

1-1-1985

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Recommended Citation

Lockett, Clinton (1985) "Adapting a Conventional Writing Lab to the Berthoff Approach," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1910>

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Adapting a Conventional Writing Lab to the Berthoff Approach

Clinton Lockett

In the spring of 1984, Marquette's Freshman English Committee decided to use Ann Berthoff's *Forming, Thinking, Writing* as the central text in the freshman program. Because her text marked a dramatic turn from our current text *Rhetoric: Principles & Usage* by Richard Hughes and P. Albert Duhamel, the English department invited Berthoff to visit Marquette in August to clarify her theories. As Director of the Writing Center, my main concern was to insure that the Center follow Berthoff's philosophy.

Fortunately, during that summer, I had the opportunity to teach a section of English 1 using the Berthoff text. My students and I noted several departures from the traditional approach to composition. Her view of writing is highly philosophical, as her title indicates; her chief concern is with meaning and how the mind comes to meaning. Her introduction reflects this view when she states that her text will not offer rules and exhortations. Instead she tells her readers that her "guiding philosophical principle is that this form-finding and form-creating is a natural activity; the book's central pedagogical principle is that we teach our students how to form by teaching them that they form" (2). Clearly, then, her concern is not with the how-to aspect of composition. Nor does she see composition as a skill that can be divided into units, as she indicates in *The Making of Meaning*. There she states that it is a misconception "that writing is a skill, that it can be factored into subskills" (25). Thus as my students and I made our way through the text, we did not find the usual chapters dealing with thesis, organization or sentence structure; there was no step-by-step approach for the students to follow in their writing of themes, no list of do's or don't's. Instead we had to adapt to Berthoff's holistic approach and spend our time on the processes of thinking and forming as well as that of writing.

After my summer's teaching experience and after having the opportunity to talk with Berthoff, I knew that the Writing Center's main concern had to be with meaning—a view that reflects my own and that coincides with the theory of Stephen North, who believes that Writing Centers must be more than "fix-it shops" (435). The Marquette community, however, viewed the Writing Center in a far more traditional light. The Center began in 1977 as a C.E.T.A. project designed to supply remedial aid to freshmen enrolled in English 1 and 2. After Marquette took over in 1979, the main concern of the Writing Lab, as it was then called, was with serving basic writers. The emphasis was on study sheets, self-directed work sheets, and exercises. The 1983 Instructor's Manual for the English 1 and 2 staff describes the Writing Lab as "a facility to extend or strengthen classroom skills...the thrust of the program has been and will continue to be on the remedial student and specialized problems..." (51).

With such a background, the image of the Center was certainly not that of a place devoted to ideas and meaning. Both faculty and students viewed the Center as a repair shop, a problem-solver. When faculty members were confronted with students who were hopelessly tangled in the mysteries of grammar, the Lab was the spot for them. I would be rich today if I had a dollar for every comma splice referral! The students also saw the Lab personnel as repairmen and women who could put their papers to right again.

An initial problem, then, was to convince both faculty and students that the Center was more than, in North's language, "a fix-it shop" or "a first aid station" (437). The use of Berthoff's language and her techniques, especially dialectics, was

successful in changing the views of the students. Changing the faculty's perception has proved more difficult, chiefly because faculty members have little direct contact with the Center. I'm sure that most of the faculty have changed very little in their thinking of the Center—if they think of it at all.

Aside from the problem of image, there were practical problems to contend with as we attempted to keep the Center Berthoff-directed. A problem that presented itself immediately was to determine a way of identifying students with a weak background in English so that these students could be referred to the Center as soon as possible. In any freshman English program there will be students with varying degrees of writing expertise. Usually the first theme is used as a diagnostic tool. With Berthoff's lack of emphasis on theme writing, the first theme in our syllabus was not scheduled until the eighth week. This point in the semester was, I thought, too late for the Center to begin its work.

I discussed this problem with the assistant director of composition, and we agreed that some kind of diagnostic test was needed. My staff and I constructed a diagnostic test, patterned after the Prentice Hall and Harcourt Brace tests but including a section that asked the student to write a developed paragraph. This test was to be administered the first day of class. After Berthoff's visit, however, it was decided that an objective test went against her philosophy. With time running out, we decided to have the students produce a writing sample in the final fifteen to twenty minutes of the initial class meeting. The instructor was to evaluate these samples, select those with writing problems, and send them to the Center for further evaluation. This method did not prove effective. The length of the sample was too short to be instructive, and neither instructors nor students took the sample very seriously. The sample just didn't carry the same weight as a D or F grade on a theme.

The problem of how to link writer and Writing Center remains unsolved. From the Center's point of view, this is a serious problem, for early referral is imperative if the Center is to effect positive changes. My suggestion is that a diagnostic theme should be assigned the first week of class. Since theme writing is an essential part of the course, I see no conflict in philosophy. It should be clearly labeled diagnostic theme—"diagnostic" so that the students understand its function and "theme" so that they take it seriously.

