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A Pedagogy of the Distracted, a Rhetoric of Agendas:
Helping Students Get into Writing in spite of—or by
Working with—Distractions

How can I help my students focus on their assignments and spend time writing? This is something I am now having trouble with myself. It is not that I cannot write, it is that I resist turning my attention to this particular topic: "What do I have to say about teaching composition?"

As will be true for my students, there is a lot that now competes for my attention. Instead of beginning this, I was planning a trip to a farm in Tennessee. Today I was reading an article by Joel Salatin about how to create "a farm life your children will treasure," and I was considering living at a farm and applying what I read. Before that, I taught a week-long leadership camp for teenagers. That focus on leadership got me to begin to imagine organizing a new intentional community or ecovillage here in San Diego. Then I planned a visit to the Los Angeles Eco-Village and to a family in Pasadena who support themselves from vegetables they grow on one-half of a fifth-of-an-acre lot (Dervaes). My students won't have those distractions, but they will want to be able to focus their attention to successfully complete their assignments. This paper highlights some approaches to getting into writing and to helping students do the same.

The first approach I model is to begin where I am. I write about my distractions—and following the suggestion of Peter Elbow, I write, mostly without revising, trying to pretend that whatever I write will be thought of as good by the person I'm writing for. At least I am saying something, and I'm getting closer to having something written on the topic. Actually, I have already reread and revised this several times to ensure I'm writing something I can stand to re-read, and I've already made and discarded several beginnings to this paper.

Another approach I model is to tighten the text. I've revised the preceding paragraphs three times already before first writing this sentence. In the most recent revision, I eliminated unnecessary wording: "living and working at the farm" became "living at the farm," for example. Behind this tightening are several ideas:

(1) In the clichés I first type out, there will be a lot of unnecessary wording that does not add meaning. If I cut these, the text may become more interesting to read and less likely to lose the reader's interest. For example, the preceding sentence could be shortened. Also, if I typed: "I was really hot," I might revise it to: "I was hot."

(2) Making the wording more certain may make the text more gripping. For example, change "may make . . ." to "makes the text more gripping."

(3) Cutting out the up-dictioning that happens when I write can also improve the text; "got me to imagine" may be an improvement over "led me to imagine."

I've gotten to this point without an outline. Now that I've been able to talk to myself about the topic, I think I can write an outline about where I'd like to go next, and I'd rather not proceed for many more pages without one.

Before I work on that structure, though, I'll mention another practice I've used to make this text more interesting: a play with the dissonance between what the reader expects and what the text provides. If the dissonance is too great, the reader will be less likely to enter the text—*imaginese si intentara escribir en español, por ejemplo*. But if the strangeness is not too far-out, the reader will stay awake and remain curious to see where the text will lead. Famous texts have some built-in dissonance: there the reader wonders why and looks for reasons the text is so respected. Believing leads to seeing in that case.

A relevant example of productive dissonance occurs in an interview with a scholar who wrote, "I Mark C. Taylor am not writing this book" (qtd. in Rickert and Blakesley, 806). In the interview, Taylor, referencing Heidegger, declares that "scholarship is not writing," because "writing . . . is transgressive" (807-08), and he proceeds to label some of his published work as "writing" or "scholarship." I kept on reading because I wanted to hear more about how scholarship is not writing.

Other examples of productive use of dissonance occur in Michael Brandwein's books about camp staff training and supervision. The reader finds Brandwein has renamed his *appendix* the *liver* because those pages of the book are vital—they are not "something that can cause great pain and that we don't really need" (e.g., *Learning* xxii). Also memorable is Brandwein's insertion of a fragment of a made-up chapter from a spy novel between chapter 16, "Evaluations," and chapter 17, "Program Structure," in *Learning Leadership*. Finally, consider chapter two of Brandwein's *Super Staff SuperVision,* which is less than half a page:

> This is the introductory chapter of the book where I am supposed to take about seven to eight pages to explain the *importance* of effective camp supervision. . . But what I *really* want to talk to you about is not philosophy, but the specific things you and I can do and say every day to make an immediate, positive difference for staff and campers.
>
> So here's the deal. I say, let's just declare all of this "importance" talk a huge "duh," skip it, and get to the good stuff.
>
> See you in Chapter Three. Race you..... (6)

Brandwein's written text reflects his philosophy about how the camp itself should be run, namely that:

