RETHINKING THE PEDAGOGY OF PROBLEM-SOLVING

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Regardless of one's approach to writing instruction, it is
impossible to deny that in teaching students about the way
they ought to use language we are teaching them something
about the way they ought to conduct their lives.

—James Berlin (92)

We have grown used to linking thinking and writing. Good
writing rests upon strong thinking, that much has always seemed
clear, and this has led many of us to suppose the reverse: that
bad writing must be in some way a sign of faulty reasoning.
And so, borrowing from the work of Jean Piaget, some theorists
have argued that many of the problems faced by struggling
writers stem from their inability to decenter in their thinking, to
look at their ideas and their writing from the viewpoint of
another. (See, for instance, Bradford, Flower, Hays, Lees, and
Lunsford.) Such a *cognitivist* view suggests, in effect, that many
of our students cannot reason as we do, that they are stuck
instead in an earlier and egocentic stage of thinking. Thus the
programs for teaching offered by such theorists usually involve
supplying students with a set of writing strategies or heuristics
that, it is hoped, will prompt them to think in ways that are
more complex and powerful.

   This cognitivist view has been questioned recently by critics
who believe that our students lack not an ability to reason but
a sense of how to use the conventions that shape academic
writing. (See, for instance, Bartholomae, Bizzell, Coles and
Walls, Kogen, and Martinez and Martinez.) Our task as teachers,

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then, such *social* theorists argue, is not to show our students how to think (since they already know how), but to help them enter a new sort of discourse—to begin, as David Bartholomae has put it, to "invent the university . . . . to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (134).

My aim here is to continue this questioning of cognitivist approaches to writing, but at a somewhat more local level than has been the case thus far. That is, rather than continuing to focus on cognitivist theory, I want to look instead at one point where that theory reveals itself as practice: the pedagogy of problem-solving. What does it mean, in practical terms, to teach writing as a form of problem-solving? What kinds of writing does such an approach seem most to value? *What else* do we tell our students when we talk about writing in terms of technique and process, of strategies and skills?

For answers to such questions one cannot go to a better source than Linda Flower's *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing* (2d ed). Flower is, of course, the leading cognitive theorist in our field, and *Problem-Solving Strategies* is her attempt to translate the results of her research into workable advice for writers. As such, it is a useful and straightforward statement of the kinds of writing that cognitivist theory values and encourages. It also shows, I believe, many of the striking limits of that theory as the basis of a writing pedagogy.

In *Problem-Solving Strategies*, and indeed throughout much of her research, Flower argues that poor writers generally fail to structure their prose around the needs and interests of their readers. Instead their writing is *egocentric*, focused on themselves, organized not so much around their ideas as on how they came to think them. What such writers need, then, is a set of strategies for making their work more *reader-based* (162-65; see also "Writer-based Prose" and "Revising"). Such a move from egocentric to reader-based prose is often mirrored by a shift from narrative to essay form. Flower warns her students against that kind of writing in which we must "watch the writer's mind at work and follow him through the process of thinking out his conclusions" (*Problem-Solving* 169). Academic readers are impatient for the point, she says, and will interpret such narratives of a writer's thinking as confused or evasive (169).

Make sure your ideas are way out in front, she suggests; let your readers know the gist of what you have to say early on (172-77). What all this amounts to, in practice, is more advice about those warhorses of composition: Thesis Statements and Topic Sentences and Explicit Conclusions and other Cues For The Reader. Here, for instance, is a passage that Flower describes as egocentric, writer-based:

> In *Great Expectations* Pip is introduced as a very likeable young boy. Although he steals, he does it because he is both innocent and and goodhearted. Later, when he goes to London, one no longer feels this same sort of identification with Pip. He becomes too proud to associate with his old friends, cutting ties with Joe and Biddy because of his false pride. And yet one is made to feel that Pip is still an innocent in some important way. When he dreams about Estella, one can see how all his unrealistic romantic illusions blind him to the way the world really works (170).

And here is its revision into writer-based prose:

> In *Great Expectations* Pip changes from a good-hearted boy into a selfish young man, yet he always remains an innocent who never really understands how the world works. Although as a child Pip actually steals something, he does it because he has a gullible, kindhearted sort of innocence. As a young man in London his crime seems worse when he cuts his old friends, Joe and Biddy, because of false pride. And yet, as his dreams about Estella show, Pip is still an innocent, a person caught up in unrealistic romantic illusions he can't see through (171).

