Contexts for Composing: the Mirror Function of Reading and Writing

by Gordon M. Pradl

This will be a story with a moral. Back in the days when they were still hiring English teachers, I was lucky enough to land a job teaching eleventh grade English in a public high school. I say lucky because I had had no practice-teaching experience, only a straight liberal arts background. Reporting in on the day after Labor Day, I was given my class schedule, an empty lesson plan book, a room key, and told I would be teaching in 167A. Fine. So off I went down the long corridors to search for 167A. As the numbers on the classroom doors got higher -124, 136, 148-1 found myself farther and farther from the center of the school. Where were these numbers leading me?

Finally, after several wrong turns, I arrived at my isolated destination. They had put me in the girls' auxiliary gym—miles away, it seemed, from any conventional classroom. Why was I being placed in quarantine? Did I already have contagious disease called "noisy class"? "Well, alright," I said, "Let's get on with it." So I unlocked the door, walked in, and immediately stared in amazement: wherever I looked, all I could see was myself. The room had been designed (in more prosperous times) for dancing instruction, with full-length mirrors on every wall.

What a disorienting environment to find oneself in, or so those more experienced than I told me. How can you stand it? But strangely enough, after the initial shock wore off, it was business as usual. Knowing no other environment for teaching, I soon felt quite at home, and, in fact, expected mirrors to line every classroom. Whenever the administration scheduled a class for me someplace else I always tried to get back into friendly 167A. Who knows what other course my teaching might have taken if I had started my career in another classroom, one where the walls and blackboard swallowed up my image rather than casting it back at me. For where else could I get up in the morning, lather a stubbly face, rush out the door after a tender kiss from my wife, and then miraculously rediscover that same face, the one so lovingly kissed, now so fittingly composed for the intellectual adventure ahead.

I must admit, of course, that the experience was not without a certain queasiness. Meeting yourself everyday, living with your reflection continually bouncing back at you—talk about feedback! From certain angles the classroom became an arena of student faces; you could sense them to your right, your left, even behind you looking out from the walls. And imagine what happened during that crazy lesson on the myth of Narcissus when we all brought in our own pocket mirrors.

The surrealistic tension of the environment was only heightened by my determination to carry out my conventional notion of what a teacher does. Because there was simply no escape from the constant flood and flow of images, I could never act in a completely ordinary way. Always slightly self-conscious (remember I had never been in front of a class before and was still discovering how I should act), I would frequently catch myself glancing at my appearance: was my tie straight, was my face animated, was I waving my hands too much? Now my wife will be the first to attest that I am no clothes horse, but that first year of teaching I spent more time, effort and money dressing myself, visiting what we still called the barber shop, than during any other period before or since. It was, of course, the same with the students in front of me—this room was a teenag-er's delight! I remember so well my endless reprimands, "Okay girls, this is not a make-up room. Jim, put your comb away and get back to work!"

In looking back on all that now, the meaning seems clear. The students and I, in preening before those mirrors, were engaged in an ongoing performance. Admiring our reflection from every angle, we were all, in fact, creating and recreating ourselves. When I arrived, the classroom was an arena of student faces; you could sense that this was a place where image and identity were central. Where else could you look into your reflection from every angle, admire it, and be admired by it? Where else could your self-image be so situated that it was continually bouncing back at you?

We all feel that same certainty as we look into the mirror. There is a concreteness, a familiarity, about the image that greets us. But think for a moment about the initial shock when you suddenly view yourself from new and different angles, from the reflections, for instance, that are possible in those three-sided mirrors you find in many clothing stores. Does my head really stick out in back? Do I always look in it, and said, "Yes, that's me." We all feel that same certainty as we look into the mirror. There is a concreteness, a familiarity, about the image that greets us. But think for a moment about the initial shock when you suddenly view yourself from new and different angles, from the reflections, for instance, that are possible in those three-sided mirrors you find in many clothing stores. Does my head really stick out in back? Do I always look in it, and said, "Yes, that's me." We all feel that same certainty as we look into the mirror. There is a concreteness, a familiarity, about the image that greets us. But think for a moment about the initial shock when you suddenly view yourself from new and different angles, from the reflections, for instance, that are possible in those three-sided mirrors you find in many clothing stores. Does my head really stick out in back? Do I always look in it, and said, "Yes, that's me."
problematic, and how much more so when we begin to use people as our mirrors, when we begin to see ourselves as others see us.