The actual day-to-day working with the students is the main concern of the Writing Center. It is in that respect that Berthoff offered the greatest rewards and the greatest challenges. Keeping the focus on the students' ideas and meaning allowed the tutors enormous freedom. No longer did correctness have to be a first concern; no longer were they locked into a rote approach of giving exercise sheets and drills. Instead, using Berthoff's dialectical approach, they could enter into the writing process, listening to, and sharing ideas with the writer. Her devices of listing, chaos, and opposing were also most useful for drawing the students out and allowing them to expand their horizons. I have also found the Berthoff approach to be effective in easing students over writer's block and allowing them to see that indeed they can write.

Some of our students, however, had difficulties with Berthoff's text. This is a common problem with almost any text, but with Berthoff's highly philosophical approach, a number of students, many of whom are C or C- students, were unable to grasp some of her concepts or to understand what she was leading to in her assisted invitations to write. As a result, we in the Center had to spend our sessions interpreting the text rather than working with writing. Three instances come to mind. One that illustrates the difficulty of the material itself is the section on "Forming," which relies on a quote from Suzanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*.

In the assisted invitation that follows, the student is asked to relate the Langer quote to the concept “form find form.” This is a critical section because this concept of form is central to Berthoff. However, many students could not grasp Langer’s ideas and thus missed the concept. Another invitation that caused problems because the students did not understand the idea behind it was one that asked the students to describe, as if they were seeing them for the first time, certain objects, a man on horseback for one. Some of my students could not see the what or why of this assignment. A different problem occurred with a theme assignment related to Berthoff’s section on physiognomic knowing. One foreign student had difficulty describing the way society judges a person by what the face reveals because in his culture he had been taught that the face should be impassive—should conceal rather than reveal.

The greatest challenge for the Writing Center was to keep its emphasis on Berthoff and at the same time meet the needs of its students. The term “needs” is critical. Our students come to the center out of a sense of a particular need. They come expecting the Center to address what they know to be their deficiencies. For some, the need is for a solid grounding in organization; for some, it is for mastery of usage and grammatical principles. One of their greatest needs is to find a method for dealing with the theme assignments that are such a vital part of the course. Berthoff, however, does not deal with structured, fully-developed pieces of writing. Her way is to explore the making of meaning, not to provide a system. Rather than explaining such traditional devices as thesis or topic sentence, she explores the concept of form.

The section on paragraphing offers an example of this approach. She does not teach steps or principles of paragraphing. Her technique is to explore the concept of paragraphing. Her description of the paragraph as “the hand that gathers” offered some students valuable insight into what actually happens in the process of paragraphing. But many of our students wanted directives: how does the writer know what to gather, how much to gather, how to order what he is gathering. For these students we had to go to answers provided in a traditional handbook.

What stance should the Center take with students who think they need help with grammar or usage? Should we keep our attention so Berthoff-directed that we ignore their needs? Most educators, including Berthoff I think, would see this as a rhetorical question. The college student is expected to write using standard English, and if the Writing Center does not address this need, who will? The danger is that the Center becomes overly concerned with the teaching of skills as an end in itself. It is all too easy for the tutor to give the students rules to memorize or worksheets to complete—much easier than thrashing out meaning with them. The Center, though, if it is to have a lasting effect on its students, must stress that mastering skills is only a stepping stone to meaning finding its most effective form.

During this past semester, whether working with organization or usage problems, I often found it difficult to maintain a sense of continuity with my students. In the past, I was able to work out an ongoing program for the students based on their particular needs. This system allowed for an overview of the semester’s work and gave both students and tutor a sense of continuity. Without this sense, the students are much less likely to come to the Center on a regular basis. Instead they use it only when a particular problem occurs, usually when a theme is due. With Berthoff’s view that composing is a continuum, an all-at-once happening, it was difficult to devise any kind of methodical step-by-step approach. Although I know from my own writing experience that writing is an all-at-once process, it is difficult to teach from this concept.

In an actual teaching situation, it is necessary to make some kind of division, to isolate steps of the process, even though it may be highly artificial to do so. Students

take heart thinking that one difficulty at a time is being addressed although they, along with the tutor, realize that it is not really possible to isolate one problem, solve it forever, and put it to rest. I am not advocating that a program be adhered to just to create a sense of continuity. The students' needs must come first. Still I think that a sense of a coherent program is imperative if students are to take the Writing Center seriously.

Working with Berthoff this past semester has forced me to reevaluate my own ideas regarding the function of the Writing Center. Is the Center's function to follow the text and the classroom and keep its sights squarely on meaning? Or should it provide students with what the classroom does not emphasize—for instance, structure or usage principles. Rather than assuming an either/or position, I see the Center as doing both. I see no need to make a breach between meaning and usage. The Center's greatest strength is that it works with each student individually, and if it is to continue to meet the needs of its students, it must take a holistic approach. It must strike a balance, avoiding an excessive concern with correctness that would stifle imagination but also recognizing that ignorance of skills, which many of us take for granted, can also stifle the students, drain their energies, and blur their meaning.

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Clinton Luckett directs the Writing Center at Marquette University. She presented a paper on the subject of the article included in this issue of *The Writing Center Journal* at the Conference of College Composition and Communication, which met in Minneapolis last March.