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EXERCISE EXCHANGE

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## Tapping the Collective Imagination

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LEVEL: General

One method of learning composition proves particularly effective for my classes, effective both in maximizing the talents of students and instructor and in minimizing many of the bad effects of the classroom itself on the students' and the instructor's chances to grow as writers. Our method is teacher-class collaboration on specific writing projects designed to be of some permanent or immediately practical value. That is, my students and I collaborate on books, on pamphlets, on collections, or sometimes just on one short story, one profile, one poem. As much as possible, from the start we plan these cooperative writing efforts with a specific goal of publication, performance, or alternative dissemination. We are, in short, not merely playing at writing, but rather, actively engaged in the real thing for real audiences with real purposes. Within these limits we strive to maximize the diversity of our points of view and to exploit fully the diversity of writing skills that we bring to our task.

We make no claim to originality for this approach to composition. For years many have suspected that less is learned by writing the conventional dead-end weekly theme or exercise than is learned by writing a less artificial assignment, as in reporting for the student newspaper, writing for the yearbook, or even as in preparing term papers for more specific disciplines. The recent success of *Foxfire* together with that of numerous publications of student work in government programs for the disadvantaged further encourages more heuristic approaches to composition by the tapping of the collective imagination of students and teachers or editors.

Hopefully a brief account of some of the specific projects that have worked well with my classes will suggest others to imaginative classes. One such project began as a conventional composition assignment and grew into a collaborative effort. The class, a group of all Black students in rural South Carolina, tired of my complaining that in spite of their healthy interest in general Black history they cared too little about their specific family history. I suggested that personal pride was possibly as much to be cherished as racial pride. The students decided each to report in short compositions about the earliest specific details of family history that they had learned from grandparents or other relations. Their papers, though interesting, were predictably uneven, both in terms of style and content; no publisher or general reader out of the class context would want to plod through all of them, particularly through the repetitions of references even to interesting items, such as old chifferobes containing personal effects or, as four papers mentioned, old freedom papers (echoes of Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the collective imagination); and few would have much patience with the varieties of voice, dialect, grammar, and audience. Still the papers seemed too insightful merely to be filed away. In a dialogue about these weaknesses the class evolved a way to save the best parts of their achievement. We divided into four small groups of five each to rewrite the twenty profiles as four, each group editing the details of its profiles to choose those that seemed most effective and to resolve consistently the questions of voice, dialect, grammar, and audience. The teacher acted as a roving member of all groups, advising when asked what worked best for him as well as what seemed less effective.

When the period was nearly over the four new profiles were read, and the leaders of the four groups then met to rewrite these four as one, again resolving conflicts of audience, grammar, dialect, and voice. The final profile was a rather fine bit of fiction, as they are currently trying to persuade publishers.

Some projects have had more cooperative structure from the start. One group, realizing that recent campus buildings were severely criticized by those using them, decided that such complaints ought to be collected, collated, and presented to administrators responsible for making decisions about future buildings not to be used by the administrators themselves. Another group, again in an all-Black college, decided to turn introspective and designed a questionnaire to distribute to white faculty to determine both the degree to which they had tried to integrate with the Black community and to determine the whites' perceptions of specific Black hospitality or inhospitality vis-à-vis white efforts at integration. The target audience for this project was specified as a periodical such as *The Black Scholar*, *Opportunity* or *Phylon*. One group collaborated in writing a collection of short stories for a projected audience of ghetto children, one of the audiences most neglected by writers and especially by publishers.

Our general principle is to isolate a real problem and to address ourselves to it realistically. We do not pretend to be authoritative scholars; we glory in being diligent, forthright amateurs. We employ professional insight, methodology and, where absolutely essential, professional vocabulary; but normally we measure our success in terms of the degree to which we have translated insight, methodology and jargon into our own experience and language as effectively as we can.

My personal favorite of all such projects undertaken in my classes is the book manuscript *Black Parables*, my collaboration with my modern grammar class at Claflin College in Orangeburg, South Carolina, but one that could as easily have grown out of a freshman composition class at this small Methodist college. Our immediate problem there was to learn something about so-called Black English, a dialect which most Black college students have little formal knowledge of or personal facility with. Ironically most of the English majors had great difficulty producing any except its most superficial lexical registers, as in *dem*, *dese*, *dis*, and *dose*, not to mention its complex and logical grammar. Since my students were headed for the highways and hedges where Black English features are far more common and because English teacher biases against any languages of their students often demonstrably interfere with the opportunity of students to learn, it seemed advisable to construct a project that would not only expose to my grammarians their own ineptitude, but at the same time effect a remedy at least partially.

Hence, for a weekend assignment each student was given a different set of the parables of Jesus to translate into Black English. To give the project an added imaginative dimension, students were also to translate the parables into the modern Black experience in the United States. While at the outset no specific terms of equivalence for the modern Black experience were prescribed, students were asked to eschew the culturally-bound and time-bound terms of the standard translations, terms such as *kingdom*, *master*, *servant*, or even *vineyard*.

