating; in trying our many **how's** to go with many **what's**. When we see forming as an activity of mind central to both reading and writing, we will have no difficulty finding ways to keep reading and writing together.

In this enterprise of teaching reading and writing as ways of making meaning, ways of interpreting our interpretations, the emphasis will have to be on process. That self-evident premise is not helping us as it should because we rarely develop pedagogies which are consonant with the kind of processes which reading and writing are. Reading cannot be represented by linear models derived from the way the computer processes "information" or the way we memorize nonsense syllables, any more than the composing process can be represented by such linear models as "Pre-writing — Writing — Rewriting" or "Writer-based Prose — Reader-based Prose." We need ways of making the **dialectical** character of reading and writing apparent. We need models (and images) of the ways our expectations guide what we think we are reading, of the ways that "feedfor-

ward" (Richards) shapes the emergent meanings we are forming.

Let me suggest a way to get the **dialectic** going. I ask my students — all of them — freshpersons, upperclass students, teachers in graduate seminars — to furnish themselves with a notebook, spiralbound at one side, small enough to be easily carried around but not so small that their writing is cramped. (School teachers who have tried this idea tell me, however, that their students insist on a notebook that will fit into the back pocket of their jeans.) What makes this notebook different from most, perhaps, is the notion of the double entry: On one side, reading notes, direct quotations, observational notes, fragments, lists, images — verbal and visual — are recorded; on the facing side, notes about those notes, summaries, formulations, questions and queries and mumbles, editorial revisions, comments on comments are written. The double-entry format provides a way for the student to conduct that "continuing audit of meaning," which is Richards' name for the activity at the heart of learning to read and write critically. The facing pages are in dialogue with one another.

The **dialectic notebook** is for all kinds of writing, creative and critical; any assignment you can think up can be adapted so that it can teach **dialectic**. Suppose you want your students to read some nature poems. The writing assigned could be a record of ten minutes of observation and meditation carried out daily over a period of a week — descriptions and speculations in response to a seashell, a milkweed pod, a garlic bud, a chestnut bur, or any natural object (the odder the better) that can serve as a "text": **Reading the Book of Nature** is probably the oldest writing assignment in the world. Each day should begin with re-reading the notes from the day before and writing a recapitulation or critical comment on the facing page. At the week's end, two paragraphs are assigned: (1) a description of the object, based on the right-hand entries; (2) a comment on the process of observing and interpreting, based on the left-hand side. Writers should be encouraged to move freely from one side to the other, from notes to recapitulations and back again, interpreting as they go.

Meanwhile, a poem could be assigned for study in another section of the double-entry journal, to be read and contemplated and responded to **dialectically**. On alternate days perhaps the pine cone or crab shell could be responded to **dialectically**. (The poem should not be about the object.) New poems might emerge and new ways of reading surely will. This kind of writing will encourage students to set aside the non-question "What is the author trying to say?" in

favor of critical questions about what has been made. They can learn the art of interpretive paraphrase: "How does it change the meaning when I put it this way?" By teaching that how we construe is how we construct, the double-entry notebook assures that whatever is learned about reading is something learned about writing and that looking again will come to be seen as the way into interpretation.

In my opinion, the best texts for these purposes are those which demand that we read them as literature. To make this point, I juxtapose, for instance, Gerald Manley Hopkins' "Inversnaid" with the Baedeker description of the same

landscape. After a couple of weeks with their **dialectical** notebooks, students feel a kinship with Hopkins because they have been discovering for themselves something about the power of language — of words and images, metaphors and syntactical structures, of rhythm, rime, cadence, and so on. They come to see reading as a process of making meaning, discovering in their own parallel composing how sources, constraints, emergent purposes work to find and create forms. These discoveries become their **speculative instruments**, fit for exploring the literacy text which serves as point of departure and promises safe return.