

## Teaching Analytic Reading and Writing: A Feminist Approach

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Too often philosophers complain that their students neither read nor write effectively, but take little or no responsibility for enabling them to become literate. "That's the job of the English Department!" At the same time many seem to feel that improvement in these areas comes automatically with the study of philosophy. At an institutional level this becomes a vicious circle; at the individual level many students are simply passed by.

It is our position that every teacher must systematically interweave instruction in literacy skills with instruction in course content. At the minimum, this means helping students with format, style and organization. Beyond this, it means stimulating them to move from one developmental stage to another. Students often start college with the assumption that their task is learning the "right" answers from authority figures and then move to the supposition that no answer is better than any other. Successful students gradually begin to realize that their goal is to provide support for a position they find the best among alternatives. Mature adult students will ideally arrive at the understanding that they must commit themselves to specific values and participate in a continuous process of critical debate.<sup>1</sup> In this context, genuine literacy requires training in philosophical argumentation. Because the skills involved in reading, writing and thinking philosophically are interrelated, difficulty in one area will adversely affect the possibility of success in another. To criticize Plato's *Republic*, for example, the student has to know how to read it carefully and how to write down her or his ideas in a logically coherent and interesting fashion, a process that implies mastery of numerous small tasks. Such routines can be developed in the context of meaningful assignments and discussions.

We do not need to read John Stuart Mill to realize that a just and progressive society requires an educated and articulate citizenry. In a society like ours, where critical thought processes are suffocated, real literacy is liberating; for the dispossessed, it becomes an act of survival. Even for the white middle class, it involves being able to think about one's own thinking as well as being critically conscious of the social thought and practice inherent in any text. Teaching literacy in the fullest sense, then, implies empowering students to assume personal control and

responsibility for their own thinking, reading, and writing.

This cannot be done well in a traditional classroom centered around the lectern, but can be accomplished in a collective environment where students actively participate in group work, and the rigid separation of teacher and learner is dismantled. A communal atmosphere enhances education for many reasons. Some of the most obvious are that it is less boring to students than most lectures, it allows students to learn from each other, and it discourages passivity. In a collectively oriented course, the true meaning of student responsibility for education can at least be approached. There we can begin to foster the processes of critical debate that we want students to use.

Collaboration and team teaching by an instructor of a traditional course and an instructor mainly interested in comprehension and learning processes is a good way to encourage growth in literacy skills. This paper describes a course offered at Denison University by a philosopher and a reading and writing specialist during the 1984 January Term, a four week period during which students pursue one intensive course. We met for two hours four mornings each week and expected our eighteen students to spend three or four hours studying, reading, and writing outside of class each day. Both of us were present for all sessions, at times assuming particular responsibilities for teaching, at times dividing the class into two groups, and at other times jointly leading discussions with the entire group. Student work was graded Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory. The texts we used were: *A Preface to Philosophy* by Mark B. Woodhouse<sup>2</sup> and *A Woman's Place: Rhetoric and Readings for Composing Yourself and Your Prose* by Shirley Morahan.<sup>3</sup> As supplemental material we used the film *The Double Day*<sup>4</sup> and records by feminist musicians.

In this essay we begin by explaining what we mean by "analytic" reading and writing, move to a discussion of feminist pedagogy, and then consider the interrelationship between reading and writing. In a later section we describe some of the activities we found most successful, concentrating on class exercises, writing assignments, and approaches to revising. We devote several pages to describing actual classroom activities in the hope that attention to concrete, practical detail will be useful to other instructors.

### *A Definition of Analytic Reading and Writing*

We view growth toward analytic reading and writing abilities as progress from non-analytic, through pre-analytic and analytic stages.<sup>5</sup> When students read analytically they view the work as a formal entity which exists objectively in intellectual life. Making a distinction between a superficial understanding of the author's words and the underlying argument, they see the text as a persuasive discussion fitting into a specific theoretical framework. Their written evaluation may discuss the adequacy of the background theory, identify presuppositions and logical, moral or political consequences, and relate the main points to significant themes of experience. With instruction in some basic concepts of logic and the encouragement to use their logical intuitions, they can develop

skills in evaluating the adequacy of the arguments presented. In general, therefore, to become analytic, students must move away from the naive position that a text is a literal description of the facts or simply a statement of personal belief, and they must reform their suspicion that it is only the dishonest, prejudiced writer who has a particular bias. They must discover that all texts carry theoretical perspectives and that their task as learners is to identify and evaluate these and their accompanying argumentation.