The first draft pretty much retells the writer's ongoing response to the novel. It is structured around what she felt and thought as she worked her way through *Great Expectations*, and it gives an honest-sounding account of both her own uncertainty as a reader and, implicitly, the prowess of Dickens in creating and exploiting the ambiguous character of Pip.

In her second draft the writer drops this narrative structure for a more hierarchical one, leading off with a Thesis Statement ("Pip changes . . . yet remains an innocent") that sets an impressively vague and sententious tone, and devoting the rest

of the paragraph to a set of particulars that appears to back up that (rather vacuous) opening claim. The voice throughout has become sure, firm, authoritative—Academic with a capital A. There is little sense, as there was in the first draft, that this writer ever wavered in *her* view of Pip-whose essential character now seems to have been clear to her from the very start of her reading.

Flower argues that this second draft is better 'from a professor or other reader's point-of-view . . . because it clearly shows what the writer learned from the novel" (171). I wish I could argue more with what such a claim suggests about how and why most professors read student writings—but we probably do read in the role of an examiner too much of the time, and even then far too quickly and superficially. Even still, advising our students to write English, theme prose, simply because it works, because that is what many of their professors will expect, surely raises as many questions as it answers.

And that second draft is themewriting—prose meant less to persuade than simply to sound persuasive. Where, for instance, does the writer actually back up her claim that Pip changes yet remains an innocent? Nowhere, really. What she offers as evidence does not support the claim so much as repeat it: Pip steals but does so through "a kindhearted sort of innocence"; he cuts his friends "yet . . . is still an innocent." The points don't add up. The reason, I think, is that the writer is trying to re-use evidence from her first draft to prove a different point in the second. A concern with how and when the reader comes to identify with Pip ("Pip is introduced . . . one no longer feels . . . . one is made to feel . . . . one can see") runs through and ties together the thinking of her first draft. But she simply drops this concern in her second draft and replaces it with vague talk about Pip's true character. She has (or has been given) a new Thesis Statement but not a new argument. The result is a revised text that sounds more imposing but no longer has much of a point to make.

So the style of the passage has changed, and changed for the worse—become more sweeping, wordy, aggressive. No more is Pip "an innocent in some important way," as he was in the first draft. Now he instead "*always* remains an innocent who *never* really understands how the world works." Similarly, Pip

no longer merely "steals"; in the second draft he "actually steals something"—and does this not, as in the first draft, simply because he is "innocent and goodhearted," but because he now "has a gullible, kindhearted sort of innocence."

This reworking of her piece, then, shows us the writer being socialized, appropriated, as she struggles to take on the voice of the academy, or at least of her teacher. But I'm not sure that such struggle is always a sign of intellectual decentering or growth—as cognitivist theory would seem to suggest—and in this instance, certainly, the narrative of the first draft makes more sense than the hierarchical structuring of the second.

Actually, as I suppose is clear by now, I like the way we see the writer in her first draft begin by forming a view of Pip as an agreeable innocent, then wrestling with events in the novel that would seem to contradict that view, and finally deciding that, even at his most dishonest, Pip seems somehow untouched by malice. It reminds me of the sort of talk about books and movies that I often have with my friends and family, and that I imagine she has with hers. Of course, the point of such talk is not usually to come to a critical agreement on issues of form or character, but simply to share our various responses to the text—to retell scenes that have stuck in our minds, to recall what we were thinking and feeling as we saw the movie or read the book. Such talk is not egocentric; it simply differs from the kind that goes on in most English classes.

Although it is not so hard, either, to imagine the workings of an English class that valued the sort of direct response to a text given in the first draft more than it did the mock Cliff's Notes styling of the second. The teacher of such a class would of course be aware of bucking the tide, of urging her students to avoid what has become a privileged way of talking about books. But that's the point. What we see occuring in these two passages is not a process of decentering—of the writer learning to shape her prose for a reader—but one of acculturation, as she starts to rework her text for a *different* sort of reader than she has written to before. She is learning how to invent (a bawdlerized and routine form of) the university.