> Attention comes from *contrast*. Whenever expectations are violated, attention goes up. An important secret is that the change does not have to be a big one. Even small, easy changes to an activity can cause big boosts in attention and participation.
>
> So every time we lead children, we want to ask this important question: *"What can we do that will take our campers by surprise?"*
> (*SuperVision* 15-16)

Right here belongs a summation of what that quote means for my thesis, such as, *Like Brandwein, writers can use contrast to maintain interest in their work.*

So far I have presented one approach to beginning a writing assignment (begin where you are, distractions and all), I've listed some ways to revise one's initial writing to make it more interesting (cut the clichés, sound more certain than you are, and be wary of a tendency to choose formal-sounding words that deaden the text), and I've described a technique (defy expectation—at least a little) to heighten both author and reader interest. Would a freshman find these points helpful? What about when dealing with an assignment teed up like this:

Successful papers will:

1. signal the topic, and give some indication of how the paper will proceed;

2. describe the [author's] project, showing—by using evidence from the text—what argument she makes concerning the connections between her particular family history and identity and the larger social and historical environment;

3. smoothly identify and integrate information from at least two sources;

4. explain how this information helps illustrate, clarify, extend, or complicate the argument [the author] makes;

5. show what you take to be the significance of the [author's] argument;

6. use an effective structure that carefully guides the reader from one idea to the next;

7. be thoroughly edited so that sentences are readable and appropriate for an academic paper. (Quandahl 2-3)

I know my role as an instructor is to make that writing assignment come alive for each student so that it would be difficult *not* to write about it without fulfilling all the requirements. Here, however, I will pretend I am designing my own composition course. To do so, I'll need to have an idea of what I am doing and why. Few of my students will want the details of my philosophy—but it will guide my decisions about what happens in class.

"As we rolled a log into place to terrace his hillside homestead, Rod Rylander said, 'Going into the Peace Corps isn't so bad as long as you have your own agenda.' I expect the same is true for teaching freshman composition." That is how this paper once began. This is my fourth day working on this text, usually for only a few hours each day. The reason I've not given this more time has to do with agenda. And habit. And the strangeness of asking myself to monologue on composition. Now someone has sat beside me on the train to LA—she is reading this. When I finish I will be free from having this task over my head. Doing well will contribute to self-confidence and to academic and teaching opportunities. This paper should demonstrate productive thought and research about an aspect of teaching composition.

I am writing as a novice, and novices who see themselves as novices are experts at learning, according to Sommers and Saltz's analysis of a group of freshman

writers. Those authors also suggest how I might graduate my novitiate: the novice is "able to move forward with his writing because he learn[s] to ask questions that [matter] to him and to others—to have *both* a personal and intellectual stake in these questions" (146). I am also *not* writing as a novice. . . I have seen how widely successful writers range, especially in the field of composition, and I am aware that some success comes simply from writing, not erasing—from avoiding "analysis paralysis" in other words—and from making the effort to get published and read.

> *I know working on this writing is important. I set aside, even as I have tried to fill it up, time to discover what I have to say and what questions I have to ask about composition. This work is slow. Often I distract myself from this work unhealthily and unhelpfully by eating, by reading the newspaper, by fiddling with some word processor feature, or by spending an undue amount of time adding a reference to another text. I think that perhaps I would be more on task if I were working on the construction of an ecovillage and writing for* that *purpose. I think* that *agenda could be more meaningful and engaging than helping students become better writers. By working on starting an ecovillage, I would be writing, reproducing, causing to come to exist, something very important for this world to have. I may be uniquely able to make that ecovillage happen—there are plenty others who will do a great job helping the freshmen become better writers.*
>
> That kind of doubt and distraction and unhealthy, unhelpful procrastination is what I would love most of all to help my students avoid, or perhaps to incorporate meaningfully into their academic writing. I at least want to help them and myself to become aware of and able to consider the vitality-reducing potential of college writing, along with its potential to helpfully transform us.