At the non-analytic level, students treat a text as a literal representation of the facts. Their exposition tends toward heavy use of direct quotation and paraphrase and their evaluation assesses the truth or falsity of the author's statements. At the pre-analytic level, students presume the text to be a neutral, unbiased report of the beliefs of a particular author, concentrating on the ideas presented as psychological entities rather than formal and logical ones. Assertions are seen as weakly interrelated and chosen in order to explain what the author thinks. Students at this level are able to report arguments by picking out conclusions and evidence presented. They assess what they assume to be the intentions of the author.

Our experience at Denison indicates that average first-year students react to their reading somewhere between the first two levels and that by their junior year many good students are capable of fairly consistent analytic reading and writing. In general, at the undergraduate level, however, students will work with a mixture of pre-analytic and analytic levels.

### *The Rationale for a Feminist Content*

Many reading and writing courses do not emphasize a particular content area, but we chose to work with consciously feminist texts. Analytic work requires a good bit of grappling with ideas and we feel this process is best spurred on by new viewpoints and positions out of line with mainstream culture. Other controversial subject matter, such as opposition to racism, would do as well, as long as the instructor is personally and politically committed to that content. We have found women's studies particularly helpful, because gender, sexuality, and the relationship between the sexes are such pressing issues. The use of feminist material touches the students' personal lives, it is interesting, and it puts forward the concrete situation of women's status in society and the students' own attitudes toward women as a problem which confronts them and requires a response.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, we expected most students to have a strong personal investment in and experience with their own point of view about women. Both of us have been very impressed with Paulo Freire's suggestions for a "problem posing education" which has as its goal the development of "critical consciousness."<sup>7</sup> We hoped that ideas from women's studies would help them discover their own "generative themes," those issues so close to a person's consciousness that their pursuit becomes vital for the person's ability to see him or herself in relation to the world.<sup>8</sup> We wanted the students to move to a consideration of the nature of their own thoughts as well as to examine the structure of the world around them.<sup>9</sup>

There is a profound commonality between feminist methodology and Freire's pedagogy because both emphasize collective democracy and the analysis of personal experience through consciousness raising.

*Reading and Writing: Two Sides of a Linguistic Process*

Readers bring the sum of their experience to the interpretation of what they read. They look for meaningful relationships between what they already know and what is new information. When a reader's background knowledge does not parallel the author's, and when the reader has little practice in evaluating an interpretation, naive readings of the text result. Worse, such a student has few resources for realizing that this is the case. The practice reveals an inability to think about one's own reading and is typical of a non-analytic approach. As the strength of the reader's prior knowledge and familiarity with the text increase, so does the possibility of reading more analytically.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, many of our classroom activities, some of which are discussed below, focus on developing such knowledge.

Readers also develop specific practices for particular kinds of reading. The process of reading proficiently should be that of becoming immersed in the task of constructing for oneself the meaning of the text. Readers must also use strategies that enable them to identify their own misunderstandings in order to clarify meaning. Non-analytic readers are not asking the appropriate questions during the act of reading because those strategies are not part of their habitual approach. Therefore, in class we concentrate on detailing particular steps in reading that our students should take, describing and demonstrating a procedure for reading an assignment. Ideally, students should consider the historical or theoretical context of an article and what they know about the author before beginning the first of three readings. The first reading should be a quick one to get a broad overview, the second, a more careful, slow reading for understanding accompanied by note-taking. Before the third attempt, students should try to determine what their own view of the issues covered is and then compare and contrast that with the view presented by the text. The third reading is again careful and is done in order to critically analyze and evaluate the author's position. We emphasize that even experienced readers must work with a text several times before they can be clear about its underlying pattern of argumentation.

