

Writing as Conversation

Richard Stack

Good writing is not, at least in the usual sense, a skill; that is, something that can be taught directly. The basis of good writing is fluency, not correctness. Fluency can only be acquired through play: it is too complex a functioning to be programmed. We learn to speak through play and we should learn to write in a similar fashion. Conversation is the fundamental form of verbal play: it is dialogical rather than didactic, exploratory rather than definitive, the expression of a desire for self-representation rather than of submission to external control. A new, non-prescriptive pedagogy of writing, based on this concept of writing as conversation, is called for. An addendum describes an experimental writing course, Writing from Life, based on a design borrowed from the traditional life-drawing class.

We learn to play the language-game by playing it. We learn to speak through play, and with this learning as a basis we can then go on to modify this native gift to fit specific situations. It is only because we already know how to speak that we can learn to modify it. It would be absurd to think we could do it the other way around. Yet this absurd way is just how writing is taught; a dozen or more years are wasted on the rather trivial accomplishment of correctness while fluency, which should be the prerequisite, has to wait. If, after learning the alphabet, children were encouraged to encode the language freely (as, for example, in a good kindergarten children play with poster-paints), they would soon enough pick up the common codes without the dreadful paraphernalia of "work-books" and the like, which really have the effect of systematically discouraging the child's natural impulse to self-representation.

Fluency, not correctness, is the crucial mark of the good writer. And fluency is attained through the enticements, excitements, and exigencies of play, which is, conceptually, the very opposite of schooling. Fluency is a naturally good functioning. Once it has been attained, modifications may be easily accomplished. But until it has been, there is nothing there to modify. It is the mark of play that it is spontaneously and voluntarily undertaken. It is the expression of freely willed activity. And thus what is learned in the course of play is not burdened with the stigma of an alien will. Consequently it is hardly thought of as learning at all. In play, you learn as you go, learning what you need when you need to learn it. At school you learn what the book (and therefore the teacher) presumes you need to learn, in the order in which the book presumes you need to learn it, and at a

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pace dictated (at best) by the average capacity of the class. It is, as we all know, a recipe for boredom and alienation; you are the object of the book's indoctrination, rather than the subject of your own learning. It may be that there are some school subjects that can only be dealt with in this way, but it is a disaster for learning to write. Means should be found to encourage the child in exuberant linguistic play of all sorts (perhaps, in the earliest stages, through dictation to someone able to manage better the pen or typewriter) so that he or she may discover the power and the delight of self-representation through written as well as spoken language. Children should be constantly producing their own magazines, broadcasts, plays, and so forth, instead of handing in tiresome homework for the teacher's crabby corrections.

Good writing is, at bottom, conversation; and conversation is the name we give to verbal play. (We are accustomed to opposing play to work, which is not unreasonable. But in its reasonableness it masks the fact that many serious kinds of human work—for example, the work of the artist and the scientist—have play as their fundamental structure.) Conversation, as a form of play, has these features in common with it: it is composed of a to-and-fro movement; this movement, though ordered, is unpredictable; and it conforms to no externally defined purpose. It is not constituted by the subjectivities of the participants but is, rather, a set of rules, however loose, to which the participants submit. Like any other game, it exists before and after the players. Saussure's *langue* is an elaborate game in which the *parole* of the conversationalist is set to play.

Conversation has the complexity of a thing woven from materials which are themselves already complex and woven. The overt dialogue between two or more speakers reflects a host of other overt or inward dialogues, and the actual track of a particular conversation has many unexplored side-tracks, hints thrown out but not followed up, perhaps to be taken up at a later time. At each moment in a conversation there are a large number of possible (even if improbable) directions that it may take. "Oh, that reminds me . . .," "Oh, by the way . . .," and similar indicators of digression testify to this constant possibility. It is when a conversation is most open and (at least in the short run) unpredictable that we recognize it to be most "conversational." This points to an essence: if a conversation is rejected as, say, "boring" then it has probably moved towards some other essence; towards, say, the didactic.

Writing shares these characteristics. Not all writing, of course. But writing which points towards its essence. As writing moves away from conversation, as it ceases to be aware of being listened to, as it ceases to incorporate the responses of the other, as it begins merely to "get the job done," it moves away from its center and origin. Particularly if we are considering writing from the perspective of learning to write well, we must start with this center and origin. Secondary forms, such as the purely didactic discourse, should not be undertaken until a foundation of writing-as-conversation has been firmly established, for this is the source of fluency. Whereas didactic writing has the specific character of knowing what it is about before it is begun, conversation—which rules that its

participants, formally at least, are equals and must therefore move according to the weave of motive supplied by those participants — is itself a fundamental mode of learning. It might be objected that it is a strange form of conversation which necessarily silences one of the parties involved (namely, the reader). But it is a central axiom of literary criticism that good writing always requires the active participation of the reader in the construction of meaning.

