

Moti Nissani

The
apprenticeship
approach to *writing*
instruction

"Now don't you see the difference? It wasn't anything but a wind reef. The wind does that."

"So I see. But it is exactly like a bluff reef. How am I ever going to tell them apart?"

"I can't tell you. It is an instinct. By and by you will just naturally know one from the other, but you never will be able to explain why or how you know them apart."

Mark Twain
(*Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter IX)

Introduction

This essay argues that the composition classroom should resemble a pottery workshop. The practitioner of the apprenticeship approach to writing instruction motivates her students and sets for them appropriate and engaging tasks. She fosters naturalness and places writing in a meaningful and supportive social system. She attempts to build up her students' self-confidence in themselves as human beings and as writers. She knows that practice makes perfect, and so her students learn by writing and editing. If she can, she sometimes converts her classroom into a computer-assisted writing workshop. Her students learn by editing their text on their own, and then through feedback from her and from fellow students. She teaches her students to revise texts by relying on common sense and intuition, not on an inaccessible and confusing multitude of explicit rules and strategies. She guides them towards improvements of their texts in the same way that a master-potter guides his apprentices. She employs conceptual change and guided discovery strategies. Her students learn by watching accomplished writers performing their crafts, and by reading well-written literature and prose. While her students are actually writing, she does not inundate them with corrections, abstractions and strategies, but fits her advice to the circumstances, to what she feels her students can assimilate at that particular point. She uses explicit instruction sparingly, appropriately and in context. She tries to avoid out-of-context excessive

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teaching of rules and strategies. She urges her students to focus their attention on the task at hand, not on themselves, the writing process or their audience.

This essay urges composition instructors to assign a lesser role to explication and self-consciousness, and a greater role to strategies which are consistent with, or follow from, the apprenticeship approach. In doing so, this essay largely draws upon confirmatory theoretical and experimental evidence. A more detailed discussion of seemingly contradictory theories, empirical findings and practices (e.g., Collins, Brown and Newman, 1987; Flower, 1989; Rosenshine and Meister, 1994; Williams and Colomb, 1993), would require a book-length manuscript and cannot be undertaken here.

The apprenticeship approach is directed at all audiences – natives and foreigners, kindergartners and sophomores, lawyers and plumbers. To be sure, while fourth-graders might be asked to retell the plot of E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, college freshmen might be asked to interpret *Once More to the Lake*. But in all such cases, the underlying educational philosophy remains unchanged.

The fundamental question of contemporary composition pedagogy

Composition instructors "do not have a unified theory to guide [their] work" (Lindemann, 1993, 316). As a result, there is little agreement in the professional literature, and in actual practice, about fundamental questions: Should we, for example, teach grammar (Hartwell, 1985)? Has literature a place in the composition classroom (Lindemann, 1993; Tate, 1993)? In modeling essays and fiction, should we try to explicitly distill the rhetorical devices which make writing powerful (Axelrod and Cooper, 1994; Hacker, 1994), or should we focus on content and let students tacitly imbibe the stylistic features of good writing (Smith, 1988)? Should we encourage writers to spend much time reflecting on the process of writing, or should we keep their attention riveted on the emerging text (Applebee, 1986)? Should we teach good writing in general, or should we teach students to write like lawyers, doctors or advertisers (Freedman, 1993)?

Many such controversies could be resolved by answering the question: Which instructional paradigm can best guide writing instruction? Before attempting to cast apprenticeship in that role, we need to be clear about the nature of apprenticeship in non-writing contexts.

Apprenticeship¹

Many skills are only partially amenable to explicit instruction. According to Michael Polanyi (1962):

A skillful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them. For example... the swimmer keeps himself afloat by... [regulating] his respiration; he keeps his buoyancy at an increased level by refraining from emptying his lungs when breathing out and by inflating them more than usual when breathing in; yet this is not generally known to swimmers... Again [does]... the rule observed by the cyclist... tell us exactly how to ride a bicycle? No. You obviously cannot adjust the curvature of your bicycle's path in proportion to the ratio of your unbalance over the square of your speed... Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art... An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice... It follows that an art which has fallen into disuse for the period of a generation is altogether lost... It is pathetic to watch the endless efforts – equipped with microscopy and chemistry, with mathematics and electronics – to reproduce a single violin of the kind the half-literate Stradivarius turned out as a matter of routine more than 200 years ago. To learn by example is to submit to authority... By watching the master... the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself...

In deciding a case today the [British] Courts will follow the example of other courts which have decided similar cases in the past, for in these actions they see embodied the rules of the law. This procedure recognizes the principle of all traditionalism that practical wisdom is more truly embodied in action than expressed in rules of action... The judge's action is considered more authentic than what he said he was doing.

When we use a hammer to drive in a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, but in a different way... I have a subsidiary awareness of the feeling in the palm of my hand which is merged into my focal awareness of my driving in the nail... Subsidiary awareness and focal awareness are mutually exclusive. If a pianist shifts his attention from the piece he is

playing to the observation of what he is doing with his fingers while playing it, he gets confused and may have to stop... The kind of clumsiness which is due to the fact that focal attention is directed to the subsidiary elements of an action is commonly known as self-consciousness. A serious and sometimes incurable form of it is "stage-fright"... It is interesting to recall that when we use words in speech or writing we are aware of them only in a subsidiary manner (49-57; bold emphasis added).

