

## Where Is the Classroom?

**W**hatever subject we teach, it is easy—too easy—to imagine that the classroom is simply the place where we transmit our subject to students. So then the job of the teacher—who is already presumed competent in the subject—is to figure out how to package and present the information to the students and how to structure assignments and activities so that students gain mastery of the subject matter and skills rapidly and deeply. All the rest of the universe, in which this moment hangs suspended, as the earth in Milton's cosmos, is taken as a given not to be troubled over—unless one were a social critic who saw in the classroom the consequences and/or reproduction of those inequities, irrationalities, or cruelties that haunt our entire social-economic-political arrangements.

Even with the great experimentation in the teaching of writing during the last two decades, the givenness of the classroom is still taken for granted. Much of the work in our field has been to make explicit and consensually validated those aspects of the writing competence that we as literate people know as a practical matter and to add to that new practical insights. Other parts of the professional work have been to develop and test new methods and materials for transmitting that competence. On the other hand, our insights into the competence and into ways of reorganizing the classroom in order to share that competence with students very early upset our traditional notions of what can or should happen in this standard modular unit of the classroom. The centrality to writing of the students' processes, motives, and messages removed the teacher from the lectern and handed important aspects of authority over to the students—no matter which of the many varieties of writing pedagogy one pursued.

Once this first move in the disruption of the traditional classroom order was taken, it was not surprising (in the usual hyperbole of social movements) that many took this as a fully radical commitment. The traditional classroom, which we had to readjust for our needs, became the oppressor of all education and individual growth. We wanted to

reinvent the university on our model. And some very useful achievements have indeed been gained on this front, although overall they have been much more modest (and much more integrated into the continuing practices of other disciplines) than our field's visionary gleam had hoped for.

Whatever effects process and empowerment pedagogies have had on the classroom, what we have learned about writing should make us consider more fundamentally the social-psychological-political-intellectual location of the classroom. We have always known that writing was a social act, but in recent years we have begun to examine more energetically the implications of that for anatomizing the social location, dynamics, and activity of each instance of writing. We have started to see how the classroom is a particular scene of writing—neither an innately natural nor an innately artificial scene; neither necessarily an oppressive nor necessarily a liberating scene; just a scene of writing. The classroom is not even one particular fixed scene, but many scenes—the scenes as we make them from our own particular circumstances and desires. Each of those scenes sets in motion expectancies of role and behavior as well as possibilities for statement and action. Each of those scenes suggest genres of communication, genres of ways of being in that setting.

So the issue is no longer what is right or wrong in the classroom so that it must therefore be reinvented, but rather that the classroom is always invented, always constructed, always a matter of genre; therefore, no matter what choices we make, we are always better off to be aware of the materials out of which it is constructed and the spaces for communication created in the design. Then we can know our options, possibilities, and responsibilities, as well as the compelling forces we may be foolish to resist. Architecture must know its landscapes, even if it wants to call attention to its own difference.

The writing classroom is a complex forum. First, it is encased in institutional beliefs that we will put students in proper shape for other teachers and will preserve the school from damaging embarrassment as we send our products out into the world. These imperatives are realized in requirements that mandate our courses and bring students unwillingly, but usually compliantly, into our domain. These beliefs are the source of our budget and our jobs, as much as we may rebel against an implied crudeness of understanding of writing that seems mandated by the bureaucracy and finances of public educational institutions. These institutional dynamics are realized through genres of testing and standards, curriculum guidelines and goals, policies and record

keeping. There are genres that flow from the surrounding institutions into the classroom to regulate it; there are genres within the classroom that carry out the mandate of the regulation; and there are genres that flow out from the classroom that represent the work and competence of teacher and student, thereby holding them accountable to institutional expectations.

It is our choice whether these definitions of the classroom and the genres that act out these definitions are wholeheartedly accepted, wholeheartedly resisted, compromised with, or sublated into some fuller understanding of our tasks. Whichever choice we make, we must consider the prices and responsibilities of our institutional places. Classrooms and hours and available (or unavailable) equipment are perhaps the most concrete manifestation of institutional shaping of the classroom, but we must also keep in mind such union issues as pay, workload, and status that shape the teacher's professional role, commitment, and life circumstances—all of which define limits to the teacher's involvement in the classroom and institution. All these concrete architectural features of the educational landscape are in turn influenced by institutional evaluation of the results of the classroom activity, as revealed in the genres of reporting and accountability that represent the results of the classroom to the wider world.

The institutional framework is given a constraining interpretation by the department's definition in the sequence, levels, and goals of courses, perhaps reinforced by syllabi, textbook lists, and departmental exams as well as by its hiring and course assignment policies. Departments create their own regulatory and coordinating genres. They then enact within various degrees of freedom, enforcement, and evasion the lives defined by those documents and utterances. Individual teachers comprise the department and have some say in setting the constraints, but the political process usually makes the result quite different from any one teacher's direct perception of what the class ought to be. On the other hand, teachers of various seniority and/or independence of spirit can expand the bounds of these departmental interpretations as far as local administrative oversight or negligence allows. Nonetheless, concerns for our own students' ability to proceed smoothly through the departmental offerings and the university maze, as well as a spirit of cooperation with our colleagues in the educational enterprise, may rein in our individual gallops after our own perceived ideal forms.