But these shared characteristics are not the only grounds for attempting to assimilate writing to conversation. It is also a word which carries a highly appropriate *ethos*. This becomes clearer if we view the word "conversation" historically. The modern sense — a stretch of convivial talk — is a reduced, narrowed sense. But somewhere, lurking behind this sense, there is a more encompassing etymological resonance. The word derives from the deponent of the Latin verb *convertere*, which is *convertari*. The deponents were relics of the Greek middle voice, for which there was no direct equivalent in Latin. The middle voice had generally a reflexive and frequentative meaning; thus *convertari* seems to have meant something like "to turn oneself and turn oneself again." Instead of the turning being the result of some external force or will (*convertere*), the word represented an inwardly motivated turning, or perhaps an aptitude for so turning oneself. In the Middle Ages a person in a state of grace could be said to be "conversable," or "in conversation" with God. That is, he was thought to be the kind of person God could be expected to invite to his at homes in the Above. The word did not specifically refer to talk; indeed, it could even refer to animals in relation to their favoured places of congregation. It certainly comprehended sexual relations, and in general seems to have denoted a capacity to allow the continuation of social intercourse, to one's "liveability," if you will. The extraordinary scope of the word may be inferred from Milton's tract against the prohibition on divorce, where it is perhaps the key term in his argument: where there is no "conversation" between a man and his wife, the relationship is no better than slavery.

There is no modern word which quite captures this range and depth of meaning. The recent campaign on behalf of "convivial" (as opposed to "schooled") institutions conducted by Ivan Illich perhaps represents an effort to remedy this lack, as does the espousal of the term "dialogical" by South American radical theologians and social theorists. (It is the key term in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.) But the special virtue represented by the word resists being sloganized. Conversation which revels in the unexpected is not easily conformable to quickly defined norms. Perhaps one could say that it points to the kinds of things we find hard to name when we say we "get on well" with someone. It is a modest word, but it seems to carry, in its modest way, some of the calmer implications of loving.

The reason that the *ethos* of the word matters so much is that it helps to illuminate a neglected but nevertheless crucially important political dimension in the teaching and learning of writing.

This political dimension is perhaps more masked in English than in other languages due to the peculiar problems of graphic encoding our language presents. These problems derive from the odd circumstance that

the advent of print technology fossilized the graphic code at the moment when the language was undergoing its most rapid phonemic development, so that grapheme and phoneme present radically disparate pictures of the language. This, in turn, undoubtedly contributed to the overwhelming concern with the criterion of correctness in the teaching of writing. And this emphasis led, in its turn, to the appropriation of "writing skills" as an instrument of social control, a social sieve, so to speak, which could be used to control access to the ranks of privilege and power.

But writing is not, properly speaking, a skill. It is simply too complex and subtle a function to be usefully subsumed under that category, for ordinarily a skill is an essentially repetitive function rather than an essentially creative one, and is thus, in principle at least, susceptible to analysis and therefore to being taught. But one cannot really teach writing, beyond the rudimentary level. You have to teach yourself. The skills routines through which schoolchildren are pushed are manifestly ineffective for at least a large proportion of them. And it is by no means clear that it is primarily those routines which are responsible for the success of that proportion which does become fluent. It seems quite as likely that this group finds itself in a position to teach itself, due to circumstances of family and class. The net result of this state of affairs is the production of a large proportion of young citizens who have been successfully convinced, through a lamentably inadequate pedagogy, that they can have no real access to writing as an instrument of personal, and therefore of social self-representation. And since writing is so patently the property of the powerful, this conviction has the effect of legitimating and perpetuating existing patterns of inequality.

