

ENGLISH COMPOSITION AS A HAPPENING

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EDUCATION, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding. (Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*)

Our entire school system, like our over-organized economy, politics, and standard of living, is largely a trap; it is not designed for the maximum growth and future practical utility of the children into a changing world, that they too will hopefully improve, but is a kind of inept social engineering to mold, and weed out, for short-range extrinsic needs. An even when it is more benevolent, it is in the bureaucratic death-grip, from the universities and the boards of education down, of a uniformity of conception and method that cannot possibly suit the multitude of dispositions and conditions. (Paul Goodman, "From John Dewey to A. S. Neill")

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For better or worse, our educational system is undeniably rigid. Not even the university is free from its demands. The English Composition course, as we should expect, is the rigid child of a rigid parent. It is, after all, taught in a classroom, a medium (in its present form) Marshall McLuhan would call "hot" and of "low participation."

Consider the fragmentation of the composition course in its daily inaction. The "teacher" speaks from his place in the front of the classroom, sheltered more than likely by the wall of his podium, while the class in the rear listens or pretends to. Even when discussion occurs, the fragmentation of the inaction into two segments (the "teacher"-as-wise-authority and the class-as-recipient-of-knowledge) is retained. The division is as clear as stimulus and response. Lecture and note-taking. Assignment and essay. Bell and saliva. Watch the class yawn for its food.

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Certain mental habits are commonly instilled by those who are engaged in educating: obedience and discipline, ruthlessness in the struggle for worldly success, contempt towards opposing groups, and an unquestioning credulity, a passive acceptance of the teacher's wisdom. All these habits are against life. Instead of obedience and discipline, we ought to aim at preserving independence and impulse. (Bertrand Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*)

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This is the way of the university, and as the university has gone, so has English Composition. Yet in at least one respect, the composition course is a university maverick because it has no real subject content. Logic, literature, linguistics, political science, philosophy -- these and other disciplines crop up in the course but as subject matter certainly they are covered with more rigor in their home departments. Clearly, then, English Composition is a methods course, concentrating not on a subject matter but on ways to get at and write about any subject matter. And here the influence of the university on the way English Composition is taught has been highly detrimental.

To begin with, my criticism of the traditional misdirection of education is twofold: first, I see education as an experience (in Dewey's sense) involving both student and "teacher" (a flagrant misnomer), an experience unrealized in the present fragmentation of the classroom unexperience (as Cummings might say) into "teaching" and "learning"; I also object that the traditional rigidity of our educational institutions puts the generation behind the podium forever out of touch with the younger generation in the lecture hall, making effective communication impossible. This is more true today when the acceleration of change at every level increases the cultural distance

between generations. And English Composition suffers more than other disreputable products of the university because it, of all university products, could be the most influential.

Potentially, English Composition could become an introduction to what the University is about, a preview of the university's forms and a familiarization with its current media (the traditional medium being the so-called academic essay). Thus the responsibility of English Composition is great. But by following the organization of content-courses, English Composition has suffered. A self-perpetuating disease. Regeneration of inactivity. A "hot" course.

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The passive consumer wants packages, but those who are concerned in pursuing knowledge and in seeking causes will resort to aphorisms, just because they are incomplete and require participation in depth. (Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media)

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If fragmentation and lack of mutual participation by class and "teacher" (we need a new word) in a genuine educational experience constitute the disease, then a unified, joint experience should provide the remedy. Although only a complete remodeling of the university will ever completely correct our "compulsory miseducation," a prior reshaping of the English Composition course could be influential once the course is raised to the status of an introduction to the university. Certainly it can do no worse than many of the too-many organizations of the course reviewed by Kitzhaber in *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*. A reshaping might be the kernel of needed change. Just such an experiment I wish to propose.

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If the object were to make pupils think, rather than to make them accept conclusions, education would be conducted quite differently: there would be less rapidity of instruction and more discussion, more occasions when pupils are encouraged to express themselves, more attempt to make education concern itself with matters in which the pupils feel some interest. (Bertrand Russell, The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell)

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Let me be more explicit in the delineation of my goals. English Composition is a proper introduction to the possibilities of the university, a preview of what the university is about. This is actually the unadmitted, and ineffective, tradition of the course, since the written medium has been the essential vehicle of scholarly communication between members of the university, student and "teacher" alike. English Composition is what the university is about. Or should be what it should be about.

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I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. (John Dewey, Dewey on Education)

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And the university should not be a factory molding students. Campuses should not be educational "plants," despite the current accuracy of popular jargon.

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I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living. (John Dewey, Dewey on Education)

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Neither should English Composition instruct in the pleasant phrasing of nonsense. It should actually instruct in nothing, in the sense that a "teacher" reveals and a class digests. What does a "teacher" know? He is merely human.

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I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing. (John Dewey, Dewey on Education)

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But the "teacher" often has one advantage -- a greater accumulation and variety of experience and it is upon this advantage, not upon any supposed wisdom or knowledge, learned or mythical, that I would like to base a new organization of the teaching of English Composition. The goal is a class of students actively aware and participant, a class that does not swallow the "teacher's" remarks but considers them. One thing that needs correcting, of course, is the student's head. It should surprise no one that essays are largely written by heads, not hands. But the heart (that forgotten organ) should work with the head. Correct the head and the heart and the essays take care of themselves.

