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METHODS

Five Decades Ago

GREG SHAFER

Before *Writing without Teachers*. . .

Before *A Writer Teaches Writing*. . .

Before process was a common discussion among writing teachers. . .

Five decades ago, *Growth through English* was published, and as we consider the Copernican-like change it ushered in—taking us from drill and kill to discussions about process and student-centered learning—it is hard to deny the book’s impact. Indeed, following on the heels of the Dartmouth Conference of 1966—which presented language arts classrooms with a new paradigm for writing—*Growth through English* was one of the first books to articulate the transactional, process approach to language learning. Suddenly it was okay to consider a student’s voice, to see language as social, dynamic, democratic. Its author, John Dixon, was clearing the way for decades of writers who would challenge the rules of standard English, demanding instead a right to their own language.

In reading over the book, it is easy to see the modest proposals for something new, the suggestions that students be celebrated as language users, that teachers provide more freedom for growth through experimentation. *Growth through English* is far from a polemic. Through its discussion about dialects and ownership of language, in its carefully considered examination of writing as an act of learning and personal actualization, Dixon touches on the need for students to transcend the prescriptivism that gave birth to the five-paragraph theme, replete with all of its alienating demands. Early in the book, Dixon uses a word that has become a common part of the writing teacher’s lexicon but was strange and perhaps even foreign at the time of the book’s publication. “An understanding of the *processes* (italics added) involved in developing a mastery of language becomes vital when it sharpens the teacher’s awareness of a pupil’s potentialities, problems and limitations” (p. 30)

Process. . . It speaks to an empowered, engaged writer who considers the complexities of crafting an essay that is

evolutionary, that involves the writer, that transcends a static, teacher-driven essay. When we teach writing as a process, we acknowledge that writing is not linear and transcends easy steps to its completion. Instead, process involves the active work of the writer, creating and recreating a text that changes and grows—one that is impervious to simplistic teacher dictates. In his review of the work, Peter Smagorinsky talks of the “shift in attention from the subject matter of English to the learners in English classes” (p. 24). In his book decades earlier, Dixon bemoans the fact that much of language use “tended to be reduced to a simple formula—a lump sum view of inheritance” (p. 4).

One decade after Dartmouth and Dixon, we would have *Writing without Teachers*, *A Writing Teacher Teaching Writing*, and *Errors and Expectations*. Since *Growth through English*, we have progressed from a current traditional approach to writing—which sought to reduce writing to a series of skills that needed to be learned objectively—to expressivist and later social construction. In both students are seen as active artists and dynamics actors in the creation of truth through language development. Indeed, when we replace the lesson to be taught with the growth and development of individual students, process replaces product and the language experience becomes a very profound moment for discovery, for understanding. When taught as a process, argues Dixon, “we can almost be sure that the language and the meaning are both his, not a product handed over by the teacher” (p. 5).

The transition from product to process, and from monologue to dialogue, is a major theme of *Growth through English* that cannot be trivialized, even in 2018, where process and democracy have become common words and practices for any competent language teacher. Outside of our classrooms, the election of Donald Trump has revealed a desire among many to curtail or even extinguish democratic policies and replace them with authoritarianism. In much the same way that a teacher dictates the steps and substance of a paper, Trump has suggested on numerous occasions that a free and vigorous press, one that questions his mandates and actions, is neither necessary nor part of the America he exults. He has

further suggested that violence against the voices of difference is a legitimate response and that truth and accuracy are not important. Most chillingly, he has expressed a clear disdain for diversity, suggesting that we build a wall to exclude those who are darker or different, and that we must persecute them—not as people—but as rapists and drug dealers. In their *New York Times* opinion piece, Levitsky and Ziblatt remind us that Trump “encouraged violence among supporters; pledged to prosecute Hillary Clinton; threatened legal action against unfriendly media; and suggested that he might not accept the election results” (Levitsky and Ziblatt).

In short, as one examines Donald Trump and his contempt for multiple voices and full participation, as we look askance at his view of democracy, we see how integral process and democracy are in terms of reinforcing core values. We see that empowering students to write unfettered is essential to establishing voice and participatory values. And finally, we also see what Levitsky and Ziblatt were discussing when they wondered: “Is our democracy in danger?” (Levitsky Ziblatt, 2016).