"And how easily and comfortably the [Mississippi River] pilot's memory does its work"; says Mark Twain, "how placidly effortless is its way; how unconsciously it lays up its vast stores, hour by hour, day by day, and never loses or mislays a single valuable package of them all!" (1883, Chapter XIII; see also Lave and Wenger, 1991). Despite popular conceptions of science as a realm of explicit rules and computer-like precision, many commentators feel that the tacit component is the distinguishing feature of actual scientific investigations. Speaking from first-hand experiences, Polanyi (1962) holds that scientific research is "an unspecifiable art" (53). Philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1993) goes farther. In his view, doing creative science in different settings does not involve one unspecifiable art, but many:

The events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure; there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation but are missing elsewhere. Concrete developments... have distinct features and we can often explain why and how these features led to success. But not every discovery can be accounted for in the same manner, and procedures that paid off in the past may create havoc when imposed on the future. Successful research does not obey general standards; it relies now on one trick, now on another; the moves that advance it and the standards that define what counts as an advance are not always known to the movers... A theory of science that devises standards and structural elements for all scientific activities... may impress outsiders — but it is much too crude an instrument for the people on the spot, that is, for scientists facing some concrete research problem... There is only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: anything goes (1,18-19).

As we have seen, mastery of an art presupposes naturalness. A good violin teacher tries to make his students as unself-conscious as he can; he avoids any advice that would put them at risk of permanently riveting their attention from the music they are playing to bystanders or to their audience, fingers, bow or shoulder. His advice is of the kind: “Wouldn’t that gavotte sound better if played a bit faster?” Or “The F was a bit too flat, try it again!” It is rarely of the kind: “Play in front of a mirror!” Nor: “Write an essay about your fingering technique!” His students are told to listen to the masters, watch them and practice alone or in company. They are rarely given take-home assignments like this:

What happens when you replay or rethink a melody? This assignment will give you a new window on your own thinking and ask you to write a short analysis of your own process... Talk to the tape... At the end of playing have one final interview with yourself and try to describe the key points in your process as you remember it, the problems you encountered, and the playing strategies you used. These check-in interviews are very important because you will be surprised to discover how much players – absorbed in the act of playing forget about their own process even minutes later... In this assignment, we would like you to explore your own process and describe some of the thinking/playing strategies you used... There is a lot to discover about how you work as a violin player, and this evidence will help you.²

In some cases, it is possible to master a complex art by intently watching a master, absent actual practice. “By watching the master... the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself” (Polanyi, 1962, 53). “Learners often need do nothing in order to learn” (Smith, 1988, 194; see also Lave and Wenger, 1991). Apprenticeship in a weaving factory in Guatemala consists in observing a skilled footloom weaver for a few weeks. Apprentices never weave, they do not ask questions and they receive little or no explicit instruction. Yet, simply by intently watching a craftsman at work, in a few weeks they master the craft (Nash, cited in Rogoff, 1990, 129). It is not surprising therefore that “one Japanese term for apprentice is *minarai*, literally one who learns by observation” (Singleton, 1989, 14).

Feedback in context is often crucial to the acquisition of an art: masters serve not only as models but also as coaches. The most useful advice is often given explicitly in response to the learner's actual performance. The advice may appeal to such things as the apprentice's aesthetic judgment or instincts. At times, it invokes an explicit rule, especially when this rule can be validated and brought to life by the novice's experiences. This occasional usefulness of explicit rules could be illustrated by citing Mark Twain again, written recollections of other apprentices, or countless literary episodes, but let me instead relate two homelier childhood experiences of my own. By imitating others, I taught myself the crawl stroke, but I couldn't swim as far or as fast as some of my companions. The turning point came two summers later, and only when a knowledgeable observer told me; "blow bubbles when your face is in the water." Similarly, I played harmonica for months, picked many tunes by ear, but these merely made the neighborhood's crows sound like gifted musicians. Again, the eureka moment came shortly after a better player gave me a rule: "harmonica players use their tongues."

The grammar of apprenticeship

No doubt there are vast differences between learning to play harmonica, ride a bicycle or carry out a creative genetics experiment; nonetheless, such activities do have common, overlapping features. At this point, we need to tentatively distill a few features of apprenticeship:

1. As in most learning situations, motivation, perceived relevance, feelings, attitudes towards the learning environment, social context, self-confidence, prior learning experiences, aptitudes and learning style, affect the rate of progress and final mastery of the craft (Freedman, 1993, 247; Pintrich et al., 1993).
2. For the most part, decontextualized expositions about performance of a craft are of limited, if any, value. No one can learn to coordinate a car's clutch, gas pedal and gearshift from lectures. One masters a craft gradually, by observing and imitating others, by comparing one's performance to those of others, by learning from one's mistakes and by being coached.

3. One learns through performing a craft in a natural setting; a would-be driver must spend time behind the wheel.
4. Much learning can occur passively, by intently watching others perform.
5. Excessive self-consciousness must be avoided at all costs. We can only do one of three things: rivet our attention on the task at hand, on our actions or on our audience. Similarly, some people have an excellent sense of rhythm but are too concerned with their own movements, or with the impression they make on others, to dance well.
6. Explicit coaching – when doled out sparingly, in context, to meet the learner’s developmental needs – often plays a crucial role in the acquisition of craft.
7. A good coach is a master-teacher. Through such things as intuition, experience and caring, a good violin teacher must have tacitly acquired not only the craft of playing the violin, but the craft of teaching. She motivates her students and places musical performances in a meaningful and supportive social context. She models expert performances and expert-solving strategies. She sets appropriate, engaging tasks. She builds up her students’ self-confidence in themselves as human beings and musicians. She does not endlessly verbalize the techniques of the masters. Her students learn by performing, and by hearing, seeing and interacting with better performers. She fosters naturalness. When her students practice, she fits her feedback to the circumstances.

