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## A Substitute for Experience

*Frederick K. Lang*

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Among college freshmen there are writers I regard as doubly inexperienced. Not only have they written little or nothing before being enrolled in a developmental writing course; they have also had little or no opportunity for the kinds of experiences that translate into telling examples and effective supports. But in spite of the latter deficiency, their writing teachers and tutors usually instruct them to limit themselves to a single resource: their own unembellished personal experiences. However, for these basic writers—or developing writers as I prefer to call them—“truth” and “beauty” are frequently incompatible. Indeed, it is often the developing writer’s concern with remaining completely truthful, with rendering an experience exactly, that sabotages her efforts to achieve the modest sort of beauty we are asking of her: a fair degree of clarity and coherence and reasonable observance of grammatical conventions.

As teachers and tutors of developing writers, we all encourage our students to exploit firsthand experience, and of course we should continue to do so, though I suspect that our directions to our students in this regard are usually as redundant as those which appear on every Writing Skills Assessment Test given by the City University of New York: “Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observations of others, or your reading.” It would be perverse to write about one’s experience without referring to what one has observed others doing and saying. Even one’s “own” experience usually occurs within a social context; there is little experience, even of a relatively private sort, that does not involve at least minimal interaction with others. And distinguishing “reading” from “experience” simply reflects the marginal position that the printed word occupies in the lives of our students.

The three categories offered to the developing writer—"your own experience," "your observations," "your reading"—are, I realize, meant to clue him in to the fact that variety is in order, that the shift to another support should also be a shift to a different species of firsthand experience. Though he is being given sound advice, a framework for his response, this is all somewhat vitiated by the pronoun "your." That pronoun asks for the truth, and telling the truth is difficult, especially when the parameters have been set by an "issue" and the temporal conditions are less than generous. Developing writers often find truth-telling impossible—even when the topic is less restrictive and they have more time. It's not that they don't want to write truthfully—indeed, most of them are quite diligent in their efforts to write from experience. It is, rather, that they cannot recall experiences that are pertinent or simply discover that they have not had any.

The problem of recall can, to a great extent, be overcome with training—with practice in using "priming the pump" techniques such as freewriting, brainstorming, and clustering. The second problem, that of sheer inexperience, is obviously the more serious. It is not simply a matter of youth but, in the case of many underprepared students, a matter of cultural isolation, of very limited opportunity for certain kinds of experiences. Of course, the lack of experience is more of a drawback in some cases than in others. A seventeen-year-old student confronting an assignment that asks her to take a stand on whether or not neglecting to vote is unpatriotic is, on the face of it, in worse shape than the student asked whether or not spanking is a desirable way of disciplining a child. The first student may have never experienced voting; perhaps she doesn't even know anyone who votes. Drawing upon her "own experience" to defend her position would obviously be to no avail. The second student, however, might be in as much difficulty as the first if he is living with relatives and is either abused or ignored, that is, if he has never been "spanked" as part of a disciplinary approach taken by his parents.

When a developing writer is attempting to defend her position on an issue, close attention to her experience may be self-defeating. No matter how honestly and scrupulously rendered, irrelevant experiences translate into ineffective supports, mere digressions. Particularly for the developing writer, drawing upon firsthand experience can produce disastrous results: he may have none that "fits" the particular topic or issue; it may be irretrievable at the time (which, for all practical purposes, amounts to the same thing); or it may not be appropriate even if it is "there" and can be recalled. Limited firsthand experience is also a detriment under conditions more humane than those imposed by a competency exam—when, for example, the movement is in the other direction and the writer is being asked to sift through his life and times for issues or topics. A short,

uneventful span of years doesn't necessarily mean that only marginally significant points of dispute will be unearthed, but the very "underpreparedness" of developing writers should call into question the centrality of experience in a writing curriculum designed especially for them.

Experienced student writers seldom run into the difficulties I've mentioned. It's not simply that they have more to draw upon, but that, when they find they can't explain and illustrate from firsthand experience, or simply don't want to bother, they invent what they need. Instead of narrating an event which engaged her as a principle, an observer or a reader, the experienced writer has been known to make up a story—to lie. And I think that teachers and tutors of developing writers should take a cue from these more advanced students, that they should in effect teach the art of lying, of devising fabrications which are appropriate and convincing. I'm not saying that this should be done instead of teaching developing writers how to draw upon first-hand experience, but I am suggesting that "truth" and "fiction" be given equal weight, that invention become as much of a resource as experience. In fact, I see no reason why instruction in truth-telling and instruction in fabricating cannot take place concurrently. As I will be attempting to show, these two teaching strategies, apparently so opposed, are in fact complimentary—coordinated approaches to the same problem.