How Much Has Changed?

Such questions are troubling but should be a wake-up call for those of who teach English and who claim to honor the legacy of *Growth through English*. One of the most contemptible aspects of an anti-democratic setting is the silencing of other voices, of creating what Freire (1988) called a banking system of education, where students stop acting on their worlds and succumb to the monolithic truths of a leader. “One of the basic elements between oppressor and oppressed is prescription,” (p. 31) adds Freire in articulating the authoritarian approach to learning.

This, then, leads us to the question of how or if the writing classroom has changed, if it still remains democratic and if it truly embraces the *Growth through English* paradigm that was so much a part of the process movement five decades ago.

As a consultant in our college’s writing center, I have the privilege of seeing students’ assignments on a daily basis and helping them complete those essays. In doing this, I have been often amazed and more often troubled at how little has changed since Dixon’s *Growth through English*. No, students are no longer diagramming sentences and completing grammar exercises, but many of the other vestiges of the prescriptive, teacher-centered era remain conspicuous in most assignments I read. For a vast majority of the students I see and

try to assist, the assignment has little to do with their lives or ability to create as true artists and writers. Instead, they more frequently asked to complete a very specific, very prescribed set of tasks that will teach them how to write THE essay. Sure, there is a process. There are rough and revised drafts, but much of it is perfunctory, carried out with little enthusiasm, investment, or student voice. The refrain of “Is this what she wants?” is heard often when I tutor students.

Assignments in the Writing Center

On Tuesday, Chelsea came into the writing center with questions about her essay. In unraveling the three page “assignment sheet and rubric” one could see why she was both confused and alienated from the goals of the paper. First, the requirements reduced the paper to a series of carefully prescribed paragraphs—each with teacher-directed goals about the writing of the paper. Second, the paper, which asked the student to read *My Beloved World* by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, had nothing to do with the student’s life, interests, or concerns, but was little more than an exercise in proving they could successfully read and appreciate the incredible accomplishments of Sotomayor.

The first paragraph, of course, was the introduction, which must have a thesis statement clearly written at the end. Paragraph two would provide a well developed explication as to why the student was inspired by the life of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, for whom the student had been forced to read. The next three paragraphs—because all essays have five paragraphs—demanded more details from the book, assuming that every student had life experiences that were consonant with the first Hispanic Supreme Court Justice.

Such assignments, while laudatory in their attempt to educate our students as to the harrowing experiences and incredible accomplishments of a poor person of color, are really just another teacher-directed exercise in obedience, which is why most students both struggle with it and resent its exclusion of their own lives and interests. Let me explain what I mean. First, very little of the assignment is really written by the student in terms of providing that student with opportunities for personal revelations. How many of our pupils can identify with a Supreme Court Justice? Even less of it, I would argue, involves genuine opinion or voice. Instead, much of it is more interested in ushering students through a series of carefully choreographed paragraphs on the wonders of the author’s greatness and the students’ ability to

show they have comprehended what was written and can use quotations from the text as proof. Since the entire book is a monolith of praise, students are left to simply demonstrate their ability to show due diligence to the incredible climb of Sotomayor.

We have all read such papers. Martin Luther King is perhaps the most favorite icon of praise, since he so easily lends himself to assignments on the virulence of racism and the eloquence of his words. Most students respond to such assignments with the same kind of apathy that emanated from the Sotomayor project. There is nothing to write. Not really. They are savvy enough to know that their goal is not to break new ground on the changing face of racism but to simplistically heap praise on King, to quote him correctly, and, to recall—yet again—his incredible civil rights journey. While there is no doubt as to his greatness, King's presence in writing assignments has become as cliché and obligatory as authoring yet another paper on the evils of Indian removals, the Holocaust or Washington's adventures with a cherry tree. Students are astute enough to know that their goal is to be officially reverent to the person or time being discussed and to attend to the more important goals of using quotations correctly and demonstrating proof that they read the book—all done with little real care about the students' worlds or values.