Decontextualized learning

Not everything can be taught through adherence to these seven, tentative features of apprenticeship. Some skills benefit from, or even require, abstract instruction which is separate in time or place from practical experience. Thus, although many children master tic-tac-toe by playing the game, almost everyone can become a tic-tac-toe grand master through explicit instruction and vigilant application of rules.

As another example, consider the knottier case of backgammon. Although backgammon mastery requires a long apprenticeship, certain features of this game can be best acquired through decontextualized instruction and metareflections. Let

us imagine a single game being played for one dollar. Under certain conditions, a player may propose doubling the stakes. Also, sometimes a player knows the exact odds of winning a game. Let us say that Black is permitted to double, knows that her odds of winning are seventy-two percent, and proceeds to double. White can decline the double, forfeit the game and one dollar, and hope for better luck next game. Or White can accept the double and proceed to play for two dollars, knowing that, by the rules of the game, Black cannot re-double the stakes. Obviously, White is caught between a rock and hard place. Should he decline and cut his losses, or should he keep hope alive by agreeing to double the stakes?

Neither common sense nor experience are reliable guides to such dilemmas. I have observed the behavior of over one hundred people under similar conditions, and found that, as in so many similar cases (see Edwards, 1968; Kahneman et al., 1982), our statistical intuition is a broken reed. A few people do eventually adopt the correct rule (always accepting a double when there is a seventy-two percent chance of losing the game) either through a priori reasoning or through watching, or playing with an expert. Many play a lifetime yet fail to consistently execute the correct move.

In backgammon, then, correct reactions to doubles can be best learned through out-of-context instruction (for example, from a book). So, in this game, apprenticeship is best supplemented with abstract study of a few statistical rules and their concrete application. Moreover, until these rules are assimilated, players must self-consciously monitor their performance. To sum up, human beings can learn limited skills like tic-tac-toe in an abstract fashion. Likewise, abstract instruction is essential when people must acquire counter-intuitive rules which are not readily refuted by experience. But there is no evidence that humans can learn complex tasks through decontextualized exposure to explicit rules and strategies, or through frequently stepping back and reflecting upon their performance. There is no substitute for apprenticeship, and no royal road to mastering a craft.

Contemporary approaches to composition pedagogy

Writing, according to the apprenticeship view, is a craft. A writer need not be conscious of rules embodied in well-written texts, nor of his strategies for generating and editing such texts. A writer should, according to this view, focus his attention on the task at hand, not on his audience or on his way of accomplishing this task. A liberal dose of abstractions and self-consciousness may be useful on the therapist's couch, but it is just as damaging to writers as it is to speakers, pianists, scientists, ante-bellum Mississippi River pilots or contemporary quartermasters. To be sure, good writers possess metacognitive skills, but these skills can be best acquired tacitly through apprenticeship, through reading and writing in context, and not through abstract instruction. In more general terms, good writing instructors abide by something like the seven features of apprenticeship mentioned earlier.

In contrast, most contemporary instruction "is based on the simple assumption that we can specify a curriculum by studying what experts do and teaching our students to do likewise"³ (Applebee, 1986, 106). In other words, most composition theorists reject the apprenticeship model of writing. Some theorists advocate the teaching of grammar, not in context (see below), but as a set of abstract rules which writers are supposed to acquire and apply to their own writing and editing. Other theorists advocate analyzing at length the characteristics which supposedly contribute to the readability of well-written essays, then urge students to try to consciously emulate these characteristics in their own writings. Still other theorists may urge students to reflect on their own processes as a gateway to good writing.

Some of these practices are based on the notion that the rules that "you don't know won't help you" (Williams and Colomb, 1993). Likewise, another theorist is puzzled by the irony "that anyone in higher education would bother to question the usefulness of conscious, reflective thought" (Flower, 1989, 185). At the core of these approaches there is this highly persuasive argument: Well-written texts embody rules of grammar, style and syntax. Experts employ well-defined strategies when they produce such texts. Once these rules and

strategies have been unearthed by meticulous research, they can be gainfully passed on to novices. And, since such rules and strategies cannot be automatically assimilated, learners must now and then stand back and divert their attention from the writing task to their own writing strategies. By and by, this process becomes second nature and a novice is transformed into an expert.

The following quotes give the flavor of the explicative and self-conscious strategies of writing instruction. College freshmen are told: "Master the essentials of the sentence as an aid to clear thinking and effective writing." "Adjective clauses or phrases are nonrestrictive when they describe (rather than limit the meaning of) the noun or pronoun they modify; set off by commas, they are nonessential parenthetical elements that may be omitted (Hodges, 1990, 2, 134-5; see also Zuber and Reed, 1993, on the importance of handbooks in writing instruction). A typical freshman composition program combines "regular instruction with a parallel set of assignments that both 'invite' and help the student reflect upon his or her own thinking and learning." For instance, students are asked at one point: "How did you handle this process [of defining a problem]? What writing/thinking strategies do you use?" (Flower, 1989, 210, 208). "Methods to encourage reflection might consist of recording students as they think out loud and then replaying the tape for comparison with the thinking of experts and other students (Collins, Brown, and Newman, 1989, 483; see also Elbow, 1973, 144; Rose, 1984, 88-9).

A widely used handbook dedicates twenty-seven pages to the comma. This discussion begins by explaining why commas are needed. To satisfy these needs, ten rules have evolved. This handbook then describes, explains and illustrates these rules. It then clarifies and illustrates important exceptions to these rules, and provides exercises for the application of these newly-acquired rules.