Writing, too, is a process, the product of which does not come all at once. Inexperienced writers have the misconception that good writing simply springs from the writer's mind in complete form at one sitting. We present the conventional model of pre-writing, writing, and re-writing, emphasizing the first and the last because students most often ignore them. In philosophy, the pre-writing stage is essential because there the student must lay down the basic structure of an argument. Students can benefit from breaking up writing into steps which can be followed like a recipe and which, once learned, can generally be applied to other essays. The first step includes brainstorming as a method of pre-writing, a way of discovering ideas, categorizing them, and exploring alternatives. In

teaching the last stage, re-writing, we distinguish between editing and genuine revision, and as we shall show, we instruct our students to become analytic readers of their own writing in order to make significant changes in their essays.

### *A Description of Class Activities*

*Journal Writing:* We started each class with a ten to fifteen minute period of journal writing, a pedagogical device which accomplishes at least three things: a) students are able to pull their thoughts together and prepare for discussion, b) the instructor can ask a specific question, thus preparing students for the content of the class session, and c) students get used to writing in the classroom. We find that students become more responsible for their own learning as they practice preparing for discussions. We often specified the writing task, at first asking students to summarize a discussion or a reading assignment or to formulate questions they would want to ask during class. As we progressed, we posed specific questions for analysis such as "Does the word 'discrimination' capture what is meant by the concept of oppression?"

*Word Processing:* Students learned the rudiments of word processing in three one-hour classes provided by a Denison Computer Center staff member outside of our regular class time. Denison's mainframe is a VAX 11/780. Our hope was that the use of the computer would remove the tedium of recopying the text upon discovering mistakes, thus freeing the students to concentrate on the analytic quality of their thoughts. Computer word processing has at least two advantages: a) It enables the writer to create new versions of a paper without the usual drudgery of copying the old. The writer can easily delete and/or rearrange characters, words, lines, and paragraphs. The computer saves all the versions so they can be kept for future reference. b) Programs such as "Criticize" developed at Denison<sup>11</sup> can search for and alert the writer to typographical errors and misspellings as well as possible usage errors. A major pedagogical advantage was that we as instructors could comfortably act as co-learners regarding the computer; although we use it extensively, there is always more to learn about its capabilities and limitations. There is nothing magical about the use of a computer and in a sense it is problematic to make students dependent on a piece of expensive technology, but students find it attractive and enjoyable. Its greatest advantage is that it makes the process of genuine revision more realizable than does the typewriter.

*Brainstorming:* We introduced brainstorming as a class exercise, asking the question, "Should the government draft women?" Dividing the blackboard into two sections, pro and con, we recorded the students' ideas and then typed them into the computer. Next we asked the students to categorize their lists. The computer gave the students the flexibility of trying a statement in one category and then deciding that it fit better elsewhere. The question itself was vigorously debated during this exercise and the students were soon ready to divide into groups and write introductions to a paper which might come from the ideas they had listed. Each group displayed its introduction on the overhead monitor enabling

the class to judge each on the basis of four criteria: a) the presence of a thesis statement, b) the inclusion of a statement about the organization of the essay, c) the explanation of important definitions, and d) an appeal to the reader's interest. These criteria became the first part of a checklist we distributed for them to use in composing and revising their final papers.

*Interrogative Mode*<sup>12</sup>: In "the interrogative mode" everyone formulates questions. No answers are allowed. We found this to be an interesting way to help students think about two essays: "Psychology Constructs the Female" by Naomi Weisstein<sup>13</sup> and "Femininity" by Sigmund Freud.<sup>14</sup> We asked each student to contribute at least three questions and said that we would continue until no one could think of any more questions. On this occasion the questioning lasted for almost an hour. Then we asked each student to write down the three questions he or she thought were most important, numbering them in the order of their importance. Turning again to the computer we listed the most important question offered by each student in turn. Most of the questions were clearly analytic ("Is it possible to come up with an unbiased theory?" and "Using Freud's theory, how does sexuality affect the male-female relationship?") The printout of this list served as preliminary work for their major writing assignment. This exercise is particularly helpful in encouraging students to uncover theoretical frameworks and presuppositions and to think about what sorts of questions are appropriate to ask; it also stimulates reticent students to participate.

