

REVIEW:

WRITING AND THE WRITER

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It has been popular among composition scholars in the past little while to speak knowingly of a “paradigm shift” in the teaching of writing and to delineate the characteristics of the old paradigm versus the new one (See, for instance, Hairston, “The Winds of Change,” or almost any discussion of what’s new in the teaching of writing). And, any talk of paradigms is usually prefaced by a glancing reference to Thomas Kuhn and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I’ve always been a bit wary of such discussions of the new paradigm, partly because I think we’re having delusions of grandeur when we think we’re undergoing a paradigm shift and we’re in fact only responding to shifts in our source disciplines. Partly also, it’s because I’ve read Kuhn, and I’m not sure that composition instruction has changed all that much. In fact, I think that the changes are pretty superficial. The gloomy outlook of Glaser et al, about education as a whole is significantly true for composition. They note: “At the present time, cognitive psychology’s findings and techniques have not significantly influenced teaching practice, instructional processes, nor the design of the conditions for learning.” Quite a sweeping statement, embracing practice, process, and design.

We can talk all we want to about peer evaluation, about workshop approaches, about one-to-one instruction, but these are fiddles. In large part, we still follow the dictates of both a psychology and a linguistics that have been superseded. The true paradigmatic dimensions of our craft remain pretty much as they have always been,

invisible to us because they are so much a part of the landscape we can't conceive of a world without them. That's what paradigms are. What we need is some brash outsider, someone who isn't familiar with our landscape, someone who will see, because of his training and experience, that we are bound by some fairly silly constraints in the teaching of writing.

Enter Frank Smith. He is all of the above and an excellent writer to boot. I first became acquainted with his writing when I was studying the subject of reading. His *Understanding Reading* is a marvel of insight into how the mind works and how the reading act must proceed if the mind works as he suggests. His text is lucid, startling in its explanatory power, heavily buttressed with documentation, and, after 14 years, still pretty much ignored. It's ignored because it demolishes so much of what is received knowledge in the reading world, and would, were its precepts implemented, restructure the whole reading instruction process.

His *Writing and the Writer* is a lot like his earlier book. Smith wears no blinders about writing and teaching writing, and seems almost to delight in contradicting standard enlightened theory. His thoughts are radical in a way that those of most researchers are not, because he is not content merely to observe the writing process, but takes as his beginning the way the human mind works. From there, he outlines how the interaction of mind and text must follow. This being the case, he's liable to say something outrageous on any given page.

Before I go into particulars, let me make a statement of position and outline the contents of the book. The position statement is this: I agree with all his major points. The guy is right.

Now the outline. The book is divided into 13 chapters. Chapter One is an introduction and overview. Chapter Two, entitled, "Why Write?" is a fairly straightforward discussion of the cultural and personal utility of writing. Chapter Three, "Writing: Collaboration and Competition," is Smith's delineation of the writing process. What he does here is to suggest that there are really two facets of the process: composition and transcription. Here he begins to challenge the reader. His contention is that the two are in competition; that doing one gets in the way of doing the other; that you can transcribe *or* compose, but not at the same time. Chapter Four begins Smith's discussion of the mind and writing. Its title, "The Thought Behind Language," gives the general idea, but again, not the trend of the

thought. Smith, for instance, here suggests that thought is beyond language—which contradicts many scholars who assert that thought *is* language.

Chapter Five, "Putting Meaning into Words," and Chapter Six, "Language: Written and Spoken," are his analysis of the writing process. Again, don't expect anything like a conventional discussion of either topic. Chapter Seven, "The Reader-Writer Contract," is a breath of fresh air to those of us who are sick of minute examinations of the composing processes of microcephalic Albanian dwarfs. It re-establishes the text as the pivot in the reader-writer equation. With Chapter Eight, Smith begins to get specific about the writing process. Eight, "The Act of Writing," Nine, "Starting and Stopping," and Ten, "The Tapestry of Transcription," are more what we would expect in a book of writing, as least as far as form goes. Here again, though, Smith tends to surprise. One of the subchapters, for instance, is on "Spelling and Memory."

With Chapter Eleven, "The Learning Brain," Smith goes back into the mind to begin his examination of how we learn to write. It is in this chapter, and in Chapters Twelve and Thirteen, "Learning about Writing," and "On Teaching Writing," that Smith is most valuable, and perhaps most controversial.

