

Tutoring in the SVSU Writing Center

by Melanie Harembksi

I've worked in the SVSU Writing Center as a tutor for a long time, and I have plenty of writing experience myself. Despite all the experience, when I was asked to write an article for the *Literacy Link*, I knew only one thing for certain: The article was to be written for a specific audience, the faculty and staff of SVSU. The question that popped up in my mind was, "What do I really want to tell you? What is my purpose in writing this article (other than fulfilling a request)?" As I began to think about the tutoring process, my purpose for writing became clear—to talk to you about the main problems that I see students encountering and the ways that I try to help them. In many of my tutoring sessions with students, those two ideas, being aware of the audience and understanding the purpose of the paper, become crucial concerns as we discuss their writing.

One of the main problems that students have is composing an adequate thesis statement. Sometimes the thesis is only vaguely implied. Other times the thesis statement itself is obvious and quite good but needs to be tightened and fine tuned. Some students may have an excellent thesis but fail to develop it in the paper. Others may have a coherent paper but lack a strong thesis statement.

As we discuss the thesis or absence of it, the student and I usually begin to talk about the purpose of the paper. Understanding the purpose of the paper gives the student a clear direction, a certain tone to take, and a specific way to present the information. The following example gives us an indication of the importance of understanding the purpose. Recently, a student came in with a critique of some chapters of a book for a social work class. She summarized the author's main points but knew that somehow the essay wasn't going where she wanted it. After some discussion, she realized that all she was

doing was summarizing—she wasn't reflecting, responding, evaluating. She wasn't writing a critique. Once she understood the purpose of the paper, she could take the basic information about the chapters and speak about the points the author had made in terms of being helpful or not helpful, good advice or a bad approach to take, etc.

As you can see, the student's misunderstanding of purpose can result in a paper that may have merit but does not fulfill the requirements of the assignment. Let's look at another example. A few days ago, a student showed me a paper loaded with details and good description. She sensed that something was wrong but wondered what it could be since she had "all the information." As an informative essay her paper was good, but her assignment was to pick a controversial topic and write an argumentative paper. We did some brainstorming to come up with workable topics. When she left, she was still pondering what topic she would actually develop, but now she was certain of her purpose.

Understanding the purpose of the paper will, no doubt, help the student in creating a thesis statement and developing the body of the paper; however, if the writer isn't aware of the audience of the paper, he/she will have difficulty conveying the message to the reader. Many of the students that I tutor assume "the teacher will know what I mean" or "it's just for the group to share so they will understand." Yes, the teacher or group members will understand but only when the student comes forward and explains the idea in person, not when the people read the paper.

As I look at the log entries made at the end of each tutoring session, one comment crops up more than any other: "Student is implying things. He (or she) needs to clearly state the information." When I tell students that I don't understand something in their papers, they

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might look at me with an expression that says, "Why don't you get it?" but after some discussion they realize that they left information out and didn't say what they intended to because they weren't writing with the reader in mind. They were writing strictly for themselves.

Although writing for a certain audience and understanding the purpose of the essay doesn't guarantee that the paper will be a smashing success, the writers who keep these two considerations in mind will certainly know why and for whom they are writing and hence the direction in which they have to proceed. One of the reasons I like to talk to students about their papers in terms of purpose and audience is because this approach allows me, as the tutor, to throw the ball (paper) back in the student's court—where it belongs. Oftentimes students think of Writing Centers as "fix it" stations where they can take their papers and have them "repaired" (corrected, edited, proofread). But repairing is neither the purpose of the center nor the job of the tutor. When I talk to students about their papers in terms of purpose and audience, I don't repair their papers for them—I just give them the tools to do the job themselves!

Writing in the ESL Classroom

by Carlos Ramet

Writing is an important component of the two sequenced ESL courses presently taught at Saginaw Valley State University but is dependent on the contemporaneous development of other language skills—speaking, listening and reading—in ways that it would not be in writing courses designed for native speakers of English. While encouraging discussion or even staging debates in a composition classroom may be a useful activity for developing critical thinking and college level vocabulary, an instructor generally makes the assumption that students are already fluent in some variety of English. The students' native fluency is thus the major strength on which to build and the teaching challenge is usually to familiarize students with another variety of the language—College English, for example, or Edited American English—rather than to develop basic language proficiency.