*Slide Presentation*: Our reading assignment on the section in *A Preface to Philosophy* dealing with the logic of philosophical arguments asked them to pay particular attention to identifying assumptions and logical consequences. We had our Learning Resources Center make slides of the advertisements in a recent issue of *Time* magazine and presented them in the order in which they appeared. The students enjoyed pinpointing the underlying assumptions the ads make—especially about the roles of men and women in society—and discussing the reason for their placement in specific sections of the magazine. They also identified errors in reasoning the advertisements committed.

*Using student questions to structure exercises*: One classroom exercise worked out particularly well although we had not planned for it. A student asked, "Can I use analytic techniques in any other reading than my school work?" We replied that it could be useful in reading the newspaper, for example, and the student responded, "Newspapers report facts." We read aloud a recent newspaper article dealing with hunger in the United States. Challenging the students to analyze the argument according to the criteria provided in Woodhouse, we worked out the argument on the blackboard. They were able to figure out for themselves that the argument used by the administration's spokesperson was invalid because it committed the fallacy of affirming the consequent. When it had been made dramatically evident that analytic reading can go on in any context, we experienced anew the importance of responding to our students' concerns about the applicability of what goes on in the classroom to life outside the university.

*Student Conferences*: Team-teaching made it particularly easy to hold con-

ferences with individual students. We devoted an entire day to a succession of half hour appointments during which we discussed revising a specific paper. Our strategy was to help each student identify two or three areas to concentrate on in their own writing and to make concrete suggestions for doing so, since it is our experience that pointing out every mistake is overwhelming. For example, we might ask a student to read a portion of a paper aloud and then ask questions designed to get her or him to think about a logical gap or a weak assertion. The next step would be to discuss the actual words that might contribute to a revision. Students need direct guidance and quick evaluative responses from a more experienced reader and writer whenever possible in order to learn habits that contribute to analytic writing.

*Applications to other classes:* These techniques are readily adaptable to other classes although the content and the objectives of the course would condition their use. Planning and implementing such adaptations need not take an inordinate amount of time; in fact, through making instruction more efficient, time is saved. While it might seem a risk to depart at times from the lecture mode, moving toward Freire's problem solving approach minimizes that risk because it enhances student learning.

The slide technique, brainstorming and interrogative mode, for example, could easily be used elsewhere. It might be interesting to compare the advertising strategies of very different magazines—say, *Forbes* and *Ms.* or *Mother Jones*. In social and political philosophy, slides of street scenes, factory settings or people relating to each other at home could be used to stimulate discussion of the underlying themes of everyday life. Pictures are symbolic of social meaning and this meaning can be uncovered from slides as well as written texts and discussed in the very philosophical activity of critiquing our own culture. Brainstorming functions well as a way of getting students to think about a subject before studying it. Students might be asked to list their thoughts about justice before reading *The Republic* to encourage them to move from a concrete consideration of their own experience to an abstract conceptual analysis. The interrogative mode can be used to make a transition from one unit of study to another, by enabling students to draw questions from philosophy of science, for example, which they want to pose during a segment on the history of science.

### *The Role of Revision in Analytic Writing*

Our course concentrated to a great extent on revision as an integral part of the process of writing. Usually when teachers talk about revision, students think they are concerned mainly with the mechanics of their papers—whether commas are used appropriately, whether sentences are complete, whether verbs and their subjects agree, and whether words are spelled correctly. While these features are important to the communicating act that writing is, we want to help our students get beyond these features.

Therefore, we call the former sort of rewriting “editing,” reserving the word “revision” to mean that process a writer carries out in substantially changing her

or his own writing.<sup>15</sup> We give our students the following directions to stimulate them to become their own audience—the writer turned reader: Read each sentence or section. Can you appropriately ask “why?” or “why not?” at the end? Can you comment “so?” If you can, there’s a logical gap there. Fill it in by telling your reader more. Such analytic reading requires a constant monitoring of meaning and syntax.