Since they are the heart of the book, I'd like to examine in detail "Learning about Writing," and "On Teaching Writing," (Twelve and Thirteen). Right at the beginning of Chapter Twelve Smith gives his standpoint on how writing is learned. He notes:

Reading seems to me to be the essential fundamental source of knowledge about writing, from the conventions of transcription to the subtle differences of register and discourse structures in various genres. No one writes enough to get all this information from the editing and correcting of what one writes, and very little of it can be imparted by direct instruction. Nevertheless, the act of writing is critical for several reasons. . . . (p. 177)

I'm glad to see someone finally say it bluntly. As I understand what Smith wrote, he says: 1) the primary way to learn to write is to read (I further assume that he means to read what you are trying to learn to write); 2) One doesn't learn to write by being lectured at; and 3) Writing is essential to the learning process.

What follows are some reasons Smith gives for the importance of writing. Among them, that you need practice to master any skill,

that writing is a way of working out possibilities, that we provide material for outside feedback when we write, and finally, a puzzling statement, “Writing provides the incentive, the purpose for learning about writing from reading” (p. 179). What is meant by that last statement is perhaps the most important point he makes in the chapter. It’s this: you can learn a lot about writing by reading, but only if it’s important to you to learn. In other words, you must read as a writer learning his or her craft. You must, in short, think of yourself as a writer. In Smith’s words, you must “*read like a writer*” (p. 179, emphasis his).

In Chapter Thirteen, Smith continues this trend in thought, but he applies it to the other side of the desk—to the teacher. He begins the chapter by summarizing the one before it: “It has been argued that writing is learned by writing, by reading, and by perceiving oneself as a writer” (p. 119). Since Smith has elsewhere argued that very few of the rules of grammar, spelling, and usage are helpful to a writer unless the writer already knows them, and that very few of the “facts” of writing are any good at all, the question naturally comes up, “Well, then. What does the writing teacher do?” Chapter Thirteen attempts to answer that question. But since the chapter is one of the shorter ones in the book, you shouldn’t be expecting precise directions or outlines for teaching plans. Smith’s answer is at once delightfully pointed and frustratingly vague: “Writing is fostered rather than taught, and what teachers require is not helpful advice about ‘methods’ of writing instruction, nor an outline of appropriate ‘programs,’ but an understanding of the task the child faces in learning to write” (p. 200). Teachers need to know about writing, about the process, about learning. In short, they need to be professional teachers of writing. They need to know what’s going on.

The thorny question about *Writing and the Writer* is its applicability to mature writers and to advanced composition classes. Smith makes points almost exclusively about developing writers, especially children. We might legitimately ask, then, how all this applies to us. If, for instance, mature writers learn their craft in a way that is qualitatively different from immature writers, then perhaps Smith’s book, valid for elementary and secondary school teachers, is not so for upper class college writing teachers. This question puts us right in the middle of the romantic/classic squabble over teaching writing.

The romantic, it will be remembered, believes that one learns to write best by “working things out,” by writing, re-writing, and gen-

erally rapping about it. The classical writer learns by studying rules and maxims, and by applying them consciously. Smith would, in the judgment of most, fall squarely in the romantic camp. However, there is an additional twist. It might be that different approaches work for different levels of maturity. Joseph Williams suggests that perhaps developing writers learn romantically and mature writers learn classically (Professor Williams said this is a *CE* reply to Pat Hartwell’s *Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar*. Both are worth reading.

If this is true, then Smith’s book wouldn’t be very helpful for us. I argue, though, that *Writing and the Writer* is as valid for mature writers as it is for developmental. I do this because the evidence increasingly suggests that any romantic-classic argument is beside the point. We learn a skill such a writing in certain ways, but ways that are neither romantic nor classic. Let me illustrate by making two points. First, writing is a skill that is probably not developed by discussion (Polanyi calls it *tacit* skill). Second, it seems to be the case that people learn such skills in two ways: By surveying examples (Hayes-Roth) and by simply doing (Anzai and Simon).

Now, clearly this is not a classic approach, because it doesn’t involve explicit rules or maxims. But (not so clearly), it’s not romantic either, because it’s not a magical mystery process. The mind is a hypothesis-making and testing device. We learn to write by surveying applicable data (examples), making hypotheses about how things are done and why, and then trying these hypotheses out. As we try to write, we create mental routines and subroutines which, when put into action, help us reach whatever communicative goal we have. And that’s too scientific for the romantics.

Which brings us back to Frank Smith. Polanyi, Hayes-Roth, and Anzai and Simon were all working with adults. Their principles square with those Smith bases his book on. Ergo, what he says goes for advanced writers as well as developing writers. Smith seems to be saying: “Look, here’s the way the mind works.... It follows that we learn to write by.... It further follows that we teach writing by”

It further follows that we should read this stimulating book.

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Note

¹WRITING AND THE WRITER, Frank Smith (New York Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982, 272 pages, \$17.95, ISBN.0-03-058837-5).