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As the audience becomes a participant in the total electric drama, the classroom can become a scene in which the audience performs an enormous amount of work. (Marshall McLuhan, The Medium Is the Massage)

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To remove the "teacher's" authority. To engage the student's active participation. Fortunately, a recent art form provides a model upon which to base a reconstruction of English Composition that will attain these ends. I refer to the happening.

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Perhaps the most striking feature of the Happening is its treatment (this is the only word for it) of the audience. The event seems designed to tease and abuse the audience. (Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation)

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Universities, though they often continue the unfortunate process rather than try to correct it, are continually plagued by the fact that students have been compulsorily miseducated for years prior to their university enrollment. Against this great handicap the reconstruction of English Composition after the model of the happening has certain advantages. Shock and surprise are essential features of the happening, and they should also be frequent moods in the composition course. Clear writing and clear thought follow only after clear experiences, yet the inspiration of such experiences has been virtually neglected by educators. But clear experiences never come easy. For the student who, in the classroom, is not used to participating in any experience at all, the clarity of shock will be quite dramatic when a real experience is presented to him. Let the "teacher" shock the student. Let him speak, not from behind a podium, but from the rear of the room or through the side window. Let him discuss theology to Ray Charles records. As long as there is reverence for the student and the process of education, no shock is too great.

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The Happening operates by creating an asymmetrical network of surprises, without climax or consummation; this is the logic of dreams rather than the logic of most acts. (Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation)

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If I make the "teacher" in this experiment a near cousin to the actor, it is a relation I am willing to defend. The best "teachers" have always been actors to by their very ability to move an audience to an experience, an active engagement with and in the performance, a process fundamental to real education. It is no surprise, for example, that Stokely Carmichael by putting on a pair of shades in an auditorium punctuated by the annoyance of flash-bulbs, or Timothy Leary by symbolically stripping out of his establishment gear to preach by candlelight from a stage floor, can elicit enthusiastic responses from a highly participant student audience. What Carmichael and Leary have learned about the university auditorium -- how to make it "cool -- we must learn about the university classroom.

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*What goes on in the Happenings merely follows Artaud's prescription for a spectacle which will eliminate the stage, that is, the distance between spectators and performers, and "will physically envelop the spectator." In the Happening this scapegoat is the audience. (Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*)*

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The "teacher," having upset through surprise and shock the student's expectations of the organization of the classroom medium, should find it less of a problem than usual to get at the student's pat ideas and opinions and to inspire an experience, a happening, that will get the student to participate in the realization of his own awareness of his inadequacy. But such a drama in the classroom happening should never take the form in which a student changes an opinion because the "teacher" disagrees with him. With this, authority returns. Rather the student should experience the difficulty of holding any opinion. Should the "teacher" choose to reveal (unmask) his own inadequacy (humanness), the revelation might prove efficacious and distinctly human.

It is with reason that I have neglected to present a more explicit blueprint for the happening after which to model a reconstruction of English Composition. In the first place, happenings happen; they are not passed down from one to another. Spontaneity is essential. Each "teacher" must inspire his own happening. What I suggest is that the characteristics of the happening that reduce the distance between actor and audience, hence between "teacher" and class; that feature shock and surprise as vehicles to raise the audience from comfort to insecurity; that result spontaneously from the "teacher's" own subtle influence, yet never occur without the student's participation; these characteristics, I suggest, can lead to valuable educational consequences with important emphases. Unity over fragmentation; "thinking" over "writing"; doubt over belief; questions over answers; present over future; impulse over plan; insecurity over comfort. Life over death.

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*Taken in their totality and in their general intention, the kinds of progress which we celebrate can be summed up in the word sterilize. Whether it be in love (contraceptive measures); in professional life (insurance); in the education of youth; in medicine; in international politics, we are engaged in carrying out to the limit an unprecedented experiment in generalized asepsis and in extinction of risks before they fall due. (Denis de Rougemont, *The Devil's Share*)*

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But there is yet another, and I think more important, advantage to modeling English Composition after the happening. Western education has long suffered under the delusion that scientific abstraction is the unique way to knowledge. This, unfortunately, to the neglect of the poem.

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I argue that the apologists for science are not justified in claiming, nor the apologists for poetry in admitting, the sole right of science to know. I insist that poetry is also capable of knowledge. . . . (Archibald MacLeish, "Why Do We Teach Poetry?")

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But the poem alone can give two things: the present and the thing-as-thing. MacLeish concludes "that we really know a thing only when we are filled with a wonderfully full, new and intimate sense of it, and, above all, of our relation with it. This sense, this knowledge in the truest meaning of the word knowledge, art can give but abstraction cannot."

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*As the professor snips the richest bud
For his lapel, his scalpel of reason
Lies on the tray; the class yawns for its food
Only transfusion of a poem's blood*

Can save them, bleeding from their civilization
(A. D. Hope, *Collected Poems*)

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The happening is a first step toward such a revitalizing experience. And so English Composition as a happening properly previews all that a university should be. Witness the reengagement of the heart, a new tuning of all the senses Taking the first step toward poetry.

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The antinomy between mind and body, word and deed, speech and silence, overcome. Everything is only a metaphor; there is only poetry. (Norman Brown, *Love's Body*)