Many will disagree and argue that the reading and discussion of icons—especially those who have risen from daunting circumstances—is a goal that is quintessentially democratic. They would contend that the life of Sotomayor is an invitation to students to write about their own possible rise and their own goals to be successful. The problem with such arguments is they fail to consider the students' real life situations. Most students I tutor in the writing center—even those who are Hispanic-- do not identify with a Supreme Court Justice. Most of them see a vast chasm separating their lives from hers and have little interest in law school. Many wonder about the water crisis that affects them each day and want to write about the prison system that has treated their family

members unfairly. In short, I would argue, if classrooms are to be democratic and to honor the words of *Growth through English* and all that followed it—if they are to honor process and social engagement in real life critical concerns—they must begin with the students' lives.

Questions to Ask

The question I ask when giving an assignment is this:

Does this paper seek to do something to students or does it invite students to do something original to the paper. In other words, are students passive or active? Do they begin with a set of teacher-directed skills that are veiled behind a great book or reading or is the paper a personal challenge or invitation to express ideas, values, and histories without any set of skills to define it? Does the paper celebrate a student's importance as a writer and critical voice or does it seek to subsume that writer in a set of requirements that must be carefully check-off? In short, is there a place where students can write simply for the sake of expression, reflection, and even transformation?

In the collection of essays I received on the topic, virtually no students exhibited what I would call an author's license to craft a personally energized response—one that was driven by intimate experiences and personal vision. Instead, and I suspect this was true of most essays in the era before *Growth through English*, most of the papers were obedient and carefully structured answers—paragraph by paragraph-- to a teacher's demands about a book.

No Rubrics

One of the first things I do as a teacher who tries to foment critical thinking and personal voice is to discard all rubrics. Students love rubrics because they serve as substitutes for independent thought. Instead of having to construct an essay that answers complex and unwieldy questions, students look to rubrics to reduce writing to neat steps—squares to

Not Without My Shadow by Erik Pevernagie

check on one's way to completing the essay. It is another way teachers inadvertently remove the artistic aspects of writing and reduce them to a perfunctory, thoughtless routine. Of course, this also makes writing much easier for the instructor. Instead of having to read an essay that emanates completely from a student's artistic process, teachers revel in the anti-democratic rubric, with all of its orderly steps for the well written paper.

In her essay on rubrics and writing, Maja Wilson contends that rubrics "standardize our responses to students' papers" (p. 63), reducing it to "prematurely narrowed and cemented" visions of good writing (p. 63). Wilson speaks for many of us when she suggests that "by accepting the standardized responses inherent in rubrics, we undermine the power of the experiences of reading and writing" (p. 66). Indeed, rubrics in my classes were supplanting the connection between writing and writer, reducing the journey to an impersonal endeavor. Too often, I would find students who wanted to know why they didn't get a better grade, since their prose seemed to fit all of the standards established in the rubric. Of course, no rubric can speak to the voice in one's writing or the ability to provide insight and vision, transcending the vapid words that are "good enough." Rubrics send a message to students that their writing—with all the messy emotions and metaphors that become part of the experience—can be reduced to a set of standards that can be simply checked off in a neat and sterile setting.

With rubrics gone, students are forced to decide for themselves how an essay is to be done. There are no mandates, so students must resort to invention, another goal that is articulated by *Growth through English*.

Robert Yagelski has argued that good writing instruction is about "the writer being" (p. 8). What he goes on to suggest is that there is a clear distinction between a "rule-governed procedure for communication" and writing that helps students "transform themselves and the world around them" (p. 8). Again, we come to questions of democracy and student engagement. We are reminded that growth comes with action and a dialogic classroom that unfetters the student in terms of their voice and the structure of their writing. It invites experimentation and stretches the parameters of what is Standard English. This is what Yagelski calls the "experience of writing" (p. 9) in which a student engages in an "ontological act, as a way of being" (p. 9). Dixon suggested something similar in contending that writing must be "rooted in experience outside school, the resources for new strength are latent in all children and young people" (p. 31).