The first of these rules states: "Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction joining independent clauses." This is followed by definitions of "independent clauses" and "coordinating conjunctions." Students are then advised that a comma

“tells readers that one independent clause has come to a close and that another is about to begin.” This is followed by an exception, stated as a rule and then illustrated. Readers are then cautioned not to use a comma to “separate coordinate word groups that are not independent clauses.” This last statement is then concretely exemplified.

After similar treatises on the remaining nine rules, readers are told that “many common misuses of the comma result from an incomplete understanding” of these self-same ten rules. “Writers often form misconceptions about” these rules, either extending them inappropriately or misinterpreting them. Such misconceptions can lead to errors. There are also other misuses of the comma. These errors and misuses require, in their turn, an extended discussion of fourteen points. The first in that new series is: “Do not use a comma between compound elements that are not independent clauses,” a point which is then expounded and illustrated. Following a similar discussion of the next thirteen points, the discussion concludes with a touch of the process approach: readers are advised to look at themselves as writers and to consider some common causes and cures for any difficulty they may have with commas.

Apprenticeship advocates readily concede the verisimilitude of all these rules. They admire the painstaking research which has gone into explicating this astonishing variety of points and counterpoints. When faced with a concrete writing problem, or when they must send their manuscript to a particularly hard-nosed editor, they may even look up a couple of concrete illustrations in such handbooks.

In short, apprenticeship practitioners think such rules are admirable teaching tools – for classes in linguistics (supposing linguists have no better use for their time). As these practitioners see it, such fine rules are virtually useless for writers. It will never occur to these practitioners to tell their students that the use of comma is governed by rules, let alone to explicate these rules. In the first place, they may question the naive assumption that rules – either explicit or implicit – are involved in the writing process (cf. Bereiter, 1991). In the sec-

ond place, even if they concede this point, and even if they can explicate these rules, they do their best to forget them, or at least, as in the case of philosophically trained scientists, to compartmentalize this knowledge from their writing and teaching. They believe that such rules are no handier to a writer than the rule “that curvature of the path must be in proportion to the ratio of imbalance over the square of speed” is to a cyclist. Their students are innocent of such things as rules and exceptions on how to use and not to use commas. Their students learn to use commas from reading the works of master-writers, from reading aloud their own works, from intuitively correcting typical comma errors in their own papers or in exercise books, and from expert guidance in concrete writing situations (see below).

In sum, in sharp contrast to the apprenticeship approach to writing instruction, the explicative and self-conscious approaches agree that writing is fundamentally unlike playing piano. Writing, they imply, is simple enough, or counter-intuitive enough, to require: 1) abstract explication of rules and strategies, and/or 2) moving back and forth from creating a text to reflections on the writer, writing process and audience. Given their popularity, one might expect that these approaches are based upon something a bit more solid than common sense and unsubstantiated theories. We shall now see that they are not.

Evidence for the apprenticeship approach to writing instruction

A Weaker Theoretical Basis for the Teaching of Rules

The apprenticeship approach insists that the analogy between old-time apprenticeship and learning to write is not partial (Collins, Brown and Newman, 1989), but complete. It thus wholeheartedly joins the Rousseauistic “strain of educational thought opposed to the classical, rule-based view of learning and cognition, . . . a strain of thought [that] has given rise to many worthwhile developments in education.” It dismisses, on admittedly utilitarian and intuitive grounds, “the family of instructional theories in which rules, definitions, logical operations, explicit procedures and the like are treated as central.” In doing so, apprenticeship is in entire agreement

with the connectionist view that “this family of instructional theories has produced an abundance of technology on an illusory psychological foundation⁴ (Bereiter, 1991, 15; emphasis added).

Rules and strategies of writing are too complex and imperfectly known to serve as guides to writers on the spot

Many scholars have noted that language is too complex to be deliberately and consciously learned one rule at a time. This argument has been made for the acquisition of grammar, spelling, phonics, writing style and vocabulary (Krashen, 1993, 4).

Not only can we recognize 50,000 words on sight – and also, of course, by sound – we can usually make sense of all these words. Where have all the meanings come from? Fifty thousand trips to the dictionary? Fifty thousand lessons? We have learned all the conventions of language through using language, by speaking it, reading it and making sense of it. What we know about language is largely implicit, just like our knowledge of cats and dogs. So little of our knowledge of language is actually taught, we underestimate how much of language we have learned (Smith, 1988, 182).

The speech of young children, and the untutored writing of people of all ages, clearly show that people know many rules implicitly (or not at all). Even competent grammarians help themselves to rules they don't fully know:

I have asked members of a number of different groups... to give me the rule for ordering adjectives of nationality, age and number in English. The response is always the same: ‘We don't know the rule.’ Yet when I ask these groups to perform an active language task, they show productive control over the rule they have denied knowing... So [the grammar in our heads] is eminently usable knowledge – the way we make our life through language – but it is not accessible knowledge; in a profound sense, we do not know that we have it (Hartwell, 1985, 111; see also Ellis, 1990, 185; Smith, 1988, 182).

After decades of effort by linguists, later joined by all specialists working on language understanding systems, no one has yet succeeded in working out a complete and valid set of grammatical rules for any language. If the rules are actually in our mind and if we all know them, is this failure to uncover the rules not remarkable? (Bereiter, 1991, 10)

Writing instruction is neither sufficient nor necessary for good writing. Some great writers have never taken a single composition course while some mediocre writers have taken many. Mark Lester believes that "there simply appears to be no correlation between a writer's study of language and his ability to write" (Lester, cited in Hartwell, 1985, 115). More recently, Krashen presented "abundant evidence that literacy development can occur without formal instruction" (Krashen, 1993, 15, additional evidence is given in Freedman, 1993, 226-7).