In the ESL classroom, on the other hand, the students' major strength is that they often arrive (at least in the SVSU context) with formally developed analytical skills and culturally acquired structuring patterns for writing essays but lack key vocabulary and the ability to sequence that vocabulary for effective communication. Writing therefore becomes a tool in the ESL classroom rather than a single pedagogical goal and improves in direct correlation to improvement in other language skills areas.

There are all types of ESL students (as many as there are nations in the world and age groups and different school systems) and as many reasons for studying English as there are types of students. In order to have an effective writing component in an ESL context, the instructor and the college must first decide who those students are, what are their needs as students of English, and why are they coming. Answers to those questions may in large part determine the type of program to offer and the role that writing will play in that program. For example, the businessman with only a few weeks for study and little previous exposure to English might benefit most from an Intensive English course in which writing plays a peripheral and mostly reinforcing role. The international exchange student with an entire year for the study of English as an

academic subject might find that living in an American social context in itself provides an intensive exposure to the language and that classroom learning is the solidification and expansion of the vocabulary and listening skills in part acquired outside. In such a situation, writing will probably play a larger and more formal role.

At SVSU, the majority of students presently taking ESL can be described either as international exchange students or as college students from other countries who now reside permanently in the United States. Many of these international exchange students have studied English as a foreign language in their own countries and some of them aspire to become English teachers in their native countries on their return. For them, and for those foreign-born college students who are now permanent residents, writing becomes central in their development towards the expression of near-college level English.

As in other teaching situations, finding topics of interest to students (or in this case, topics of cultural significance to students) goes a long way towards producing results. On the very first day of the first semester, I simply had students introduce themselves orally and as a follow-up writing assignment asked them to tell me about themselves in two or three sentences. As the semester progressed and as students were better able to manage vocabulary, I was able to make longer assignments (e.g., "Describe a part of your country or a part of the U.S. you've seen") while still trying to maintain a focus on what was important to them.

In addition to frequently assigned one to two sentence summaries of articles we had been reading, I generally assigned theme questions every other week. When marking these papers towards a rewrite, I found it important to "prioritize." In effect, I would tend to overlook "low priority" ESL writing problems such as comma splices or sentence fragments (which, for the native speaker, are probably high priority concerns in their development towards Edited American English) when such issues as putting the adjective before the noun or making subjects and verbs agree are primary hindrances for ESL students. Rather than my writing in the

correct usage after the first draft, I use a series of editorial symbols that allow students on their own to find a more appropriate form for the second draft. If, after the second draft, there is still some awkwardness of expression, I normally write in the word choice a native speaker would use.

During the second semester, as students were beginning to master advanced verb tenses, I was able to assign more linguistically challenging topic questions. Themes continued to grow in length and complexity so that by the beginning of this present term students were generally writing two page papers in response to assignments such as "Describe a time when everything seemed to go wrong. What should you have done in that situation? Or shouldn't have done?" This seemed to be a useful assignment for many because it allowed them to reflect on their sometimes trying experiences in a new country and to incorporate another complex verb tense. Finding a topic of personal significance to the students had proved crucial. Many of them wrote *at length* and with considerable emotion about feelings that, I believe, they would never have expressed to me orally because of cultural reticence.

By far, the most successful writing assignment this academic year has been the latest one for the obvious reason that it comes after two full semesters of language instruction in listening, speaking and reading, and after considerable social interaction, travel, and exposure to a living language. In ESL improvement, as I have stressed, all the skills are interrelated but the detailed response to the assignment "Narrate a folk tale or legend from your own country" is due, I feel, to two less obvious factors: the reading material for this semester (folktales and legends from many countries) has allowed students to acquire the vocabulary and narrative patterns for this type of writing, thus showing the connection between what students read and how they write; and the readings themselves have caused students to recollect similar stories from their own cultures and have apparently generated a personal desire to share those stories with other readers and listeners. Again, the key to fresh writing in the ESL context seems to be finding topics of individual and group relevance.

English 114 as an Alternative to English 112

by Gary Thompson

Defn.—Freshman composition: a course whose goal is to get students to disregard previous, misguided instruction about language (not to mention their own usage) and adopt our own enlightened and beneficent guidance; see masquerade.

