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Making Freshman English a Happening

WILLIAM D. LUTZ

At the CCCC Meeting in Miami in 1969, I presented a paper on Freshman English as a Happening.¹ I would like to begin this article by summarizing the main points of that paper.

One. Writing is creative. We must as teachers of writing concentrate first on the creative aspect of writing.

Two. The classroom as presently structured does not provide the environment in which anything creative can be taught. Physically the room insists on order and authoritarianism, the enemies of creativity: the teacher as ultimate authority in front of the room and the students as passive receptacles at his feet. The unbridgeable gap (generation and otherwise) is physically emphasized.

Three. To approach writing as a creative process demands not only an alteration of the physical environment in which writing is taught, but it also demands an alteration in the very process by which we attempt to teach writing. We need to look anew at the student, the role of the teacher, the classroom experience, the process of writing, human nature, original sin, and the structure of the universe.

Four. One approach to writing as a creative process (ignoring for the time being split infinitives, sentence fragments, and other mortal sins) is to make the classroom experience a Happening: structure in unstructure; a random series of ordered events; order in chaos; the logical illogicality of dreams.

Five. Ultimately Freshman English as a Happening calls for the complete restructuring of the university. We would have to break such academic chains as grading systems (including pass-fail) and the absolute authority of the teacher.

After reading my paper at Miami, a friend of mine, who is a teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin, made the following comment in a letter to me:

. . . take a look at that paper you wrote for Miami. If anything is ever off the wall that is. What do you expect people to do in your new writing course after they crawl around in your foam rubber—read Lionel Trilling and Northrop Frye? But the dialectical thing is “No classes presently exist like that.” Again, the antithesis, “Who gives a damn.” Classes like that exist in peoples’ fantasies, and people like to have real props for their fantasies. Who knows, if enough people let the walls down around themselves and manage in a few isolated places to knock a few institutional walls down, we may really get to have courses like the kind you envision. Look at the great writers of this century. Look especially at Genet. He wrote Lady of the Flowers, an off the wall book if ever there was one, in prison on paper bags; wrote it out of his masturbatory fantasies. Juxtaposition of the sacred and profane, precisely because the profane can be sacred. We can do the same in another dimension—hard core pornography next to pictures and poems about real intense love. If it were legal, we should put joints in the binding. An essay on the birth

¹ I would like to acknowledge my debt to Charles Deemer whose article “English Composition as a Happening” in the November, 1967 issue of College English provided the impetus to the ideas in this article.
control pill should include a birth control pill. The age is that of Aquarius, all right, everything is liquid, at least with the kids I see on Bascomb Hill. They seem to flow into each other, and nobody seems to talk coherently anymore. It's juxtaposition, not composition. English Juxtaposition 101.

And that is what a Happening is: juxtaposition. Susan Sontag in her essay on Happenings calls the Happening "the art of Radical Juxtaposition." This is perhaps the essence of the Happening as I use it in Freshman English.

Freshman English as a Happening attempts to create an experience about which the student can write. This is in contrast to the usual method of having the student read about an experience someone else has had and then write a theme about it. I want to make the student respond directly to his own experience and not someone else's.

To begin with, I have tried to eliminate themes and textbooks from my class. Sometime ask your students to react to the word "theme." For them it is a dirty word with nothing but unpleasant associations. As a matter of fact, their first response will probably be "How long?" So I decided that instead of assigning a theme of a certain length, I would simply let my students write. They do not have to write 500 words, or 50 words, or 5,000 words. They just write. They do not have to count words. The students as writer chooses his form of discourse, manner of presentation, and length.

I also decided to ask my students to propose a text they would like to use. Each student submitted a brief outline of a text with an introduction in which he explained the plan and purpose of the book. One of the most interesting outlines came from a student who based his reader on the two worlds of vision: the retinal image that is formed in man's eye, and the visual world which man perceives. It was his belief that the writer, unlike most men, lives in both worlds and has the ability to communicate these worlds. Writing, this student believed, has three purposes: to make a point in some area; to produce a feeling; and to simply experiment with words and worlds. The text he suggested was designed to help a student become aware of the two worlds of the writer.

The first section of his text was a collection of readings designed to reveal the personal anguish of the mind: Kafka, Camus, Albee, and others. The second section was a list of things to do: see "Yellow Submarine" and "2001: A Space Odyssey"; see some paintings by Dali, Picasso, Braque, Miro, and others; leave your home unannounced and go on a strange journey; try different things; visit an asylum, better yet be committed. The third and final section of the text contained readings about what he felt were two interrelated things: the drug experience and the religious experience. Among the selections were excerpts from The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolfe, poems by Kenneth Patchen, the hell and damnation speech from Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and poems by Dylan Thomas.

What is striking about this proposed text is the section on doing things. And this is what I try for in Freshman English: doing things, which I call Happenings, for want of a better term.

The first Happening I tried this year I took from the Freshman English syllabus of the University of North Carolina. At the beginning of the second class of the semester, I gave each student an index card and instructed him not to read it until told to. Then, at a given signal, each student read his card and performed the activity described on

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it. At the end of three minutes, a student who had been designated time-keeper called time. I asked the students to sit down and write as much as they could describing what had just occurred in the classroom and their reaction to it. What had happened was seemingly unstructured and unorganized activity, chaos, and that was how the students described it. But in a later class discussion the students discovered that they had simply failed to perceive the organization that did exist simply because they were participating in an activity they were unfamiliar with. What were they asked to do? Among other things individual students were asked to:

Go to the front of the room and face the class. Count to yourself and each time you reach five say, “If I had the wings of an angel.”