The issue I've been circling is that of the difficulty of focusing on writing when one's agenda is not simply to learn to write (is that really anyone's agenda?)—and of the difficulty of writing about teaching writing when one's agenda is not simply to teach writing. "Composition is relatively unprotected by 'content' from the needs of students" writes Bruce Herzberg (117), and, I would add, from the needs of the instructors as well. I am not the only potential instructor of composition who has gotten himself into the field because of his perception of freedom in focusing on technique and practice rather than content. A theme for the composition class this fall is *identity,* but it could have been something else, though that theme is an intelligent choice, as Sommers and Saltz suggest: "Free to set their own intellectual agendas, many freshman, particularly those who grew up in relatively homogeneous communities, set off to explore their identities by selecting courses that enable them, however covertly, to study themselves" (141). Those authors also view writing as "the heart of what [we] know and how [we] learn;

writing is not an end in itself but is a means for discovering what matters" (146). And U.S. Senator Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa wrote, "Learning to write is learning to think. You don't know anything clearly unless you can state it in writing" (qtd. in Maxwell, *Thinking* 41). Both views support subordinating content to practice in the composition classroom. College is a place for those who don't have agendas to develop them, and for those who already have agendas to develop skills that will assist them in realizing their agendas. The successful instructor will not force content on her students but will use the existing agendas of students—or her ability to elicit motivating agendas from students—in the service of their developing in certain ways as a writer, a reader, a thinker, and a human.

I do have an agenda though. The simple aim to help students become better writers and readers can further the project of the Enlightenment, which one author describes as "to achieve emancipation and thereby the good life by founding society on rational principles rather than tradition" (Braaten 73). In philosopher Jürgen Habermas' conceptualization, *rationality* consists of making valid claims not just about "a state of affairs" (objective reality, truth), but also about a subjective reality (the speaker's truthfulness or sincerity), and an intersubjective or social reality (the appropriateness, or normative or moral correctness of the communication) (Fultner xvii; Howe 20). Taken together, Habermas believes, efforts made to express and to understand validity claims are what moves society forward.

Bestselling author Stephen Covey presents a similar view in the description of the fifth of his "seven habits of highly effective people": "seek first to understand, then to be understood" (*Seven* 240):

> Empathetic (from *empathy*) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel. . .
>
> When we really, deeply understand each other, we open the door to creative solutions and third alternatives. Our differences are no longer stumbling blocks to communication and progress. Instead, they become stepping stones to synergy. (240-59)

My writing class can help students develop and improve their own validity claims and their ability to understand the claims of others. That is part of my agenda.

"Teaching Writing as Teaching Leadership" was once the title of this paper, and recently I've been walking around saying that my personal vision statement is as follows:

- To develop leaders who develop leaders who develop communities. And
- To create visions of community success that are more compelling than any vision of individual success.

This comprises the social activist and the more personally meaningful aspect of my agenda for the composition course I teach. It meshes the agenda by which I have been distracted from focusing on this paper with the agenda of teaching writing as effectively as possible. It also echoes Jeffrey M. Ringer's vision of the future of liberatory education, "that critical pedagogy in the United States direct its energies toward promoting a concept of liberty that stresses the freedom to work collectively, critically, and democratically toward the common good we're all striving for—a dialogic community in which individuals and communities work together for the benefit of all" (780).

Here I am again. It is almost two weeks since I wrote the first words you read in this paper. I have been to LA and back. There was another week of leadership camp. All in all it was a lot of fun—but I had little time to think about this. Now I'm trying to pick up where I left off. Below there is a rough sketch of what I have left to write about. It is almost four o'clock, and it took me most of the day to get settled into where I would start writing again. I had laundry, exercises, emailing, napping, and daydreaming backlogged. Now I was about to give up and go home. I wanted to eat something—a typical way to escape or relax—and then try to get back into this. Instead, though, I thought I'd give the technique by which I began this paper a try, and I'm still here! And the words on the screen are staying there. They are not being erased. I imagine my students writing like this in their papers about what is distracting them from their work.

The rest of this essay has to do with considering how best to combine my agenda of developing students' abilities to understand and to be understood with my agenda of developing leaders who work for visions of community rather than individual success. That latter part of my vision may be better stated like this: to develop leaders who see their individual growth as dependent upon the growth of the others in their community.

I can take a few pages from my experience in leadership camp and in community organizing: if a way of structuring the classroom or the presentation of an agenda fails to generate energy and attention, I change it. In other words, the students and the community train me to guide them in ways they will follow. Furthermore, if *anyone* in the community or class offers resistance to what I am doing, I often find myself distracted by them—they are capable of sucking my attention—until they leave or until we both figure out how to change what we've been doing to work more closely together. On the other hand, it is also possible to generate so much excitement for an activity in other members of the community that the resisting member is compelled to join the fun. Ultimately my agenda in teaching and community organizing is to experience joy and meaning with other people. Although not clear to me at the time, I might have chosen to run leadership camp and to teach composition primarily because they offer opportunities to experience mutual meaning. bell hooks says it this way: "To me the classroom continues to be a place where paradise can be realized, a place of passion and possibility, a place where spirit matters, where all that

we learn and know leads us into greater connection, into greater understanding of life lived in community" (183).

