

W&R/T&P NEWSLETTER

A NEWSLETTER for educators in Canada interested in reading and writing / theory and practice. Issue #3. December 1982.

This newsletter is offered to all educators in Canada interested in processes and pedagogies relating to language, language use, and language acquisition. As a forum whose primary objective is to intensify the relationship between theory and practice, it serves both informative and polemical functions.

* ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! * ! *

EDITOR: James A. Reither
Director, Writing Program
St. Thomas University
Fredericton, N.B. E3B 5G3

FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENT: Russell A. Hunt
English Department
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405

* ! * ! *

PROVINCIAL CORRESPONDENTS:

ALTA: Chris Bullock
English Department
University of Alberta
Edmonton T6J 2E5

B.C.: Richard M. Coe
English Department
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby V5A 1S6

MAN: Murray J. Evans
English Department
Univ. of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg R3B 2E9

P.E.I.: Terry Pratt
English Department
U.P.E.I.
Charlottetown C1A 4P3

* ! * ! *

ONE READER'S COMMENT, REMINDING US WHY WE HAVE THIS NEWSLETTER:

"As for me, I'm no expert: I want to know how to teach reading & writing at a university level so that I can do it better."

M.G.O.

* ! * ! *

A TECHNICAL NOTE: The text of this newsletter is composed and formatted using MicroPro's WordStar on an IBM Personal Computer with 128K system RAM and two double-sided (320K) disk drives. It is printed out on an Epson MX80F\I printer.

If you have (or have access to) an IBM PC, I'd like to hear from you. Perhaps we can get our machines communicating with one another. I have a modem, although I don't yet have it hooked up and running.

* ! * ! *

NEWS FROM A FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENT:
"TWO 'ENERGIZING ARTICLES'"

One of the things I've appreciated most since I've been involved in academia has been the occasional recommendation by a colleague of a particular book or article which turns out to be "energizing"--that is, it makes me get up and take a walk half way through reading it; it calls for large, block-lettered comments in the margin; it produces pages of notes, full of exclamation points; and it reorganizes my thinking so as to make me want to go back and reread other things in the new light it's shed on what I thought I already knew.

In the course of reading full time for the past couple of months in the new (to me, at least) field of reading theory and its possible implications for the teaching of literature at the introductory college level, I've found a half-dozen such articles. Not all, it's clear, would be energizing to someone who wasn't in my unique position--someone, for instance, who had not recently read the particular range of things I had just finished at the moment. A couple, though, might well excite many people concerned with the same kinds of broad issues of literacy and language learning that I've become preoccupied with over the last few years.

Here, in the hope that they might be "energizing" to some of

my colleagues, are recommendations of two such articles I found recently.

1.

Rand J. Spiro, a reading researcher at the University of Illinois Center for the Study of Reading, has for some years been associated with the group there working on "schema theory". He has often published in association with Richard C. Anderson; their best-known collaboration was the editing of the 1977 Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge (Erlbaum). Last spring Spiro, whose primary interest are in cognitive psychology, published "Long-Term Comprehension: Schema-based Versus Experiential and Evaluative Understanding" (Poetics 11:1 [March 1982], 77-86).

In it, Spiro argues that many of the problems encountered in applying schema theory to "real-world" reading arises from the fact that most reading research involves very short texts and drastically limited periods of time. Psychological researchers, he asserts, have failed to consider that processing over longer terms may be as different from short-term processing as long-term memory is different from short-term. Spiro goes on to suggest some of the ways in which a "logical" model, limited to "information-processing", is inadequate to the activities which seem to accompany our reading of texts such as his example, Joyce's "The Sisters". (Longer-term processing, he says, is particularly characteristic of the reading of literary texts.)

More generally, the idea that what really matters to reading is the kind of thing that's already in the reader's head before he starts generating meanings is obviously an important one if you're trying to understand the role played in teaching by pre-conceptions about literature and by the influence of the contexts in which literature can be--and is--read and taught. This is an especially important concern when we are trying to understand not just how people comprehend, but how the affective dimension fits into that comprehension. An important difficulty with schema theory in accounting for the reading of literature has been that it has seemed incapable of allowing for affective or emotional response. Any hint that that may change seems an exceptionally interesting idea.