For several years I and others have offered versions of English 114, SVSU's alternative to the routine second semester of English composition. From reading the catalog copy, one would surmise that the only key distinction between English 114 and English 112 is that readings done in these classes are focused on a particular theme (Writing about Science Fiction, about Short Stories, about Feminism, or about Television), as opposed to readings organized in some other fashion (for example, rhetorical modes). I've come to believe, however, that the distinction runs much deeper than the choice of a "reader" for the class.

The "reader"? That term is often used to designate the anthology by which sample essays are conveniently and (relatively) cheaply made available to student consumers. But aren't the *students* the readers? Behind the term, and behind many observations about college writing, is the assumption that writing is a *body of knowledge* to be acquired. In this theory, once the student has the concepts of comparison-and-contrast, thesis statement, comma splice, illustration, working bibliography, enthymeme, and some others that vary more or less idiosyncratically with instructors, she can then proceed to enter the golden world of academic discourse.

But if we proceed from the assumption that college writing is more a *set of practices* than a body of knowledge, the situation may be transformed. By this view, students enter college as readers already. They are reading largely non-academic texts such as sports pages, rock videos, soap operas, television commercials, rock and country music broadcasts, *People* magazine, and thou-

sands of other details of contemporary culture, and making their own sense of them. They are adults who are already immersed in discourse—bank officers, managers at McDonald's, farmers, child care workers, insurance salesmen, as well as fresh graduates from high school and transfers from Delta—and it may be far more interesting to engage in a discussion of rhetoric as it can be found buzzing around their ears than to pretend that there's no connection between the verbal world they now inhabit and the one that we want them to be able to function in, that they have to lose their world to enter ours.

Selecting a 114 topic connected with contemporary culture can help draw that connection. Students are both experienced and naive about writing, about "reading" their world. They've had "English" for 12 years, with a combination of prescriptions and proscriptions about the ragbag of disorganized, hand-me-down linguistic lore we label "mechanics," and some more predictable advice about rhetoric ("put the main point at the end of the introductory paragraph, give the body of the paper three paragraphs, and in the conclusion retell what you said in the rest of the paper")—and they already know what they think of it. They are caught, and expect to be caught, between what English teachers say and what they mean—that is, between statements that we want them to present their own original ideas and insistence that these original ideas be articulated in our own sort of language, that is, the mysterious "academic discourse."

Most composition students don't see that there's anything to be taught. Their problems are basically trivial ones—how to use a semicolon, how to make the style flow better. We may substitute other problems, described at a slightly more sophisticated level, such as the ability to summarize, paraphrase and avoid plagiarism. But what we can't usually bring ourselves to tell them is that they have a great deal to learn, not only about these matters, but about

thinking critically about the objects of their discourse, about themselves, about their purposes for being in the university. These issues are pretty fundamental and personal, and a class that makes some real gains will be a risky endeavor. In some important ways we want to remake them—while pretending somehow that we aren't doing so, but allowing them to develop their own capacities for free and untrammelled individual expression (an end that is a social product). This discrepancy may be addressed more easily if we start with their discourse, start where they are able, and illustrate what their abilities have in common with what they will need later.

Defn.—Academic discourse: whatever sort of writing is expected by the instructor in whose class one sits. The university is the cultural site of examination of the production and dissemination of knowledge. For the most part this examination takes place along a framework of rigid hierarchies—mega-disciplines such as "arts," "sciences," "social sciences," "applied sciences," and so on, then "history," "physics," "music," "philosophy," and then further subcategories. But there is a hermeneutical difficulty involved in trying to gain simultaneously knowledge of a discipline and knowledge about one's relationship to that discipline. Like other activities in the university, English composition is caught between replicating the culture by producing students who can work "seamlessly" within it, and encouraging a thoughtful/skeptical attitude towards the culture. Most discussion of composition, and most of its pedagogy, is devoted to practices that will advance the former, to the exclusion of the latter. In other words, before we can speak about academic discourse, we need to discuss what is its end. For me this is increasingly to problematize the language within which we and they move, to bring some of the hidden purposes to the surface. Only then can students choose to follow or to reject the values presented.

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