Perhaps most revealing is what Flower does *not* talk about. Aside from the nearly meaningless comment that "the passage is full of good ideas" (170), everything she notes about the two

versions of the text concerns how they are structured. What the writer actually has to say about the novel (and whether it is worth saying) is never brought up. Rather, the second draft is judged better than the first because it sounds more like conventional academic prose. Despite all the talk of issues and ideas and logic, what counts in the end is form.

This emphasis on formal tinkering can be seen in most of the instances Flower gives of transforming writer-based into reader-based prose—a process that she openly defines as one of the writer *reorganizing* his thoughts and writing for his reader:

> In most expository and persuasive writing, the writer needs to reorganize his or her thoughts around a problem, a thesis, or the reader's neads. Writer-based prose just hasn't been reorganized yet (165).

The implication is that, for the most part, writers first figure out what they want to say and *then* adapt those ideas for their readers. And, indeed, while *Problem-Solving Strategies* is filled with plenty of reorganized texts, it is notably short on instances of writers changing their minds, reworking the substance as well as the form of what they have to say. And so the revision of a group progress report on The Oskaloosa Brewing Company (166-68) consists for the most part of the inserting of a few headings and topic sentences; there is little evidence that the group ever thought (or was ever asked) to use such a rewrite to reconsider its analysis of the firm. Similarly, while the second draft of an essay on selecting the right kind of running shoes (who gives such assignments? why?) does make the choices open to the buyer more explicit, its changes are also all stylistic: the same information and same recommendations are repeated from draft to draft (171-72). And though Flower points out that experienced writers, unlike novices, spend a good deal of time reworking the gist of what they have to say (186-87), virtually all of her advice on editing and revising concerns style—with sections on direct and economical prose, noun/verb ratios, nominalizations, weak linking verbs, negative expressions, passive constructions, avoiding a listlike style, embedding simple sentences, common paragraph structures and the like (188-219).

In sum, then, the shift from writer-based to reader-based prose involves not so much the reconsidering of what one thinks

as the restructuring of what one has written, of writers "trans-form[ing] what they know in order to meet the needs of their readers" (221). There seem to me two important problems with teaching towards such a goal. The first has to do with how easily "meeting the needs of the reader" can be translated into "giving the teacher (or boss) what he wants." This is what seems to happen in the passage on Pip, and is something, of course, that can happen despite the best intentions of student and teacher.

The second has to do with the metaphor of egocentrism. For if reader-based prose turns out to mean in practice something like "writing that conforms to what a particular reader or set of readers expect," then mastering it would seem less a matter of cognitive growth, of learning how to think, than of socialization, of becoming familiar with a new set of rules and practices. The struggling writers Flowers discusses are all adults, yet she uses a term, egocentrism, that originally described the thinking of young children to talk about their work. The use is dismissive. It implies that such writers have somehow failed to master the rudiments of ordinary adult discourse, that their ideas and writing are still immature, self-focused. (Think of how our view of such writings shifts if, with James Britton, we call them not egocentric but *expressive*.) It is one thing to teach our students a set of strategies, rules of thumb, for dealing with academic (or other) readers. It is quite another to suggest that in so doing we are also teaching them to *think*.

In "The Language of Exclusion," Mike Rose points out how such linkings of decorous prose with solid thinking have long been used as a means of barring certain kinds of writing (and thus writers) from the discourse of the university. The reasoning goes something like this: Good writing is the vehicle of clear and precise thinking. But to write well one must first master certain "basics" of form and usage. Therefore, if a writer does not show facility with such forms, then his writing cannot possibly be sound. He needs to be sent off to bonehead English, to get his flawed language and thinking remediated. Until it is, what he says can be ignored.

We need to take care not to use items such as writer-based and reader-based prose to make similar distinctions, to mistake, however unwittingly, the conventions of academic writing for

the processes of thought. Flower's reader-based prose is really another name for a privileged form of discourse: hierarchical in structure, issue-centered, organized around concepts rather than events, and whose transitions and conclusions (but not always assumptions) are made strongly explicit (171-73). There are good reasons, I believe, for teaching our students the workings of such discourse. But one reason is not that it is less egocentric than their own. What we need is a way of talking about writing that does not turn into yet another language of exclusion, that does not class many of our students as somehow deficient or inept, but rather lets us connect their discourses to ours.

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