

TEACHING WITH WRITING

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THE VACCINATION THEORY OF WRITING: How Can an "A" Composition Student Write So Poorly in my Class?

Consciously or not, we'd like to think of writing as an obvious set of skills to be mastered. In fact, these skills probably formed the basis for our own most traditional (and perhaps most distasteful) grade school English classes--the ones that drilled us on proper grammar, comma use, and so on. If we think of good writing as the mastery of these kinds of skills, then we're close to espousing what has been called the vaccination theory of writing.

According to this theory, writing (like a vaccination) ought to "take." And once it does, once students "become good writers," then they ought to stay good writers; the vaccine ought to be good for life. Several corollaries follow here too: the vaccine (writing instruction) ought to be administered in grade school and high school--writing instruction is their job, not ours; student writers who can't find and fix their own errors, who can't, in short, express themselves adequately, need a new vaccination, and the English department ought to administer it, soon; and finally, students who can't write well are sick, and they need some medicine to get better.

The vaccination theory explains our puzzlement when a student (student X) who claims to have earned an "A" in WR 121 two years ago (or even last term) now hands in writing we judge to be horrible. What happened? Why didn't the vaccination "take"?

But suppose that we substitute a different theory; call it the performance theory of writing. Here's how the new theory might work with student X.

In WR 121 student X writes a summary and

analysis of an essay, "Inside the Brain," by David Noonan, and this summary and analysis earns an "A" grade. Whereas the vaccination theory would tell us that student X is a good writer ("the vaccination has taken"), the performance theory might say that student X is a good performer in this particular setting: student X is, say, a good swimmer.

The next term or the next year, student X takes an economics class (or a public health class or a biology class) which asks student X to read two articles and write an analysis that compares them. The student hands in an error-ridden, inaccurate and incomplete paper and receives a "C-" grade.

The vaccination theory would suggest that student X needs a booster: go back to English. But the performance theory would suggest that while student X was a good writer in WR 121 (a good swimmer), this student needs additional help and/or practice performing in this new setting: student X needs help becoming a pole vaulter. Swimming and pole vaulting are, after all, related; they use some of the same muscles, and they build on the same sense of coordination and agility. Similarly, the writing in an public health class uses some of the same intellectual techniques and understandings as those used in WR 121, but it probably also calls on new understandings, new muscles used in new ways.

So how can we improve student writing in our own classes? The performance theory would suggest these factors: practice and instruction. If our course introduces vocabulary new to students, then how can we give them frequent practice using that vocabulary? If our course involves readings that students may never have really encountered before, how can we open the doors so that students can become self-sufficient readers? How can we point out the ways that an article is organized? the ways it

makes its argument? the ways it arrives at its conclusions? As experts, that is as practiced readers and writers in our disciplines, we take such matters for granted; we're great pole vaulters. But move us to the hockey rink, say, or to the cockpit of a small plane, and we'll not perform as well.

Finally, writing is performance: we write best whatever we write most frequently. And we often forget the difficulties we had, the confusions we felt, before we became practiced professionals. We forget that students may not really understand how information is structured in our field--not, that is, until we urge them to see that structure, talk about it, and use it.

In short, the performance theory of writing argues for more writing, not less. It argues for writing graded not on accuracy of content but rather on the demonstrated degree of intellectual engagement. It argues for chances to make mistakes without penalty, assuming that such mistakes are inevitable and useful stepping stones to later understanding. The performance theory urges us to give students regular and frequent opportunities to practice before asking them to perform.

Just as a crew coach might try to take apart a rowing stroke in order to make the crew team conscious of the stroke's complexity (and how it can go wrong), we might ask students to pose questions, to forecast answers, to unpack the organizational structure of a paper or an article, to explain a concept or technique in their own words. This is important intellectual practice, practice which almost inevitably leads to improved performance.

WRITING CENTER HOURS SET

The Writing Center (Waldo 123) is now open for spring term. Students should make appointments either by stopping at the CWL main office (Waldo 125) or by calling 737-2930. Spring term hours: 8:30am-4:30pm and 6:30-8pm, Monday through Thursday; Fridays 8:30-3:30. For more information, call Jon Olson, Writing Center Director, at 7-3712.

SEVEN GENERIC SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING PRACTICE

--Based on your reading or on this lecture, write one thing you're sure about, and one question you want to ask. Continuation: discuss how would you go about answering this question.

--Draw a rough picture or flow chart or map of this particular idea or concept. Show how the parts fit together.

--What is new to you, unfamiliar to you, about this?

--Could you explain this to someone who missed class today? If not, why not?

--Before a lab: what's going to happen today? Predict one possible outcome. On what are you basing your prediction? What could throw off your educated guess?

--Before a field activity: what two things do you want to pay special attention to? Why are they particularly important?

--At the mid-point of a large project: what has worked well so far? What needs to be changed in order to speed up the process? What is the next reasonable mini-deadline that I should set?

Note: These are all generic writing activities; they need to be adapted to fit your students in your courses. If you want to discuss ways to give your students more of this sort of writing practice, call the WIC director, Lex Runciman, at 7-3711. Together we ought to be able to arrive at some useful writing activities. If you'd like a copy of "Considering Goals and Options for Writing in Your Course," part of Barbara Walvoord's book Helping Students Write Well, you can request one by calling the CWL main desk, 7-2930.

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