The next level, the one most professional discussions are aimed at, is the teacher's imaginative construct of the meaning of the course, which the teacher then realizes in a structure of relationships, activities,

and materials that create the opportunities for the students' experience in the course. The teacher's construction of what is appropriate to the course also frames the teacher's response to the students' responses to the classroom. Given the usual definition of our professional task as increasing students' competence in written language, one would at first imagine that the teacher's imaginative construct would be built on that goal. However, accepting that definition in itself implies cooperation with various perceived social structures and may become a point of contention for a number of teachers. Further, there may be a great range of ideas as to what comprises competence in written language and how one attains it. Most curriculum debates center on such issues as whether competence consists of mastery of the code, particular styles of personal communication, familiarity with self-discovery or other inventional procedures, self-conscious use of revision and editing procedures, rhetorical awareness of audience, or familiarity with selected genres. This professional debate carried out in the genres of professional journals, personal credos, and coffee-room discussion itself provides a frame for each teacher's conceptualizing of the classroom. How the teacher then conceives of the classroom will influence the genres within which the teacher communicates to the students, the genres of materials and readings the teacher will bring into the classroom, and the written and spoken genres the teacher will elicit and welcome from the students.

The teacher's role in defining the dynamic of the classroom is realized not just through intellectual commitments and conscious choices but also through the personal history that shapes the personality and competences and attitudes of the person who walks in front of the classroom. The teacher's history of participation in different situations and developing skill in and affinity toward those genres through which that participation is realized prepares and predisposes the teacher to act in ways that have already proved personally successful. What competences the teacher has most to offer, what interactional skills the teacher can draw on, what habitual persona and behavior and reactional styles the teacher enacts—these all produce classroom environments and events almost beyond the control of conscious thought, although they may all be open to reflection and change.

Then there are the students' definitions of the situation and of themselves within the situation. Their understanding of where they are headed, where they are coming from, and how much they may bring their historical selves and desires into the classroom shape what the students make of the classroom and of the demands and opportunities

presented to them by the teacher. Who do they perceive themselves to be and what are their prior experiences of writing? In what specific ways is the learning of writing rewarding or aversive to them? What are their motivations for being in college, and how do these motives translate into their writing attitude in the classroom? What futures do they imagine for themselves and what college curricula stand between them and their goals? Where does writing enter into their actual academic and career goals as well as their imagined paths? How do they perceive teachers and or classmates as potential audiences for their communications? What subjects are compelling for them to communicate about and what are alienating? What underlying needs do they have which may be channeled through their writing? Many other psychological, social, economic, industrial, experiential, behavioral, self-presentational, and even spiritual issues enter in to what these complex individuals bring with them into the classroom, what they expect of writing, and how they respond to the curious communicative world the classroom offers them. From the perspective of genre, the students' histories provide students with the genres they carry with them into the classroom, their perception of how those forms of communicative participation may or may not be revealed in the classroom and with what encoding and transformation, and how they respond to the generic expectations the teacher structures into the dynamics of the classroom.

It is within the students, of course, that the learning occurs, but it is within the teacher, who sits at the juncture of forces above and below and sideways, that the learning situations are framed. It is in the intersection of all the forces that the classroom occurs. Teachers may try to simplify radically the forces through one or another pedagogical theory or commitment, very often some formal textualized reduction, requiring student enactment of well-defined genres, clearly distinct from the genres that come from outside the classroom. Students will often play along with reductionist strategies of classroom organization because of their own priorities and habits in dealing with bureaucratic institutions. Some simply want to get along institutionally and have learned how. Others perceive that learning grammar or spelling or the five-paragraph essay will serve them well. Others, however, may get lost because the reduction eliminates some important element that might link them more closely into the dynamics of written communication. In some cases formal textualized reduction is a useful and valid and successful thing to do.

On the other hand, teachers may attempt to bring a wider array of

forces to play, even though every class is necessarily a reduction, an elimination of unrealized alternatives and underlying dynamics not attended to. Teachers can attempt to let in more of the students' past, future, current reality, or imaginative and emotional privacies. Teachers can look more to institutional and social forms that surround the students' lives and in which they participate; classroom work may be built around the genres of the workplace, journalism, the media, or political participation. Teachers may make much of the dyadic relationship between teacher/student, author/audience, master/apprentice, calling upon both the students' prior experience and interior life; intimate genres of journal, dialogue, personal narrative, and contemplation are given prominence. Or the teacher may constitute the entire class as a sociocommunicative microcosm, perhaps relying on genres of argument, suggesting either seminar room or public debate. Or they may seek to place the students in direct contact with larger networks of communication, writing articles for the local newspaper, proposals for the reformation of campus life, or reports for their current employers.

Since writing is no single thing but is the textual realization of a wide range of human interactions, one cannot say a priori that any particular path is the one proper path to writing or that any particular genre ought to be practiced in the writing class. Writing will occur in a great variety of situations. The teacher has wide authority to attempt to select and rearrange the various forces around the classroom to create the character of the particular forum that the class will become, but then the classroom becomes the result of the forces that come to play within the forum. Thus, the determination of how to teach writing is a matter of social-ethical choice, but the actual events of the classroom and the learning are dynamic products of interaction beyond any individual's control.

As I mentally review the many writing courses I have taught, the framework I have just proposed helps me make sense of the eclecticism that not only makes every class session a heterogeneous experience but accounts for the great differences in which I have approached one course or group of students versus another course or group. Through a seat-of-the-pants estimate of the needs and possibilities and goals of each circumstance, I have located each course differently, enacting my teaching in different genres, bringing in different genres for student consideration, and presenting through assignment genres, differing communicative opportunities and challenges for students to realize

their presence in the classroom forum. Within the complex, multidimensional matrix of writing, I have tried to find different placements for the classroom, so that the unfolding drama of each term will take us all in the classroom to places we are satisfied with. Each term is a strange interactional journey, which my choices may frame—with bad choices leading to sterile landscapes and more fortunate choices tapping into important and vital communicative dynamics for this class at this time. But once the dynamics begin to unfold, the best I can do is watch where they are taking us, so that I can improvise most appropriately and creatively to allow these dynamics to fulfill themselves. Only then will the deepest and most useful practice of writing emerge.