It goes without saying that this fact cannot be reconciled with the beliefs that decontextualized mastery of myriad rules and strategies, or that an acquired sense of self-consciousness, are needed for good writing. In contrast, those who see writing as a craft have no problems accounting for Plato's or Robert Burns' masterful writing, nor for the stale writing of some fifth-year composition students.

Writer's block

Writer's block lends additional evidence for the apprenticeship approach. In fact, the etiology of writer's block is reminiscent of stage fright. Blocked writers, like rule-bound, self-conscious dancers, are immobilized by rules: One of the most dramatic differences between... high- and low-blockers is... the presence or absence of rigid rules. The teaching... of writing has too often and too zealously been reduced by English professionals and the larger culture alike to the teaching and invoking of rules... And the problem occurs not simply with grammar and style. The composing process itself is often reduced and simplified in textbooks because it is too complex a process to be presented in its multifaceted richness (Rose, 1984, 89-90).

Freewriting

In a directive reminiscent of free association in psychoanalysis, freewriters are told: "Never stop to... think about what you are doing" (Elbow, 1973, 1). Some research supports the seemingly "surrealist position, that often enough a student's freewriting, compared to rehearsed writing, turns out more coherent, better organized, or more 'fluid' (Haswell, 1991).

The explanations offered for the effectiveness of freewriting and related approaches are again reminiscent of psychotherapy: Invisible writing “is intended as a way of reducing self-consciousness and relieving a writer of some of the constraints that might distract his thinking while he composes” (Blau, 1991, 291). “Freewriting does seem to... keep the generating activities clearly separated from the analytical or editorial... [through] what Elbow terms ‘transparency,’ of being able to escape the inhibiting self-consciousness that can interfere while material is being generated – or immediately afterward” (Mullin, 1991, 146). “Free and invisible writing... are precisely the sort of therapy that is called for to assist basic writers in overcoming their insistently premature and counterproductive focus on their readers and on the surface features of their discourse” (Blau, 1991, 296).

Thus, freewriting rightly expends much elbow grease against acquired inhibitions. It goes without saying, however, that lifelong apprentices – those lucky enough to have never been overburdened with rules, strategies and self-consciousness – can direct their energies to more productive and rewarding tasks.

Preoccupation with audience

As we have seen, apprentices focus on the task at hand, not on spectators. The available evidence supports this feature of apprenticeship. Thus, Perl (1983) found that preoccupation with audience tends to impair writing. Often, writers who “focus on what they think others want them to write... do not establish a living connection between themselves and their topic” (49).

The teaching of grammar

Grammar instruction has been fashionable for ages. After all, doesn't it make sense to teach writing by drilling into learners the rules of language? However, the apprenticeship approach predicts the wastefulness of grammar instruction, and, as may be expected by now, the apprenticeship approach is right:

We need to attempt some massive dislocation of our traditional thinking, to shuck off our hyperliterate perception of the value of formal rules, and

to regain the confidence in the tacit power of unconscious knowledge... Hoyt, in a 1906 experiment, found... no "relationship between a knowledge of technical grammar and the ability to use English and to interpret language"... In a 1959 article... John J. DeBoer noted [that] "the results have been consistently negative so far as the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression is concerned." In 1960 Ingrid M. Strom, reviewing more than fifty experimental studies, came to a similarly strong and unqualified conclusion... For me the grammar issue was settled with [the unqualified conclusion of a 1963 survey]: "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or... even a harmful effect on improvement in writing" (Hartwell, 1985, 121, 126, 105). A series of studies... confirm that grammar instruction has no impact on reading and writing (Krashen, 1993, 22).

The effect of reading on writing

Practitioners of decontextualized and self-conscious instruction put themselves, and their students, through much dour work, forgetting all the while that there is a far more effective – and fun – way of understudying writing: reading. A survey of the literature led Stotsky (1983) to this remarkable conclusion:

Studies that sought to improve writing by providing reading experiences in place of grammar study or additional writing practice found that these experiences were as beneficial as, or more beneficial than, grammar study or extra writing practice (637).

Others go even farther:

It is only through reading that anyone can learn to write. The only possible way to learn all the conventions of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, even grammar and style, is through reading. Authors teach readers about writing (Smith, 1988, 177). Reading is the only way... we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar and the only way we become good spellers (Krashen, 1993, 23).

According to this view, writing competence "is acquired subconsciously; readers are unaware they are acquiring writing competence while they are reading" (Krashen, cited in Freedman, 1993, 230). Moreover, besides modeling good writing, reading serves another vital function. Writers need

to project themselves into the role of the reader... to attempt to become readers and to imagine what someone other than themselves will need before the writer's particular piece of writing can become intelligible and compelling. To do so, writers must have the experience of being readers. They cannot call up a felt sense of a reader unless they themselves have experienced what it means to be lost in a piece of writing or to be excited by it (Perl, 1983, 50).

It would appear then that reading for pleasure is a necessary, and almost-sufficient, condition for a good writing style (but see, e.g., Crowhurst, 1991). This fact forcefully argues for the apprenticeship approach to writing.

An Argument by Analogy: Learning to Read

Certain crafts closely resemble writing. Showing that such kindred crafts can be best acquired through apprenticeship would strengthen the case for apprenticeship in writing. To provide that additional support, we shall now direct our attention, in that order, to learning to read, learning to speak a first language, learning to speak foreign languages and learning artificial languages.