The learning (or not learning) about Black English evoked by the assignment is perhaps overshadowed by what the students and the teacher learned about com-

position, both the rich achievement of the succinct models and the brilliant prose impact that they make when imaginatively reworked to interpret and reveal diversity in the modern Black experience. One of the parables will serve to illustrate this imaginative brilliance, a revision of "The Prodigal Son," who has become "The Son Who Wasted His Blackness":

The Brother said, A certain Brother had two sons. The younger of them said to him, Old man, give me what is coming because I am leaving this no-count place to get with some action. When the father gave him his share, he hit the road and went far away, where he wasted his money in the company of big pushers and con men. When he had spent all, his companions deserted him, and he found himself living in the ghetto, hungry. He even went to work as a bar sweeper in a honkey bar, and Mister Charlie sent him to clean out his toilets. He would even have drunk the beer left in the glasses of honkies, but he was not allowed to. And when he got himself together he said, My Dad has men working for him that have bread to spare, yet here I am sick with hunger. I will get out of here and go down home to say, Dad, I have been a fool before the world; I have dishonored my Blackness; and I am not worthy to be called a Brother or your son: let me work for a simple wage. And the son did hike home and go to his father. When he was a long way away, his father spotted him and ran to him and embraced him. The son said, Dad, I have been a fool and am not worthy to be a Brother or your son. But the father said to a helper, Bring his best dashiki and put medallions on his chest, and bright shoes on his feet. Bring out the fatback and the greens and let us eat and be merry: for my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. And they partied.

Now the older son was in the field, and as he came home he heard the music and the dancing. He asked one of the helpers, What's happening? The helper replied, Your Brother is back, and your father has brought on soul food and a party. The older Brother was angry and would not go in; so his father came out to him and begged him. The older Brother said, Old Man, look how hard I have worked down home, never disobeying you, and you never had a party for me so that I might entertain my friends. But as soon as this Nigger is back, who has wasted his Blackness with whores and drug addicts, you celebrate! The father replied, Son, you are always with me, always beautiful, and everything I have is yours. It is Black to party now and be happy, for your Brother was dead, and is alive again, lost touch with his Blackness and has found it again. (after Luke 15: 11-32)

Now the form of these Black versions was ultimately the teacher's responsibility; an entire summer was spent editing the work on which the students spent, at best, but two weekends. Their other needs from the grammar course prohibited their devoting more time to a minor project in that context. Still it is worth noting that grammarian James Sledd used the students' original versions in a linguistics class at the University of Texas in 1973, thereby extending the usefulness of the project as a grammar study. Of course the editor's final version has modified features of dialect and grammar in the selective fashion normally employed in literature, to minimize tedious distractions for a general audience. The importance of the assignment as collaboration for composition learning was the collective experience of discovering imaginative equivalents for the parables in the language and experience of our own day.

At the outset I claimed that collaborative composition not only maximized the talents of students and teachers—a claim I have tried to support—but also minimized many of the bad effects of the classroom on the students' and the teachers' chances to grow as writers. These usual bad effects of the classroom deserve specific attention. Foremost, as already implied, is the artificiality of writing about superficially contrived subjects and of writing what only the teacher will see. Students are thereby encouraged to cheat by supplying teachers with the kind of professional jargon about literature and language that is easily pilfered; when they try on their own to please the teacher, they demonstrate even more bizarre notions about what pleases teachers.

Collaborative writing provides a more appropriate use of authority, leaving it open for arbitration at every stage. Furthermore it invites original work and an opportunity to share it openly. The teacher himself is a sharer, not a dictator, or a final judge; the class is allowed to make richer use of his authentic experience as a writer himself, and yet he is not forced to pontificate in the abstract about writing. The class is stultified neither by authoritarian prescription nor by abdicating description regarding grammar and dialect; rather, the dynamic decisions about all matters are made, as they are for all professional writers, at every turn of a word.

Collaborative writing minimizes the intellectual isolation of fierce, lonely academic competition; it encourages excellence upon a model of greater community, of greater sharing. Seldom do students get the opportunities to learn scholarly language the way that they learned their native idiom, namely, mainly through interaction with their peers. Particularly as the American academy moves towards wider pluralism even in academic writing styles, collaborative writing offers a rich opportunity to tap all kinds of imaginative resources.

Perhaps most importantly, collaborative writing helps to explode one of the most pernicious myths about the creative process, namely the romantic notion that good writing always springs full-blown spontaneously, as if from an imaginative well, that some have this well and that others do not. Successful writers often act as if they have a vested interest in hiding their revisions and in failing to tell what editors or even other less direct literary influences have done to improve their work before the public sees it. Maybe it is just as well that most of the public buys this romanticism, but our students deserve to be less superstitiously enfranchised as fledgling writers, learning by experience that for most writers the writing of even the most seemingly spontaneous passage is a labor, one worth doing and redoing well.

## Teaching Poetry in a Collaborative Learning Situation

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LEVEL: Composition and poetry courses in upper-level high school or lower-division college, advanced seminars in poetry and in creative writing (poetry) courses.

AUTHOR'S COMMENT: Most of us are familiar enough with critical analyses of poetry, their methods, perspectives and occasional usefulness in the classroom. Here I wish to describe a method of structuring an introduction to poetry course around the concept of collaborative learning for a quarter.