An important aspect of that mutual meaning is the nature of the community I am teaching for. I want to be teaching people who are in fact part of my community: people I will continue to see and to work with and to hear about for years after I have shared the classroom with them. I confess to assuming this will not happen at San Diego State U, although if my teaching is truly transformational, possibly it could. That is to say, I've been planning to use the teaching experience I get at San Diego State as practice for the community where I will eventually contribute in more substantial way, but I should think of my time in the classroom at SDSU as the real thing! Impediments to generating energy in the SDSU composition classroom include the transient nature of the community. Contrast the SDSU composition class, for example, with the community of a small-town LDS (Latter-day Saints) Church Bible study group, where many of the participants have known and will know each other for years, and feel they are a valuable part of a growing culture. Another impediment is a lack of values shared between the students and myself. SDSU students may be unlikely to be as concerned as I am with the characteristics and problems of intentional communities, ecovillages, and car-free living. I will be like a Quaker teaching on an army base. I could think of myself as if I were a missionary, or an ESL teacher outside the US, but that doesn't quite work, as I have yet to find or create or saturate myself in the home culture that I am a representative of.

Of course, what I just looked at as impediments can also be opportunities for engagement. Because we have not known each other for years, there is a lot we can teach each other about our differences. I can learn from why certain values appeal to my students. If I can teach successfully as a foreigner, I will be better prepared to be a missionary for my culture once it becomes more established. Regardless of cultural differences between us, I should still be able to communicate the key parts of the combined agenda I described above, to develop the writing skills of leaders who develop communities.

> I'm not making this up: I'm now at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I rode the Greyhound more than 50 hours to get here, and I camped out last night in a field on the ag section of the campus. To complete this paper, I wanted to check my citation for Mark C. Taylor, which led indirectly to me looking up bell hooks' *Teaching Community*. She has a lot to say about "moving through fear" to develop community (Parker Palmer qtd. in hooks 197), echoing what Lois Arkin said during the LA Eco-Village tour: much of her community-building consisted of helping neighbors introduce themselves who had never spoken to each other though they had lived across the street from each other for years. hooks has begun to make it part of her practice to talk "to groups of people [she] would not ordinarily talk with" (193), and considers "speaking across barriers of difference [to be] radical intervention" (195). She recognizes that

"for many smart students from backgrounds that are marginalized by race, class, geography, sexual preference, or some combination, college continues to be a place of disconnection" (177). The remedy is "education that serves to enhance our students' journey to wholeness" (181). She mentions the view of the dean of Southwestern University, Jim Hunt, that "teachers here want to help students challenge their assumptions, deconstruct them, and then reconstruct them in a different way" (192). In other words, I feel validated, encouraged, and challenged to go further in this direction because of her work and the articles concerning the nature of "liberty" and "hope" in the 25th volume of *jac,* of which bell hooks is on the editorial board. hooks also emphasizes the importance of encouraging awareness of and discussion of spirituality in academic environments. I have been doing so in my teaching, influenced by Ken Wilber, Stephen Covey, and Jürgen Habermas ("Religion"), and I find it wonderful to become aware of a black woman saying this too. Until now I have not stated it, but an underlying motive for my focus on developing community comes from Wilber's pointing that devotion to the other is an aspect of spirituality and an avenue of development that has been neglected by postmodern western culture. He says, as hooks says, as Diana Leafe Christian says, as Covey says, as Habermas says, remedying this neglect "positively transforms us" (hooks 197). Here are some quotes from my commonplace book:

> . . . sustainable community must be based on sustainable relationships—relationships that give more than they take—that nourish, enliven, and inspire us," says Larry Kaplowitz. "Such relationships are a continual source of energy." (Christian 202)

> The close and frequent interactions with other community members about how we'll live and work together tends to evoke some of our worst and most destructive behaviors. And potentially, it can heal them. (Christian 201)

> Most of us don't realize that our wider society is dysfunctional because it's just ourselves, doing what we habitually do, but multiplied and magnified by millions of people. (Christian 201)