Many researchers and practitioners are convinced that reading can be best learned through apprenticeship:

[The learner is] an active and already partly competent sharer in the task of learning to read. Here the model is apprenticeship to a craftsman... the learner first undertakes the simplest parts of the job, then gradually more complex ones, increasing the share he can cope with and all the time working alongside, under the control of and with the help of, the craftsman. The apprentice does not sit passively with his mouth open; he works actively with the tools of his trade in his hand... After all, how do little children learn everything they do before school; to speak, to play, even to walk or eat? (Waterland, 1985, 6)... Children should be allowed to behave like apprentices – to be active partners in the task with the adult leading, not driving (9)... In many ways the acquisition of written language is comparable with that of spoken language... the perfect example of pure apprenticeship... Reading cannot be taught in a formal sequenced way any more than speech can be (10–11)... I began to... turn theory into practice... Within a term, so successful was the children's response that colleagues in the rest of the school began using the apprenticeship approach with their classes (17)... This response from

children is the greatest success of the apprenticeship approach to reading and its greatest justification. Teachers who are now committed to what is still, in many eyes, a revolutionary idea have a responsibility to share experiences... I believe that the potential for this approach to learning has hardly begun to be explored... What about approaching writing like this? (47-48; see also Hyde and Bizar, 1989, 59-60; Smith, 1988, 198-9, 210, 303).

An argument by analogy: learning to speak a first language

No one, to my knowledge, disputes the fact that speaking is acquired tacitly and unselfconsciously. This bolsters the apprenticeship model of writing instruction. After all, historically, writing may have originated as a means of recording speech. Also, writing still closely resembles speaking, and some of the greatest masters of the written word (e.g., Bertrand Russell) often dictated their books.

An argument by analogy: learning a foreign language

Foreign writers (e.g., Conrad, Koestler, Nabokov, Polanyi, Popper, Rand in English; Iskander in Russian; Bialik in Hebrew) sometimes reach the pinnacle of their profession. They often fail to master the sounds of their adopted language, but their writing is accent-free. For the most part, their mastery of the written word is not achieved through explicit, self-conscious instruction. Thus, Freedman (1993) cites evidence that "nearly all second language learning entails... the subconscious inferring of the rules of language use on the basis of comprehensible examples of the target language during the process of authentic language tasks" (230).

As we have seen, although apprenticeship involves for the most part tacit learning, it does contain an explicit component: unlike decontextualized abstract rules, explicitness can be of immense value – when it is used sparingly, when it accompanies and echoes practical experiences, and when it is tailored to the developmental needs of the learner. Some research suggests that foreign language instruction at its best relies on a similar mix of authentic tacit and explicit components (Ellis, 1990).

An argument by analogy: artificial language

Psychologists have studied the ability of subjects to learn artificial languages, usually constructed of nonsense syllables or letter strings... mere exposure to grammatical sentences produced tacit learning... [but] subjects given the “rules of the language” do much less well in acquiring the features than do subjects not given the rules. Indeed, even telling subjects that they are to induce the rules of an artificial language degrades performance (Hartwell, 1985, 117).

A sampler of instructional implications

There is, thus, overwhelming evidence in favor of the apprenticeship approach to writing instruction. I have already explicated a few tentative rules of apprenticeship, but these only provide a broad philosophical framework. Tacit mastery of this framework is essential to good teaching, but it does not yet tell us how this framework can be applied in settings as disparate as dancing, carrying out a scientific experiment and writing.

This framework, to begin with, points to the importance of motivational, social and affective factors – all too often set aside in the traditional classroom. It tells us that writing can be best mastered by students who feel that it is relevant to their own lives and concerns. It suggests that certain practices, despite their popularity, seeming reasonableness and many defenders, must be used only sparingly. These overused practices include out-of-context excessive teaching of rules and strategies and paralyzing novices with over-attention to themselves or to their audience. Explicit instruction and reflections must be used sparingly, appropriately and in context. Instead, writers should focus almost exclusively on generating and editing a text.

One can readily come up with many more concrete implications of apprenticeship to writing, implications which no doubt depend on such variables as imagination, language of instruction, location, age and culture.⁵ Here, I should like to further illustrate this approach through a few practices which follow from, or are consistent with, the apprenticeship approach, and which worked well in our setting: teaching English composition to older-than-average college freshmen.

Practice makes perfect

In the apprenticeship classroom, grammar, abstract rules and strategies, and metareflections are kept at arm's length. Apprentices focus on what they want to say, not on how they are going to say it. They revise their texts by relying on common sense and intuition, not on an inaccessible and confusing multitude of explicit rules and strategies. When apprentices commit glaring errors, instructors or peers bring such errors to their attention, but again, the appeal in such cases is to common sense, to usage, to aesthetics or to parsimony, not to formal rules. Apprentices don't waste their time studying rules, and exceptions thereof, for the proper use of punctuation marks. They are neither taught, nor tested on, the spelling of such words as "concede" and "quibble." They are guided towards improvements of their texts, and the texts of others, in the same way that a sculpture apprentice is taught to chisel a statue. Whenever possible, they are coached in small groups and in one-on-one conferences.

When computer labs are available, and classes are small (twenty students or less), the problem of delayed feedback can be readily overcome through computer-assisted writing workshops. These workshops mimic more closely apprenticeship in non-writing contexts, speed production and editing of texts, strengthen word-processing skills, and provide writers with immediate feedback from fellow writers and from a floating instructor, thereby allowing writers to rapidly produce successive drafts of their assignments.