Everyday in school we see students reflecting their performances off a variety of others as they jockey for peer acceptance and leadership. The responses in these interactions serve an important mirroring function in shaping behaviors. Similarly, we as teachers are important mirrors and models for our students, acting as both reflecting bodies and images to be compared with. Of course, the image we project to our students of what it means to be an adult is not always accepted; but, still, it remains a benchmark. This is one reason why many students feel compelled to return to their schools after graduation. They want to call attention to how and where they have moved and changed. And what better way to do this than by contrasting themselves with who we who have stayed put, continuing to teach the things that we do? In seeing us again, they are using us as mirrors to sanction what has been altered in the new selves they have become and wish to project to others.

As we seek to make and define ourselves, we learn quite early that surface images will not suffice. A static self, posing before the reflecting eyes of others, tells us very little. It is finally in our actions, in our decisions, and in how they are greeted in the mirrors of others that we see our identities emerging. This can be seen in the tendency of most people to identify themselves by their occupation—a doctor, an artist, a carpenter. By referring to their occupation when answering the question "Who are you?" they can see themselves in terms of what they "do," in terms of the "occupational mirror" shared by their peers.

Now, if clarifying the student's sense of self is an important teaching task, then our primary function is really to get our students doing things, to get them participating in the ongoing process of becoming. In preparing oxygen from potassium chlorate, in completing a scale model of an African village, in catching a game-winning touchdown, in resolving to become friends with the shy new student in school, in writing a poem about the death of a pet—in all these acts students begin to know and define themselves because they are doing things that both they and others can react to. By "doing" they are making interesting and active the otherwise passive surface of the mirror. They are seeing the range of possibilities behind the superficial image, the range of persons they are and can become. Now one of the main acts of "doing" that takes place in an English class is the act of writing—what we might more appropriately call composing. We want to get our students to see that the person who stares back at them from the mirror is someone who did something, who made something, who composed something. In producing a composition then, our students are undergoing a fundamental human activity: the search for and the creation of their individual identities. And this act is a social one, one that demands the responses of others.

All my talk about mirrors and identity further suggests an integral link between the acts of composing and literature. To compose is to make literature—in early Greece the poet was a maker. It is literature, the ongoing creative human quest to discover and develop our self, that provides one of our primary mirrors for human behavior, the dialectical relationship between image (act) and reflection. All this relates directly and centrally to the English classroom. The primary connec-
tion we are seeking to establish is the dynamic one between each student and his or her own language—which in turn is a relationship of identity. In getting students to the perception that one way of saying something is not the same as another, we want them to know that the difference is everything because, in fact, it is a meaning difference. Every reflection in the mirror is not the same because every identity is not the same. And our widespread, piecemeal, and compartmentalized approaches to the teaching of writing, our mechanical teaching of isolated reading and writing skills, belie this organic connection that is so necessary in the process of creating competent composers.

Bringing about this sensitivity to language and self forces a unique responsibility on us as teachers. What we must do is create an ongoing series of what I would call “contexts for composing.” This means raising conflict-filled issues with our students, creating an environment in our classroom that is teeming with unresolved ideas and discontinuities that urge the student into acts of authentic composing. Fundamentally, this responsibility involves the introduction of texts which demand a response. This means having to say things that matter, that are worth saying, that are not merely dummy runs.

But what does this mean in actual practice when we say that the teacher of writing doesn’t begin with writing itself but with the exploration of the life around us—of those events and issues that determine our experience, that make up that image that persists in the mirror? Well, this prewriting exploration begins, I would argue, with literature, with the stories and poems we read with our students, with texts that call for some kind of response.

Suppose, for example, we intend to read the play, Inherit the Wind, with a group of eleventh graders. It dramatizes the story of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial and the continual tensions that exist in society between scientific progress and conventional beliefs. As Drummond squares off against the ailing Brady, we see that what is really on trial here is the individual’s right to think. So the play raises many issues that remain contemporary to this day: How does the principle of free access to ideas and information conflict with the notion of community values? What are the functions and implications of censorship? To what extent should society protect its youth from the “corrupting” influences of the world of knowledge and experience? Are teachers responsible ultimately to the mores of society or the understandings of their discipline? Students will respond to Inherit the Wind because, although the story occurs in the past, it deals with very real and immediate concerns in their lives as they seek to differentiate themselves from the identified conventions of the generation before them.

While it is possible that the simple reading of a book like Inherit the Wind can create a context for composing, a concrete and current experience often enhances the process. It was on this basis that I used the following approach.