> In today's America, the repression of the Great Thou often goes hand in hand with boomeritis. By emphasizing either a 3rd-person conception of Spirit as a great Web of Life, or a 1st-person conception of Spirit as Big Mind or Big Self, there is nothing before which the "I" must bow and surrender. The ego can actually hide out in 1st- and 3rd-person approaches. I simply go from I to I-I, never having to surrender to You. (Wilber 191)

> Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of

> risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, revelling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community. (hooks 197)

High ideals do not translate directly into engaging classroom time, however. Generating interest in the writing class itself comes down partly to the art of classroom management and to experience about what draws the students in. In that respect, I have benefited from my experience running the leadership camps this summer and from the creative approaches to structuring, staging, and performing camp staff training that Brandwein describes in his books. As part of his suggestions for keeping student attention riveted on what is occurring in the classroom, he offers multiple techniques for generating full group participation in classroom discussions. In addition, Brandwein pointed me to *Values Clarification* (Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum), which has exercises designed to get students to choose, prize, and act on their beliefs. Students find these exercises compelling—and what's more, having and acting on beliefs is a basic part of leadership. My experience using a few simple values clarification exercises with groups of as many as 100 high school students mirrors what Sommers and Saltz say about novice writers' experiences in a course in moral reasoning: "[they] thrive in a course where they are urged to trust their own intuitions, writing their way *into* expertise about something that matters to them" (139). Building off of students' desire to defend their views, the moral reasoning course described is "successful in moving students from 'shooting out opinions' to 'structuring and defending ideas'" (138). Key to the success of that course is a handout which introduces and models techniques for writing philosophical arguments. From the fragment of monologue Sommers and Saltz provide with which the instructor introduces his moral reasoning course, it is clear he has considered, as much as Brandwein, and as much as the authors of the exercises in *Values Clarification*, how to frame a scenario that will interest adolescents and adults. Were I designing my own argument-focused composition course, I might combine values clarification exercises, where validity claims need not be based on textual evidence, with formal argument, where some of the claims must be based on published research and on established philosophical frameworks. The key to the success of the moral reasoning and values clarification focus is, I believe, that "we live some answer to these questions every day" (Michael Sandel qtd. in Sommers and Saltz 137), and that students from early adolescence onward are attempting to make lasting commitments to agendas and to identities (Marcia 160).

While using values clarification and topics in moral reasoning to structure the content of a writing course should help motivate students to practice (1) the interpretation and creation of validity claims and (2) the commitments and skills necessary to exercise basic

leadership, the main part of my social activist agenda has yet to be addressed. The development of leaders who develop leaders, who see their individual growth as dependent upon the growth of the others in their community, may depend upon classroom management techniques and discussions such as those suggested by Brandwein (e.g., is it better to always form groups with the same people or different ones? Do we want people sitting distant from or close to each other?), as well as, perhaps, to various team-building techniques. The overall goal might be to model as much as possible *within* the classroom the concepts that each student is a leader who helps develop the leadership skills of her classmates, and that the success of each student is dependent upon the success of her classmates. (Thus, as Lois Arkin pointed out to me, it may be important to emphasize the development of both leadership and followership *skills* rather than the idea that we are all leaders all of the time.) That scenario at first appears to contradict the basic structure of an academic composition course where individual, independent grades are awarded, and where it is possible a student could perform well without knowing the names of any of her classmates. bell hooks, in fact, writes, "I did not want to teach in settings where individuals needed to be graded. To me the best context for teaching was, of course, one where students chose to come because they wanted to learn, from me, from one another" (21). However, the classroom-as-teaching-community can contain the structure involving individual grades while *also* being a more effective learning environment than the classroom of isolated individuals. A main reason for this is that a classroom-as-teaching-community goes much further than classrooms of isolated students to developing shared values and long-term relationships among its members. Therefore the classroom-as-teaching-community is a more meaningful place to be.