Overcoming misconceptions

According to Mike Rose (1984), "many of our students have developed narrow or distorted conceptions of the writing process... our students' misconceptions profoundly affect their growth as writers" (87-8). This problem afflicts all writing classrooms, but it is particularly acute for practitioners of the apprenticeship approach. Before coming to our classroom, writers have often been urged to apply an unmanageable horde of abstract rules, to consciously employ expert strategies and to incessantly reflect on their own writing. They may feel uncomfortable in a writing class which spends much time

on the reading of contemporary short stories and little time on grammar. For the foreseeable future, then, practitioners of the apprenticeship model must clarify their educational philosophy to their students. They must also take the persistence of misconceptions into account, and rely on conceptual change strategies to overcome them (Posner et al., 1982).

As a more concrete illustration of the implications of apprenticeship and conceptual change instruction, let us direct our attention to that frequently strange animal – the comma-riddled text. We can edit it and request a revision; we can refer our students to handbooks which explicate the proper use of commas; or we can lecture on the subject, lucidly explaining and illustrating why a comma helps readers in some cases and distracts them in others. All these approaches may be valuable, but apprenticeship and conceptual change instruction both point to a better way. They tell us that students are unlikely to permanently relinquish any time-honored practice just because we are dissatisfied with it. Somehow, they must come around to being just as annoyed with unnecessary commas as we are. We can help them reach this unhappy state by asking them to read their text aloud and by insisting that, in so doing, they give every comma its due. This may bring about the desired malaise, because reading aloud is known to help writers detect redundant punctuation marks (Hartwell, 1985, 121). Next, we can guide such writers to a more nearly correct use of commas, again not through lectures but through a Socratic dialogue. We must take our time and make sure that they understand our alternative conception, for instance, by pointing out parallels between pauses in speaking and writing. We need to make sure that this conception makes sense to them, for instance, by reading aloud texts in which commas are not overused. Above all, the new conception must be shown to be fruitful; for instance, by reading aloud the revised text and perceiving that it reads better than its comatose predecessor. Finally, we need to apply a variety of conceptual change strategies, not just one. Knowing that people are disinclined to let go of discredited convictions, we need to revisit the subject of superfluous commas a few times until the alternative conception takes hold in the writer's mind. Instead of repeating ourselves on successive encounters, we can assault

- Single Stroke
- overdot
- midpoint
- period
- underdot
- bullet
- apostrophe
- inverted comma
- comma
- bar
- acute
- grave
- prime
- macron
- hyphen
- subtraction
- en dash
- ¾ em dash
- em dash
- lowline
- solidus
- virgule
- backslash
- () parenthesis
- { } brace
- ogonek
- cedilla
- breve
- Double Stroke
- umlaut / dia
- colon
- semicolon
- quotation
- quotation
- exclamat
- question
- pipe
- double
- double
- double
- = equa
- + addi
- × mu
- « » gui
- na
- fl

comma-strewn papers from new angles; for instance, by giving students the written text of a speech from which all commas have been removed, playing that speech on a tape recorder, and asking students to insert commas in the text while listening to the tape.

Guided discovery

If writing is a craft, if misconceptions about writing are indeed resistant to change (Nissani, 1994; Rose, 1984), and if the essence of learning can be “best captured by the metaphor of embryological development, not by that of the stepwise construction of brick walls” (Nissani and Hoefler-Nissani, 1992, 110), then learners “should be told as little as possible, and induced to discover as much as possible” (Spencer, 1864). For instance, errors can be circled but not corrected (cf. Hartwell, 1985, 121). Or, as we have just seen, students can detect mispunctuations by reading aloud their texts (Hartwell, 1985, 121).

Situated learning

Old-time apprenticeship is successful, in part, because apprentices often wish to acquire a craft. Their economic future, standing in the community and professional pride may hinge on successful completion of their training. They need not be cajoled into acquiring the craft; in Japan, for instance, learning traditional arts is often described as “stealing the master’s secrets” (Singleton, 1989).

Writing novices should likewise view writing, and writing instruction, as useful, relevant and empowering. The common practice of providing a real audience helps to achieve this goal. Here, students’ writings are read aloud in class, shared in small groups or placed in class publications. Instruction can also make use of writing tasks students encounter in real life; students can write and edit letters to family and friends, papers for other classes or work-related writings. Another approach involves team-teaching arrangements between a writing instructor and an instructor in another discipline. For instance, in a combined biology/writing class, learners write about biology and receive, in this context of an actual writing task, instruction and feedback from both instructors.

Rule-free grammar instruction

Instead of learning an unmanageable plethora of abstract rules, apprentices often edit ungrammatical or inelegant sentences. Throughout the process, no appeal is made to explicit rules. Some of the sentences are verbose, and apprentices discover on their own, or recognize, the superiority of a more concise version. Dangling modifiers are explained by analogies to situations where such modifiers make no sense or by appealing to apprentices' linguistic intuition. Other key problems are similarly worked out on the intuitive level, without mentioning once such terms as "subjects" or "prepositions." In a portion of the final test, apprentices can be asked to edit a "short story" which is an amalgamation of most of the errors they have encountered throughout the term.

Instead of dry, abstract and largely irrelevant recitation of rules, this problem-solving activity is productive and enjoyable. This activity can, as well, be easily converted into a competitive game. Indeed, one of the best ways, in our experience, to gain converts to the apprenticeship approach of writing instruction is precisely through this engaging rule-free activity of learning to recognize stylistic errors.

Reading

As we have seen, "writing style is not consciously learned, but is largely absorbed, or subconsciously acquired, from reading" (Krashen, 1993, 73). The implications of this for composition apprenticeship are profound. A writing class ought to be, in part, a reading class. And the goal is not only to have students read for our class, but to foster a habit of lifelong reading. Needless to add, reading instruction at its best follows the apprenticeship approach (e.g., Smith, 1988; Waterland, 1985).