One reason why it is so hard to make a dent in the way writing is considered is the apparently inevitable synonymy of "writing" and "written." Writing is taken to be identical with, if you like, "visible language." It is true, of course, that graphic encoding has manifold and significant consequences for verbal utterance, but is it the case that writing "has its being" in its "graphicality"? If so, what are we to make of the hundreds of years of poetic composition, memorization, and performance which certainly preceded any form of graphic representation? Would it be reasonable to say that Homer and the nameless Beowulf poet were not participating in the same kind of way of "being with language" as their grateful inheritors, such as Milton, Wordsworth, and Joyce? Furthermore, what are we to make of the fact that "The Prelude" was composed while its author was pacing up and down a stretch of gravel path, and subsequently committed to paper through dictation to the faithful Dorothy? In general it is more precise to consider writing as the composition of language such that it may be reproduced, and to consider its graphic encoding as simply the first occasion of such reproduction. What such a formulation entails is the view that writing is fundamentally a mode of performance, of address to the other; that it is, in fact, conversation.

We must find a way to give people — people in general, not just the usual select bunch — the chance to discover and delight in the power of the written word as a mode of self-representation. Writing is the way we make

ourselves heard, and if one is not heard, one is unlikely to listen. It is my contention that a consideration of writing as a kind of conversation can offer a direction for the reinvention of a pedagogy of writing which can begin to do this more effectively than prevailing methods.



ADDENDUM: A Letter to a Novelist

Dear ———

I have heard, through the grape-vine, of an incident at a cocktail-party at which you were heard to express dismay at the idea of a course I am offering entitled *Writing from Life*. It seemed to me that your interest in the course, though I gather dismissive in character, nevertheless provides an occasion for giving some explanation of its nature and conception, for sending you a copy of some of the work produced during the last version of the course a year ago, and, finally, for inviting you to attend a class meeting.

Certain disciplines—notably dancing, drawing, and fencing—have traditionally been taught outside the academy and consequently developed their own rather special pedagogical structures and arrangements without the normative constraints of the school or university. Many teachers of these disciplines work in effect, as small entrepreneurs who stand or fall by their ability to attract and hold their clients. An institutional setting tends to protect salaried teachers from such direct pressure—at least to some degree. This protection seems to impose on salaried teachers (like me) a special responsibility to make good use of the relative freedom it affords, and not to settle comfortably for certain well-worn but untested assumptions about how best to do the work.

I dare say that you have done some teaching of writing at some point, and, if so, that you are aware that the question of how best to do it is a matter of doubt and controversy. On the whole, it is badly done, or at least uncertain in its results. It is not implausible, therefore, to think that some fundamental rigidities of conception in the design and execution of such courses may contribute to their widespread failure. The purpose of my course is experimental: it is to see whether adapting a pedagogical design which has an ancient and proven value in the visual arts (namely, the life-drawing class) to the purposes of learning to write may be an effective way of circumventing some of these rigidities of conception.

I have taught for some fifteen years now, and over this period I have developed certain general criteria to enable me to distinguish between a good and a bad class. In a good class the student is thinking about the subject he is studying and the teacher is thinking about the student's thinking—in short, teaching is subordinated to learning. In a good class the student is working actively, getting real exercise, and not merely sitting and (perhaps) listening. In a good class the student is continuously aware of

the work being done by other students, their successes and failures. In a good class, finally, the object is to discover what can be done, not merely to repeat oneself or others.

These four general criteria seem to be of broad (though not exhaustive) validity, but they are particularly apt criteria for a class in writing. It is not altogether obvious how to design a course which will effectively respond to them, but I believe that *Writing from Life* does at least begin to do so. Let me try to explain how.

The class is given in a studio rather than a classroom setting, and thus inherits some of the aura of the practical work associated with such a setting. As in a life-drawing class, the focus of attention of the students is on their efforts to render their response to a model, rather than on the teacher. The teacher is thus free to circulate around the outside of the class, rather than being pinned to the centre. He is thus able to attend to the student's writing at the moment of its composition and to help with difficulties as they emerge.

The class is organized as a series of exercises, and after each exercise is completed the results are read aloud to the class. This is not a rigid rule, but enough is read so that a student can get a feel for the range of possible solutions to the problem posed by the exercise and can gauge their relative effectiveness. At the end of the course we will generally contrive to produce some sort of publication of the best material, as in the magazine I have enclosed.

Although the exercises which comprise the class are fairly specific and frequently have rigid and arbitrary limits, they never imply any particular solution. In effect, they are provocations to write, occasions for writing, rather than problems in the usual sense of the word. There is no question of grading what is produced, but rather of trying to discover what works.