One step toward bringing about a classroom-as-teaching-community might be to make explicit the intersection of visions and agendas that have brought the community into existence. Robert Brooke, Tom O'Connor, and Ruth Mirtz present agenda negotiation as central to classroom leadership:

> Students in college classrooms, for example, face competing definitions for the purpose of college. Teachers, parents, Greek systems, political organizations, consciousness-raising groups, and peers (to name a few) all offer different, conflicting notions of what college is for and how one should act there. All students, therefore, must work out for themselves some sense of who to listen to and who to reject; from these conflicting definitions, students develop their own patterns (and purposes) for college behavior. . .
>
> . . . Students who emerge as leaders in classes clearly offer their colleagues a view of the situation which resolves some of the conflicting tensions. Teachers who are seen as effective do the same. In contrast, students and teachers who are perceived as annoying, arbitrary,

ineffective, and confusing are understood this way because they heighten rather than resolve conflicts. . . Leadership interaction, in short, becomes a problem or an aid for students largely through the way it articulates an understanding of the social situation. (67-68)

Toward the end of articulating our social situation, we could state the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies' (DRWS) agenda for the students, and I could state my agenda for the students, and my agenda for my life, which at the moment happen to be the same. Students' first task in the course, after, perhaps, some ice-breakers and trust-building activities, could be to express their agendas for themselves in the course, for themselves as writers, and for their lives—with the awareness that all of these statements of agenda are works in progress. This process will need to be presented creatively to help students engage with it, of course. Other activities—such as values clarification—might be used to help those who have never contemplated the agendas in which they are entangled to develop an agenda of their own. With preparation, I've found that students as young as thirteen are able to create meaningful vision statements. Unlike in Brandwein's camp staff training, it would be counterproductive to present from the beginning one goal and one purpose for the class with which everyone should align their individual agendas—though ultimately that will be what occurs, and students certainly could adopt as their own from day one the DRWS agenda or the instructor's agenda. Students and instructors should as much as possible work their way from their own preexisting agendas to incorporate the explicit departmental-determined plan for the course. Here, for example, are the learning outcomes for RWS 100 at SDSU, for fall semester 2006:

> In RWS 100, students:
> 1.   construct an account of an author's project and argument; translate an argument into their own words;
> 2.   construct an account of an author's project and argument and carry out small, focused research tasks to find information that helps clarify, illustrate, extend or complicate that argument; use appropriate reference materials, including a dictionary, in order to clarify their understanding of an argument;
> 3.   construct an account of two authors' projects and arguments and explain rhetorical strategies that these authors—and by extension, other writers—use to engage readers in thinking about their arguments;
> 4.   construct an account of two author's [sic] projects and arguments in order to use concepts from one argument as a framework for understanding and writing about another. (Manley et al. 8)

This cannot serve as a simple statement of vision such as Michael Sandel's goal for his moral reasoning course, "to 'awaken the restlessness of reason' by asking [students] to consider questions that are urgent because 'we live some answer to these questions every day'" (Sommers and Saltz 137), but it is a statement of agenda.

Attempting to be upfront about the various agendas which have brought us to the writing classroom helps us to understand the nature of our community, but is not enough to create a community in which members see their individual growth as dependent upon the growth of the others in the community. Also needed is a buy-in to the vision that we are all leaders who are working to develop the leadership skills of others, and to the vision that we succeed or fail as a whole. The leadership part of that vision should not be difficult to get class members to share—there are many ways to define leadership, such as, "the best way to test whether a person can lead rather than just manage is to ask him to create positive change" (Maxwell, *Laws* 14), and "leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves" (Covey, *Eighth* 98), or simply, "a leader is a person who uses skills to help a group identify and achieve its goals" (Brandwein, *Learning* 6). Even if none of these conceptualizations of leadership appeals, there is the view that to function as a student, as a writer, or as a human, we must develop and practice self-leadership—which consists at least of personal decision-making and self care—and that by self-leading we inevitably provide a model others can learn from. In short, to live is to lead, to live is to enact an agenda—it is just a question of how much responsibility we are able to take for developing that agenda.

The community development part of my vision should also be something the students will embrace. If our community is full of aimless people, or of unthinking reproducers of the status quo, any energy I have for growth may be stifled. On the other hand, if I am an aimless person in a community of individuals working persistently on beautiful projects, it is unlikely I will remain without direction for long. While saying this, I am reminded that I sometimes wonder about the possibility and nature of personal growth, so I should help students realize how development can continue beyond adolescence. One institutional impediment to the vision of individual growth as dependent upon development of the classroom community, however, may be the instructor's perception that some students will have to do worse than others so that the GPA for the class is not too high. This contradicts the goal of, say, a successful staff training, which is that each staff member should learn the skills successfully and perform their job as well as possible. If the instructor avoids a "some students must do poorly" mentality, and creates a culture in which self-leadership consists of asking for and accepting help when it is needed, and in which each student wants each other student to do as well as possible, then the instructor and other students should seek to support those who need more help. Even in that scenario, however, I expect there will still be variation in the academic grades for the course, which may be based on something like the DRWS agenda, even if self-evaluations report complete success. Success at the student's own agenda does not always translate exactly

to success at the institutional agenda.