Go to the front right corner of the room and hide your head in it. Keep counting to yourself and on every third number say loudly, “Home.”

Sit in your seat and watch the person facing you from the front of the room. Each time he says “Angel” you clap. Don't look anywhere else.

Be an ice cream cone—change flavor.

Look at your feet but don’t ever move them or look up or anywhere else in the room.

Gently tap your forehead against your desk. Keep doing this without looking around.

Walk around to everyone in the room and pat him or her on the back lightly and say, “It’s all right.” Stop occasionally and say, “Who, me?”

Notice that each student participates in the classroom activity in a different way. The student standing in the corner certainly had a different experience than the student who was told to walk around the room and speak to each individual in the room. Then, too, the student who spent the whole time looking at his motionless feet had a different viewpoint than the student who stood in front of the room and was an ice cream cone.

For the class after this Happening I mimeographed some of the descriptions written by the students and discussed them in class. I read all the cards to the class so they understood all the things that had gone on in the classroom. Then we discussed whether there was a principle of order in operation which they had not seen. The discussion included the problem of what is order and how orderly is our life and the world around us. What do we mean by order in writing? The questions and problems that flowed naturally from this one classroom experience were endless. It was with some reluctance that I moved on to other things.

For my next Happening I reserved a room in the Student Union. I chose a carpeted room furnished with comfortable chairs and couches. Then I had neat rows of hard, uncomfortable folding chairs set up. I asked the students to sit in the folding chairs and not the others. They had to sit up straight, fold their hands in their laps, be quiet, and listen. Then I played some records: Ravel's “Bolero,” the theme music from the movie “2001,” some Gregorian chant, selections from the Association, the Doors, Steppenwolf, the Jefferson Airplane, Clear Light, Iron Butterfly, Simon and Garfunkle, and others. At the end of the period the students simply picked up their books and left. The next class was held in the same room; only this time I made a few alterations in the physical arrangements. There were no neat lines of folding chairs. The students sat, stood, or lay wherever they wished. When everyone was comfortable I closed the drapes, turned off the lights, lit one candle in the middle of the room and a few sticks of incense, and played the same music as before. The class just

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listened to the music in the dark with
the flickering candle and the scent of
incense permeating the room. Again,
when the period was over the students
were asked to pick up their books and
leave. Some of them did not want to.
At the next class (held in the regular
sterile classroom), I asked them to try to
write about their two experiences in
listening to the music. Was there any
difference? Why? What did they feel
both times? What effect did the candle
have? The incense? Again I mimeo-
graphed some of the responses for class
discussion. We discussed being sensitive
to the world around ourselves and being
aware of using many of the senses we
somehow or other take for granted. The
writer, the students decided, must use
more than his eye.

Next, I attempted to alter the usual
classroom discussion. Some teachers may
have their students sit in a circle for a
class discussion. This works fairly well,
but I have noticed that it is still the
usual people who talk and everyone
still looks to the teacher for answers and
leadership. So I made one small altera-
tion: I turned off all the lights and con-
ducted class discussion in the dark. After
the first class discussion in the dark the
students wrote about the experience.
They noted the obvious things—how
“weird” it was, how funny it felt, and
so on. But after a time, they adjusted
to the situation and as soon as they
became adjusted I had them write again
about this method of class discussion.
Next, I held class in the regular, clean,
well-lighted place. Again, I asked the
students to write about this method of
discussion and mimeographed selections
from all three writing assignments. We
discussed the writers’ reactions to their
experiences. Did everyone have the same
experience? What did each writer empha-
size? Were the viewpoints the same?
Again, these experiences provided a
wealth of material for writing and dis-
cussing. But we moved on.

A variation on this method of cla
discussion is to leave the lights on an
have all the students sit in a tight circ
with their backs to the center of the
circle. Then conduct the usual class dis-
cussion. But I found this technique was
not as successful as turning off the light

A more difficult but very interestin
assignment I have tried is to ask stu-
dents to paint a poem. Since I cannot
ask them to buy all the paints an
equipment necessary for such an assign-
ment, I usually make it voluntary. How
does one go about painting a poem? Th
art students in class came up with some
really intriguing approaches. But the
most common approach was an attemp
to express the poem through color an the
arrangement of color. No attempt was
made at a picture. The students who
tackled this assignment displayed the
results to the class and then we talked
about it. Is the ordering of an experienc
on canvas the same as ordering the
experience on paper with words? Are the
problems in any way similar? Through this
experience some students got an idea of the problem of expressing it
non-verbal terms their feelings and re
actions to something. They learned that
the agony of communication and expres
sion is not confined to writing alone.

There are other things that I could
list here, such as holding class in an ar
studio, or having students construct
something out of clippings from maga
zines and newspapers, or having stu
dents construct something three dimen
sional from cardboard, lights, paper, and
whatever else they want, or construct
a light show either for the whole
class or for one individual at a time, or
rolling around in a room filled with
sponge rubber, but I am sure each class
can come up with its own ideas. And
that is what it is all about: teacher and
student involved in the creative experi-
ence.

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