Doubtless the notion of using nude models in a writing class strikes one as eccentric (or worse). I have a number of reasons for thinking it to be a good idea, and have encountered no seriously reasoned objections so far. The human body is an extraordinarily absorbing and interesting object: it is the locus of a range of emotions and feelings broader and deeper than any other. The nude body in a studio pose is an object located in a specifically imaginative space: the nudity of the model removes both his or her character as a particular person (with a given name, occupation, history) and his or her location in a particular place. He or she acquires, automatically, a symbolic and imaginative presence akin to that, say, of a dancer. Thus the writer is free to imaginatively place, clothe, and give a history to the model without hindrance. Furthermore, the presence of the model creates a certain urgency, a sense of obligation in the classroom which, it turns out, provides a powerful motor for student work. The nude presence is unambiguously what it is: it's there for you, and you are there to study it.

Although writing "from" the model is the most important recurring element in the design of this course, it is worth noting that many of the class exercises do not involve the model at all. However, writing from the model does obviously define a rather particular attitude towards the kind of work on which the course will focus, and this attitude pervades all the

exercises. It should perhaps be noted that the object of the exercises involving the model is by no means restricted to the description of the model. Indeed, one thing that becomes apparent very quickly is that writing is a strikingly limited tool for the mere description of the external world, and that its real forte is the externalization of inner states.

One might have thought, perhaps, that the nudity of the model might prove sexually provocative and therefore embarrassing (or worse). In practice however, this does not appear to be the case, except perhaps initially for a few moments. It turns out that the body has far more interest than mere sexiness, and it is more likely to be the very unfamiliarity of the body that is disconcerting rather than its sexiness.

I am aware that designing a course in this manner is a provocative act. But it seems to raise a healthy challenge to prevailing pedagogical designs. Oddly enough, the students cotton on to the idea easily, and seem enthusiastic about the possibilities it offers of active studio work in writing.

The success of a class, I believe, depends more than is usually thought on its pedagogical design, which is what I have stressed here. But of course it also depends upon the acumen and sensitivity of the person conducting it. However, it has been my observation that the teacher tends to see the relation between his work and the student's achievement as a relation of cause and effect. It would be more accurate to see the relation as analogous to that which obtains between setting and action in a play. One of the virtues of the pedagogical design I have described is that it could serve as a model for a teacherless class, or at least that it could help clarify the relatively modest degree to which learning is directly dependent on teaching.

I have deliberately refrained from giving any details as to the actual exercises which constitute the class in the hope that you may find yourself sufficiently intrigued to come and have a look. The students would get a kick out of it and so might you . . .

"A writer keeps surprising himself . . .
he doesn't know what he is saying
until he sees it on the page."

Thomas Williams

Mixing Levels of Revision

David Lowenthal

Orderly and straightforward revision, in which editorial tasks are delimited draft by draft, breaks down with lengthy and complex tasks. In rewriting a book, I have had to combine various stages of revision in each draft — adding new material, reshaping thoughts, striving for coherent expression, and polishing prose simultaneously instead of serially. This kaleidoscopic way of working yields unexpected advantages that compensate for its untidy clutter: it helps to maintain the pace of revision, resolves problems left over from previous drafts, and stimulates new ideas and reconsiderations which, at a late stage in the editorial process, come as necessary nuisances.

For some years I have followed a regular system of rewriting. This tried and true routine has recently failed me in rewriting a book. Rather than working in an orderly sequence I have had to backtrack to previous tasks, undertaking late much of what should be done early in the process of revision. Confusion and anxiety result.

Why has this happened? The explanation suggests a remedy. My present task is too complex and prolonged for the normal routine, one draft after another, each with a set goal. Instead, I now have to consider problems of content, structure, meaning, and style in the same draft, amalgamating various stages of rewriting.

Let me be specific. My book concerns the ways we use the past and how we transform it in doing so. My sources are enormously varied: they range from discussions of the meaning of history and dissertations on memory to debates about architectural preservation and appreciation of old movies, antiques, family trees, and science-fiction time travel. Some of these materials are quite easy to deal with; straightforward and lucid, they need little reorganization to fit my framework, emerging only slightly altered from their original form. Other sources, by contrast, pose extraordinary difficulties; to unravel and render accessible convoluted arguments couched in opaque, jargon-laden prose may require several revisions.

These disparities endure through several drafts, with some sections long seeming more finished than others. Certain segments will be intelligible, even elegant, other portions awkward or unclear. This unevenness was initially distressing, for it not only upset my writing habits but cast doubt on my presumptions about revising. Let me first detail these habits and presumptions.

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