bell hooks suggests, however, that many students will not have any other agenda than "that they need to make a specific grade to be successful and want to be awarded that grade irrespective of performance" (16). Her approach has been to

> [teach] students to apply the criteria that would be used to grade them and then to grade themselves so that they could remain aware of their ability to do the needed work at the level of achievement they desired. At different intervals, in one-on-one settings, their self-evaluations would be placed alongside my evaluation. The difficult part of this process was teaching students to be rigorous and critical in their self-evaluations. But more often than not our grading would be the same. (16)

As we know though, she then chose to teach in settings where no grading is involved, and many other great teachers teach without a formal grading system, *mirabile dictu.*

Ultimately, the development of a classroom-as-teaching-community, perhaps through some of the methods I have pointed to here, should lead students to quality time spent studying and practicing writing. Students should feel comfortable expressing and writing about their difficulties in writing, in setting aside protected study time, and in focusing on their work once they have secured that time. Students needing help should receive as much or more attention than those who are already the most accomplished. Because in the classroom-as-teaching-community each student can act as an instructor, the effectiveness of the instructor can be multiplied. A chart by John C. Maxwell expands on this point:

Leaders who develop followers	*Leaders who develop leaders*
Need to be needed	Want to be succeeded
Focus on weakness	Focus on strengths
Develop the bottom 20 percent	Develop the top 20 percent
Treat their people the same for "fairness"	Treat their leaders as individuals for impact
Hoard power	Give power away
Spend time with others	Invest time in others
Grow by addition	Grow by multiplication
Impact only people they touch personally	Impact people far beyond their own reach

(*Laws* 210)

Thus, one element of a successful classroom-as-teaching-community may be that the instructor develops her most skilled students to be leaders of those who are less skilled.

The main challenge for the instructor may be not in getting student buy-in to the leadership and community-building agendas of the kind of classroom environment I am envisioning, but in helping students find their way into the departmental agenda for the course, so that everyone is able to earn high academic grades. I envision that while students in this course will learn to reproduce academic conventions, they will also consider in what ways they can alter those conventions to make academic writing less painful, less harmful, and more in tune with their personal agendas. I will remind them of Mark C. Taylor's view that "writing is transgressive," while scholarship "must conform to codes and procedures that, though varying from field to field, follow long-established patterns . . . [and discourage] innovative work" (Rickert and Blakesley 808). While on some level codes make work possible, and as Joseph Harris reminds us, "it is only through being part of some ongoing discourse that we can, as individual writers, have things like points to make and purposes to achieve" (12), I believe that for the most part Taylor is targeting codes that are not written down in any style guide but which are taught, learned, and enforced nonetheless. When asked about the future of the humanities, for example, Taylor suggests "disciplines [will] disappear [and] inquiry will be guided by problems and thematic foci, which will be approached from a variety of perspectives" (819). Taylor also states, "[i]f the university is to have a future in the twenty-first century, writers rather than scholars must lead the way" (808). I may be able to help my students become writers who lead the way by manifesting that "the only way to subvert people is to have more fun than they do" (Bill McKibben qtd. in "Staff, Board, Volunteers"). I will now stop tweaking this paragraph.

I am no stranger to "[t]he best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley/ An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain for promised joy," but without a plan we reproduce noise, or we reproduce agendas we have not carefully considered. In December, assuming I've had the opportunity to teach an RWS 100 course at SDSU, ask me what I think of the writing here.

> Students can be helped to focus on their writing by encouraging them:
> - to write and keep writing without erasing;
> - to use writing about distraction as a way into writing;
> - to view writing as a transgressive act;
> - to consider the agendas leading to the existence of the classroom community and to the writing they do for the course;
> - and to develop and use their own agendas as a way into writing.
>
> I model these approaches in the composition of this text and in my thoughts about how to integrate within the composition course my agendas to help students become both:
> - better writers and readers
> - and leaders who develop leaders, who see their individual growth as dependent upon the growth of the others in their communities.

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