Besides providing invaluable models of good writing (Smith, 1988), and besides providing invaluable insights into readers' needs (Perl, 1983), the readings we choose can be used as springboards for the students' own writing. For example, students can summarize a reading or respond to it.

To develop a keener appetite for reading well-written essays and literary works, the readings accompanying a writing class must be captivating (see Pintrich et al., 1993). They must include pieces the instructor is excited about, for students will be more impressed by the instructor's genuine enthusiasm than by anything else she does or says. The ideal collection of readings must serve as an excellent prototype of written language. It must be flexible – allowing instructors to learn from experience and add or delete material from term to term.

These goals can be best served by one collection – the coursepack instructors put together on their own. The ideal collection might include appealing short stories, light poems, and essays. For instance, a coursepack for African-American women might include a couple of short stories from Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. Perceptive love pieces always work well. Because students are interested in their immediate surroundings, the ideal collection features local, contemporary writers and journalists. A couple of short pieces by another local person of their acquaintance – their instructor – work particularly well (instructors more than make up for their shortcomings as writers by being on the spot).

To judge by current practices, many writing instructors share the view that the freshman composition class is “no place for literature” (Lindemann, 1993). Indeed, four out of five freshman composition programs in the United States include no novels, short stories, drama or poetry (Tate, 1993, 317). From the apprenticeship standpoint, this is lamentable. Because literature tends to be more emotionally gripping and engaging than essays, and because reading is essential to good writing, appropriate literature firmly belongs in every writing class. Gary Tate perceptively says: “The discipline of composition studies... has erred seriously... by elevating nonfiction prose and the discourses of the various disciplines to sacred heights, in the meantime ignoring enormously rich body of literature... [Only with] a vision that excludes no texts... can we end the self-imposed censorship that for more than two decades has denied us the use of literature in our writing classes” (321).

Modeling writing as a process

Besides exposure to well-crafted products and performances, an apprentice needs to know how these products and performances are generated and improved. Similarly, besides reading fine texts, writing students benefit from seeing accomplished writers at work, and from these writers' retrospective reflections. Students may benefit from examining successive revisions of short stories, essays or poems. They may benefit from autobiographical portraits in which writers describe critical turning points in the acquisition of their craft. They may benefit from seeing their instructor at work. For instance, by using a laptop computer and an overhead projector, a writing instructor can provide an immediate model of the process of writing and editing. As before, the goal here is neither to distill rules nor metareflections, but to provide a living model of a craftsman at work.

Role of explicitness and metareflections

As we have seen, the apprenticeship approach does not banish explicit teaching and metareflections from the composition classroom. Explicit rules are sometimes vital in an authentic context (Ellis, 1990; Freedman, 1993), or when they make writers aware of rules which they have failed to tacitly acquire. Advanced writers, in particular, may benefit from some explicit knowledge of rules and strategies of their craft and from a modicum of self-reflection.

For instance, the injunction to avoid the passive voice in one's writing is too abstract, too devoid of context, too plagued by exceptions "for the people on the spot, that is, for writers facing some concrete writing problem" (to paraphrase Feyerabend). But when given as editorial feedback on an actual text, and when the change can be readily implemented and shown to improve that text, this injunction is useful.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that controversies about such issues as explicitness, genres, grammar and metacognitions can be resolved by returning to apprenticeship as the overarching paradigm of writing instruction. One can imagine countless reasons for not embracing apprenticeship, including vested

interests, the difficulty of seeing time-honored practices in a new light, the apprenticeship models' counterintuitive emphasis on contextual learning and the effectiveness of alternative models. Nonetheless, the apprenticeship model offers a unified theory of writing instruction. It is consistent with much of what we know about both language and learning. It promises to make writing instruction more enjoyable and fruitful to both learners and teachers. It assimilates the best features of traditional and process instruction while avoiding most of their pitfalls. For these reasons, it may one day prevail.

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Notes

1. Throughout this paper, apprenticeship refers to traditional methods of learning crafts, and to modern methods of acquiring complex arts like playing piano or investigating a scientific problem. The meaning of apprenticeship in this paper is best captured by the text's extensive Polanyi's (1962) quote. Similar educational philosophies can be found in Feyerabend (1993), Smith (e.g., 1988), Krashen (e.g., 1993), and Waterland (1985, 1989). Apprenticeship is also akin to Rogoff's (1990) guided participation and to Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. Apprenticeship, as it is understood in this paper, has very little in common with cognitive apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, and Newman, 1989), the central concept in an educational model which, despite its name, embodies too few features of apprenticeship and far too many features of 1980s cognitive psychology. In contrast to Collins, Brown, and Newman's (1987) emphasis on "how cognitive apprenticeship goes beyond the techniques of traditional apprenticeship," 2) this essay argues that apprenticeship – by itself – provides the best model of writing instruction. For Collins et al. apprenticeship is a mere metaphor for an elaborate cognitive approach; for me, it's the real thing.
2. This is a paraphrase of an actual assignment in a freshman composition program.
3. Besides common sense, this assumption is traceable to uncritical acceptance of fashionable trends in cognitive psychology: "A major direction in current cognitive research is to attempt to formulate explicitly the strategies and skills underlying expert practice, to make them a legitimate focus of teaching in schools and other learning environments (Collins, Brown and Newman, 1989, 480).
4. Bereiter valiantly sets out to save as much of his old paradigm as he can by insisting that rule-bound cognitive psychology and connectionism can be united. But such a reconciliation is as likely to bear fruit as was Tycho Brahe's attempt to unite geocentricism and heliocentricism.
5. For more concrete, ready-to-use examples, please consult my manual (available upon request).

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