For one thing, they are conjoined by the term *narrative*. This form of "discourse is the mode found in all storytelling, whether historical or fictional"; narrative is simply "a written version of events" (Scholes and Comley 29). This is the form that renders firsthand experience, but once we apply the word *narrative*, we are in effect considering the possibility of another kind of "storytelling." And though there are no samples or statistics I can point to, narrative may very well be the technique for paragraph development which tutors and teachers of developing writers most widely endorse. In *The Writing Room*, a sourcebook for those who work with developing writers, Harvey Wiener stresses three methods for composing a paragraph: description, narration, exposition. However, each of the descriptive paragraphs he cites as examples, and particularly the more sophisticated ones, cohere by dint of an underlying narrative. And what Wiener calls an expository paragraph is really one that is developed by linking two or three narrative excerpts by means of "subtopic sentences."

Because attention to activity of some sort is very often inevitable, at the very least to provide connective tissue, and because a minimal story can usually be generated quite readily, narrative does seem the most useful technique with which we can equip our developing writers. But we seriously diminish that usefulness by limiting narrative to only one species of storytelling: the rendering of events drawn from firsthand experience. Perhaps another way of saying the same thing is that we should emphasize form over

content in teaching our developing writers, that we should focus more on narrative as technique and less on the source from which any particular narrative is drawn.

What I am doing here, of course, is confessing as well as corrupting. I admit that I teach my students to invent narratives—to “lie,” if you will—and I’m proposing that other instructors, and tutors as well, do likewise. (It might simply be a matter of getting others to admit that they already have. I find it difficult to imagine a writing teacher or tutor who, when confronted with a student complaining that she has never had an experience which pertains to a particular topic, would say anything other than “Make one up.”) But isn’t it immoral, or at least amoral, to encourage students to fabricate experiences, to be systematically untruthful? Perhaps this objection is best countered with another question: what does morality have to do with composition? In other words, what does being good have to do with writing well?

Moralizing continues to infuse, and distort, the teaching of writing, particularly in America. Our students are told again and again to “be sincere.” But sincerity as a value has been called into question, with regard to both social interaction and written communication. Jean-Paul Sartre expends pages of dialectic to reveal the hidden kinship between sincerity and bad faith (156-62). And in his elegant study of style, F. L. Lucas declares: “It would be better if we indulged in less cant about sincerity.... No, I am not prepared to assume that all good writing has seemed to the writer the truth and nothing but the truth” (141). Recently, Richard A. Lanham has advanced a demolitional argument against the moralistic paradigm which dominates the teaching of composition, a paradigm he calls the C-B-S approach—Clarity, Brevity, Sincerity (2-3). Lanham is most energetic in undermining Clarity and Brevity, in showing how unrealistic, and uninteresting, continually focusing upon these so-called virtues can be. He is relatively reticent, though, when it comes to Sincerity: it is as if he can’t quite bring himself to come out in favor of complete insincerity, outright lying.

Like Lanham, Scholes and Comley break with tradition, but, also like Lanham, they fall short of advocating fabricated content. “Many of our assignments,” they write, “are designed to free students from the burden of self by offering them personae, voices, and roles already chosen for their suitability to a given form of discourse” (vii-viii). As I’m sure many writing teachers and tutors have, I’ve given students assignments which are designed to free them even more. I am talking about a species of lying which is both imaginative and structured, and which can be easily prompted and guided by the instructor. The first thing to do is to ask students to lie and then to deal with their reactions. There will be titters and some expressions of shock

and disbelief. But resistance of any sort can be quickly dispelled through a series of “lying exercises”—writing assignments which the tutor or teacher does along with her students.

When Peter Elbow discusses “Breathing Experience into Words,” he concludes that a writer does not necessarily “do better writing about memories than about made-up events.... For the essential act in experiencing something is wholly internal” (325). Lying, then, is a species of experience; it is, in fact, more firsthand than most other experiences. What at first may seem a creative (or outrageous) approach is really quite standard, clearly within the pedagogical framework proposed by Kenneth Bruffee, Mina Shaughnessy, and others. It’s still a matter of helping the developing writer discover and draw upon his resources. (Composing an appropriate lie is, after all, true “resourcefulness.”) But an instructor or tutor who attempts to teach the art of lying well shouldn’t be surprised when her students fail to lie completely. In fact, she should expect and welcome these failures. A pure lie is probably as rare as an act of pure truth-telling. When a student makes up an event he will, consciously or unconsciously, include bits and pieces from occurrences in his own life—experienced, observed, or read about. He will reconstitute these occurrences to some extent, making them more suitable, more telling.