Assignments that Begin with Students

It is my contention, then, that writing pedagogy must always begin with the writer. It must start by asking students to delve into their own lives and experiences and to see that writing can and should be used as a critical journey into their own beliefs and their own power to change what they see as unjust or evil. While students cannot identify with historic icons, they can and often need to write about people and entities who have loved or haunted them. One of my first assignments I give to any writing class—developmental or advanced—is to write a letter to a loved one. In giving them the assignment, I remind students that they can write to a person, place, or thing and that conventional rules about writing can be bent to make the letter work. I also provide them with the most iconoclastic sample essays from previous students. There is the essay written by Haley, who writes a letter of love and hate to heroin. In the paper, she curses the power the drug had over her for years, while acknowledging its power to control her and change her life.

Throughout the letter, Haley engages in an exploration and assessment of her own life, the decision she made to use it, the arrogance she felt in thinking she could stop, and the struggle she experienced in defeating this nefarious foe.

I hate you. I admire you. I can only see you and know you for the way you made my life a living hell, and then I can thank you for making me dig into myself to defeat you. I would not be the same had I not met you on that cold December day. But how do I apologize to the people I hurt because of you?

Dixon referred to such essays as a "drama, which makes explicit the variousness of life, but also acknowledges its elusiveness" (p. 39). To read Haley's paper is to feel the incredible force of a life lived and the struggles of a human being to transcend to something higher while also understanding it. Students who read it begin to see that no rubric could foster such potent prose.

Again, it is important to see how important it is to craft assignments that begin with students and that force them to look to their own creative vision and values—rather than a teacher or rubric—to define success. At the same time, teachers must define success as elusive and depend on conferences as a way to wend their way through the evaluation process. When students are taught through true process, grading becomes messy and teachers relinquish control.

The Research Essay

In assigning the research paper, I place students in the role of an advice columnist for a newspaper. Their charge is to answer one of the questions asked of them and to provide research to support their opinion. What is more democratic about the paper is the more empowered role the student takes as columnist. Instead of writing for a teacher who will grade them, they write as a professional who will begin with her own opinion and experiences to answer a question that they find relevant to their lives. Students choose from questions about rap music, drugs and school, relationships, bullying, and vaccinating their kids. Some topics are important to some while others are relevant to others. Each student chooses the topic and researches their answer while imbuing the essay with opinion as well as personal examples. In short, then, they again begin with their personal experience and branch out to find answers for others and themselves. The assignment is democratic because it does not ask a student to ignore their opinions and experiences or to subjugate them for the life of an icon, but to place them at the center of their writing.

Of the many essays on the Dear Andy Paper, I have gotten several on the impact of stress and the reason why it is so deleterious to one's life. Many of my students love this topic, because they are themselves stressed and wonder about the impact it has on their health. Further, they like to explore their own reasons for stress and make them a topic for classroom discussion. Clara's essay included the following statement:

Stress can be lethal. It certainly was for mother, who died from the years of abuse at the hands of my father and the pressure that came after his death. I can only tell you that stress kills and has a lasting effect on those around the victim. Research and my own life reveals the danger it presents.

Final Remarks

The notion that we don't teach writing very well, is neither new nor surprising for many of us. Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer gave us a "Snapshot of Writing Instruction in the Middle and High Schools" as late as 2011 and found that "students are not writing a great deal," (p. 15) and much of what they do write is superficial and perfunctory. Much of it dictated by standardized tests and strict requirements for

programs. In short, the study found:

Writing is short, not providing students with opportunities to use composing as a way to think through issues, to show the depth or breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections and raising new issues (p.16).

More importantly, there is much evidence to suggest that we have yet to truly embrace many of the most seminal aspects of the Dartmouth Conference and the classic *Growth through English* that followed it. In his final chapter of the book Dixon argues that the ultimate goals of the literacy/language arts class must revolve around the "profounder possibilities of a considered and extended exploration of experience, permitting slower realizations and more individual personal growth" (p. 112).

Five Decades ago. . .

The goal of all English teachers should be a liberatory classroom that reflects what is best about *Growth through English* and its call for student development. As many have suggested, it has implications for the student, for the classroom, and perhaps even our world.

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