We carry the distinction between editing and revising even further and tie it in to the change of consciousness described in Freire’s pedagogy. Adrienne Rich offers a related view. Appropriating the syntax of “revision,” she writes of “re-vision” as:

. . . the act of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction . . . . It is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

She stresses that good writing requires:

an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot, knowing that your motion can be sustained, that the buoyancy of your attention will not be suddenly snatched away.<sup>17</sup>

Genuine re-vision, then, is truly a transformative process that involves seeing the world, one’s writing, and oneself differently. Ideally, one becomes so engaged in the logic of the argument that it carries one along and dictates the next step in the reasoning process. Re-vision is a liberating process because it fosters qualitative developmental change and the assumption of responsibility for one’s expressive identity. Such refining of one’s own generative themes is crucial for the ability to read and write analytically.

### *A Writing Assignment and Sample Responses*

We will now discuss in detail one of our writing assignments and the drafts of two of our students’ papers in order to make some specific observations about the process of becoming more analytic and the role that writing, team teaching, and revising groups can play in that process. We modified an assignment from *A Woman’s Place* to read:

After reading the following quote from The Declaration of Independence, list the assumptions which stand under its assertion of self-evident truths. Consider these assumptions carefully and select one about which you will have something interesting to say. Write a two page analytic essay about what this assumption means to you, being sure to indicate how its implications apply to the United States in the twentieth-century.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>18</sup>

This assignment was successful because it was grounded enough in the

students' experiences that they could begin to think analytically about it. In the context of the feminist readings we had studied, many of the first responses focused on a criticism of the use of the supposedly generic "man" and issues concerning equality between women and men.

We both read all of the students' papers, taking turns being the first reader, sometimes even commenting on each other's remarks. Since genuine revising is enhanced through receiving criticism from others, we wanted to accustom students to asking their peers to read their papers. So, for each writing assignment we had the students break into groups and/or pairs to read each other's work and make comments for revising. Both of these processes diffuse authority from central figures and provide a more detailed and collective response. This communal atmosphere encourages the students to assume more responsibility for their own work and learning. By the third week the students were not only comfortable but enthusiastic about helping each other and acting on criticism received. During one revising session we were struck by the similarity between our classroom and a newspaper room; students were actively engaged in their work, moving freely around to solicit comments.

The first student work we will look at shows how both writer and respondent can advance toward analytic thinking. Student one's first draft was poorly organized and relied on arguments from authority (the dictionary and the Bible) to support his contention that the language of The Declaration of Independence is not discriminatory and that everyone is equal in our society. Next to the quotations from the dictionary, a student reader wrote on his paper, "What are the assumptions?" After discussions with fellow students and with us, he modified his first strategy and argued that people are not generally regarded as equal, but that change is not likely to occur soon. He tried to argue for the latter by setting up an analogy between resistance to social equity and to the acceptance of the metric system. This elicited the comment from a classmate: "The two concepts are not comparable. Think of another example. I know what you mean, but the metric system is too weak an argument." His final draft is better organized than any of the previous ones, but while it goes beyond the first two drafts, it still contains the logical gap of failing to argue for his view that the word "men" is actually gender neutral. In this version he expands his section on why he believes it will be some time before women achieve equality. He also comments on working and the concomitant freedom and rights it implies. On this paper student one did not reach the analytic level we had hoped for, but his work exhibits clear progress and, above all, a willingness to think about and act on criticism.

Student two's first attempt was a brief "safe" response which at first glance seemed to fulfill the assignment. Her subsequent versions, however, revealed a misunderstanding of the difference between The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution. Her confusion about what The Declaration of Independence accomplished persisted throughout her drafts despite comments which questioned her understanding of it. She had called it the "backbone" of American government, and in response to our prodding finally said it served "to hold the country together as a set of rules and regulations by which we were to live under and

obey.” She did, however, make some progress in understanding egalitarianism. Her second draft attempts a conceptual analysis by asking, “What does it mean ‘All men are created equal’?” She suggests it means “no one is better than the next person and that everyone is the same;” but she worries that that assertion is not true because: “Some people are handicapped and retarded at birth.” After discussing the difference between the idea of social equity and that of physical sameness, she changed her analysis and claimed that the famous sentence means that “all colors, religions and both sexes have the same rights and opportunities.”