It is not the use of firsthand experience that I have been arguing against but a simplistic approach to it, an approach resulting from the enshrinement of such values as authenticity, sincerity, plainness. The developing writer, who is ill equipped to be both truthful and proficient, is the one who suffers most from these sorts of strictures. Though the analogy might seem odd, there is the case of James Joyce. One particularly candid critic has observed that when Joyce is writing about or as himself—in his letters, let’s say—he is an embarrassment to even the most fanatical Joycean. He is a master of the language only when he is creating fictions—that is, doing some structured lying. For Joyce, “Syntax was a function of role: of character. Writing fiction, he played parts, and referred stylistic decisions to the taste of the person he was playing” (Kenner 21).

What is a technique for Joyce is for developing writers merely a tendency. In attempting to describe an experience faithfully, a developing writer often goes too far, reverts to the speech patterns characteristic of the environment in which the experience occurred. When writing about a situation involving friends, for example, she may begin to sound the way she does when she is “conversating” with them.

If developing writers are to become better writers, they must do more than simply find and be true to themselves. They must imagine new selves: learn how other people sound, what other writers do. The mode of lying

that I've been advocating not only helps a developing writer become nimble in his selection and manipulation of support; it allows him to become self-conscious about his role as a writer. If the developing writer is to deal with controversies and issues, then it will be the rhetorical stance that he must adopt. He must learn to examine "the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve certain effects," come to see writing as an "activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers..." (Eagleton 206).

In this regard, I find useful some of the psychodrama exercises of Gestalt therapy (Perls 86-102). Such exercises enable an individual to project herself into another's situation, to "play" an adversary, for example, or a loved one. Prewriting activity as dramatic as this galvanizes even chronically paralyzed writers. In addition to their being effective in the classroom, Gestalt exercises are particularly suited to a tutorial, given the privacy and flexibility inherent in that situation. Very often a student comes to a writing tutor simply because he doesn't know how to begin an assignment or feels that he has nothing to say about a particular issue. By helping such a student discover the various groups of people involved and then by having him pretend to be a representative from each group—first orally and later in writing—the tutor becomes his active ally in the task of composing without directly interfering in that process and thus encouraging dependence. Even with remote issues such as gun control and capital punishment, the developing writer can generate a scenario; he can examine the issue, live it as a series of concrete situations. That scenario can then be used as the basis for organizing a first draft.

The kind of approach I've been advocating, this business of structured lying, facilitates not only the initial stages in the writing process, but the final ones as well. That is to say, it makes it easier for teachers and tutors to help their developing writers become willing and adept revisers of their own prose. In my discussion of narrative, I argued that putting invention on a par with experience emphasizes form over content. I also think that it emphasizes surface over substance. A studied disregard for the truth of the matter is more conducive to revision than is painstaking honesty. When a student writer, particularly a developing writer, has gone through all the trouble of remembering and writing down in detail a true experience, she is resistant to the idea of revising; she doesn't want to tamper with the truth. She may have trouble distancing herself from the experience and from the feelings evoked by laying it out particular by particular. The experience might be so vivid or personal that the developing writer can't regard a prose rendering of it from a reader's point of view. After all, she has told the truth, hasn't she? Doesn't the truth speak for itself? Why revise—why run the risk of vitiating its purity?

And there are other, perhaps better reasons for making things up, for telling stories rather than facing facts. As an “inner” experience, a lie interacts with other such experiences—recollection, for example—in ways that “outer” experiences can’t. When fabricating narrative, a writer will recall not only snippets of personal experience but also scenes from TV shows, excerpts from movies, episodes from stories and novels. And the way in is also the way out: the developing writer moves beyond herself as well, gets closer to the “others” she is lying about and for.

In discussing “Narrative: What Happened,” James Moffett writes that we achieve decentering by adapting ourselves to things and people outside ourselves and by adopting points of view initially foreign to us, as the anonymous narrator does with his single, dual, and multiple character points of view. This amounts to expanding one’s perspective; one does not become less egocentric, but his center becomes an area, not just a point. (148)

And the decentering encouraged, in fact, demanded, by the fabricating of narrative has significant consequences outside the classroom. The addition of lying to a developmental writing curriculum not only prepares the underprepared student for topics and issues that she hasn’t had the opportunity to have but also readies her for, impels her toward, situations and events that had been beyond her comprehension until she wrote about them.

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