When the students came into the classroom to begin the lesson, I distributed copies of the play. Before they could begin reading, however, a colleague appeared at the door to announce that the principal wanted me in his office immediately. Before leaving, I instructed the class, “Janice, will you read the introduction aloud? Then, everyone choose up parts and begin reading Act I. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” After about fifteen minutes—during which time the students were actively getting into the play—I returned with some startling news. “Unfortunately, some parents have complained to the principal about this play because of its slurs against religion and they have demanded that it not be taught in school.” I protested, but the principal insisted that I collect the books for now until he can investigate the matter further. So will you all pass your books up to the front of the room please, so I can collect them?”

A mild commotion ensued as the students responded in disbelief to my news. “We were just getting into the revival meeting scene. They have no right to take the books away from us.” “Yea, that’s censorship!” “It’s as bad as what they were doing to Winston in 1984.” Confronted by what they took to be an unwarranted action on the part of the administration, the class was incensed. Their naive, unexamined notion regarding free access to books and information had been called into question by the mirror of the administration, forcing them to sort out who they are and what they feel on the basis of this new and incongruent angle of reflection. One student suggested they write an open letter to the principal arguing for freedom of thought in the classroom. Finally it was decided that each student would go home and prepare a list of arguments against the confiscation of the book and begin drafting what they felt should go into the letter.

The next day I returned the books and revealed my reasons for staging the drama. In the discussion that followed, the students talked openly about their reactions to having been denied access to a book. This led to a discussion of other occasions when the students believed they had been controlled or censored. With that kind of impetus, the students not only read the play, they went on to examine the life around them for signs of how the generations disagree over beliefs and values. This led to researching the subject in newspapers, magazines, and other books, to looking for the uses and abuses of thought control and the inculcation of values. Parents and other adults were interviewed to gain their perspectives on these issues. Finally, a campaign emerged between students who were in favor of complete freedom and those who thought there should be certain forms of censorship. This encouraged writing of all kinds, including editorials, letters, speeches, articles, and dramatizations of other episodes where freedom of thought had been curtailed.

I am certainly not suggesting that every class or unit begin with such an elaborate opening. Nor can we expect
that students would continue to suspend their disbelief. The point, however, is clear. In planning our work with the students, our purpose is to engage them in a critical dialogue with what is going on around them, a dialogue that allows them to construct their individual maps of the world. Composing never occurs in a vacuum; rather, it is part of an ongoing dialectic. In reacting to real issues, students are, in fact, testing out their ideas about themselves and the world. And this testing, of course, relates directly to their telling of stories, to their participation in narrative.

Another approach to the mirroring function of language is related by John Rouse in a book he is currently preparing, The Completed Gesture. Rouse describes some work in composing he did with a class of lower-track twelfth graders. The kids had been reading a series of hot rod novels, but were showing little interest in them. One day Rouse challenged them, "You could write one of those books yourselves." They, naturally, smiled back indulgently, mired in their own sense of inadequacy. Rouse forged ahead out of desperation. "It can be about this kid, Jesse James. He's seventeen, and a little on the short side, and he's in our school, and the other guys make fun of him because of his name and size." Slowly the inventive imagination of the group began to catch fire, and by the end of that first class session they had established that Jesse's father had been a soldier killed in the war and that his mother supported the two of them by working at the local diner. That Jesse would get into a fight with Howard, a boy with money and a lot going for him, and that the central event in the story would revolve around a boat race. Yes, these kids, who had never cared about punctuation or spelling or usage, were, in fact, testing out their ideas about themselves, a commitment existed of when the novel was reaching its final stages. Copies of the novel were to have your books? Everyone hold up your books. "Esmeralda, you're the social studies teacher..." Morgan said. "Til see you for detention at 3:15," Morgan said.

In capturing in their mirrors this teacher and all the other characters and events of their novel, these students became spectators of their own experience. Objectifying their experience, they began to gain some control over it. And because in composing the novel they were really composing themselves, a commitment existed that Rouse was able to take advantage of when the novel was reaching its final stages. Copies of the novel were to be sold at the annual school fair, and since the thing created represented who they were, was a mirror of themselves, these kids, who had never cared about punctuation or spelling or usage, spent several days scrupulously revising and proofreading their manuscript.

The class finally named the book Wake Rider, after Jesse who, for all his striving, rode in the wake of others' passage until, finally, he possessed himself.

The story of Jesse, shaped by many hands, became the collective fiction of these students, telling of their aspirations and their doubts. It came about because a sensitive teacher created a meaningful context for composing, allowed his students to create a new mirror on their identity, to experience an image transformed. And it is this mirroring function of writing that is—or should be—our primary focus in English. For it is through composing that we gain our composure.