We offer these examples to illustrate what can happen when students are asked to re-think an assignment. It is encouraging to see the action a student takes in response to criticism since too often we return papers and wonder whether they are ever look at again. Focusing on revision in a collective setting maintained a dialogue about the students’ work which enabled both us and the students to identify and examine the steps in their thought process.

### *Conclusion*

We believe the underlying theme of our course was transformation. Many of our students had finished the previous semester in academic difficulty and found confidence in their new ability to approach subject matter more carefully. Some had enrolled simply to learn word processing, but left having gained new control over their thoughts and expression. Keeping in mind the difficult and gradual nature of the growth toward analytic reading and writing we believe we saw developmental progress in our students. The role of a professor should be to pay attention to the typical pattern of development of analytic skills and to help students lay the groundwork for future growth. Development is made more likely through a feminist transformation of the classroom since it requires a democratic and collective environment which makes students take more responsibility for understanding the issues covered. Students enjoy the sense of community fostered by classroom activities which allow them to express their opinions and disagree with instructors and each other. Throughout this paper we have adopted the position that instruction in reading and writing can be included in regular classes. The time required for such skill-building, far from detracting from course objectives, enriches the students’ mastery of course content and encourages methods of abstraction which are part of the very nature of philosophy.

### Notes

1. William Perry’s work provides a description of such developmental stages. For an application of Perry’s schema to the teaching of philosophy, see William J. Rapaport, “Critical Thinking and Cognitive Development,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 57:5, May 1984. Progression through the stages of Perry’s schema is a gradual lifelong process. Some students do not reach the final stages even with four years of college.

2. Mark B. Woodhouse, *A Preface to Philosophy* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1975). The last two chapters are particularly good for their explanations of reading and writing philosophically. The book also contains helpful exercises on tools of informal logic that can be used for class discussion or homework.

3. Shirley Morahan, *A Woman's Place: Rhetoric and Readings for Composing Yourself and your Prose* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981). This is both a composition book and an anthology of interesting feminist writings, many of them now classics of Women's Studies.

4. Helena Solberg-Ladd, dir., *The Double Day*, Tricontinental Film Center, 1975. (53 minutes). This is a film about working class women in Latin America and how their lives have been changed in the transition from a peasant based agrarian mode of production to a more capitalist one.

5. For a fuller discussion of the difference between these stages see Daniel J. Kurland, "A Student's View of the Text: Implications for Reading and Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, 27 (1975), pp. 341-346.

6. Feminist material also stimulates consideration of traditional philosophical issues such as the distinctions between appearance and reality, and ought and is. Free will versus determinism is easily discussed, as well as issues surrounding decisions about the adequacy of conflicting theories.

7. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973).

8. Freire, p. 92.

9. An interesting pairing of Freire's pedagogy with feminism is found in Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser, "Strangers No More: A Liberatory Literary Curriculum," *College English*, 44 (1982), pp. 115-128.

10. This prior knowledge is termed "schemata" by some working on the problem of describing comprehension. The suggestion is that people use various cognitive structures in order to make sense of what they experience; in this framework the act of reading is analogous to the act of hypothesis testing. For an extended discussion of this, see David E. Rumelhart, "Understanding Understanding," in *Understanding Reading Comprehension*, ed. James Flood (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1984).

11. Created by Dr. Tommy Burkett of the English Department, Denison University.

12. Suggested by Len Jordan and Kent Maynard of the Sociology/Anthropology Department, Denison University.

13. Morahan, p. 152.

14. Reprinted in *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relation Between Women and Men*, ed. by Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg, 2nd edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984), pp. 91-98.

15. A discussion of this view can be found in Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading, A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*, third edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982).

16. Morahan, p. 9.

17. Morahan, p. 16.

18. Morahan, p. 132.