Spiro is, however, not yet in a position to take into account many of the characteristics of the kind of reading appropriate to literary texts which I consider most important--for instance, the typical doubleness of perception involved in the reader's awareness of both narrator and author, or both pattern and subject; in other words, all the complexity of what Seymour Chatman would call the "discourse level" in addition to the "story level". Even so, it seems to me his article represents a dramatic case of a spark jumping across the narrowing gap between two previously unconnected--and often even hostile--disciplines.

It is perhaps equally important that Spiro--unlike many

empirical researchers--does not ignore the possibility that literary studies may have something important to offer cognitive science, as well as the other way 'round:

The issue of long-term comprehension not only illustrates some of the limitations of schema theory for a complete understanding of text-processing (especially literature), but also shows how the study of literature (which is not subject to the constraints of the laboratory texts) may complement experimental studies in the development of a general theory of text-processing. (P. 84.)

Perhaps most important, however, the article represents what may well be the beginning of a major rethinking of the relation to "real-world reading" of schema theory as it has been outlined over the 1st few years, and it's particularly interesting to me that Spiro--with his background and training--should be one of the people doing that rethinking.

ii.

An article I found exciting in quite a different way is Michael Steig's review of four books about reader-response criticism in the February 1982 College English ("Reading and Meaning," 44:2, 182-189). Three of the books are of central importance in this most recent (and, I think, most promising) development in literary criticism, and his presentation of them is of a kind which it seems to me may invite many literature teachers not especially interested in literary theory (or, in fact, actively hostile to it in the form of recent developments like poststructuralism, deconstruction, and so forth) to take a serious look at this new set of ideas. In part, this is because of Steig's approach: he begins by outlining his own "theoretical development" from a less-than-fully-self-conscious embracer of New Critical principles to a believer in the principle that the reader is the most important of the complex of elements available to the scrutiny of scholars, critics, teachers, and readers. His pilgrimage is one that many other teachers have found themselves on in the last few years, and company along the road, as Chaucer understood, is a goodly thing.

Steig's statement of the basic problems posed by the three books most directly concerned with reader-oriented criticism (Stanley Fish's Is There a Text in this Class? and two important anthologies--The Reader in the Text: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading, edited by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, and Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, edited by Jane Tompkins) is clear and direct. Problems like the extent to which many self-styled reader-response critics are in reality concerned only with texts and the "ideal" readers those texts imply, and the opposed extreme--critics who are concerned only with individual readers as human beings, and hardly with reading at all--are faced squarely, but without using them as an excuse for dismissing the field as a whole. Indeed, I think Steig's review makes as good a short introduction as I've

found to the central questions raised by the movement, and also constitutes a useful focusing of the issues for a reader who is already acquainted with the basic ideas.

In a way, each of these articles represents a step toward a synthesis from one of two opposed extremes--Spiro's from that of rigidly empirical investigation, and Steig's from the traditional humanist paradigm of literary studies toward a greater attention to problems of observation and measurement. The impending collision may be just a minor traffic accident, or it may be the kind of genuine "big bang" out of which a universe arises; we'll have to wait to see. Either way, all of us interested in this field will be part of it.

Russell A. Hunt
English Department
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405

* ; * ; *

NEWS FROM THE PROVINCES

ALBERTA. Current Research: At the University of Alberta, Tom Gee's (Secondary Education) PhD-in-progress is looking at revision in student writing in a unique format: provincial grade 12 exams in which students were encouraged to prepare their essays on the left hand side of answer sheets and write their finished essays on the right hand side. Also, Robin A. Smith (Secondary Education) recently completed an MEd using a body of work from first-year students in a university remedial program to tabulate the writing problems of 'poor' writers and assess the frequency with which specific problems occur. And Joseph Belanger's PhD, completed in 1978, found, in a school sample, no correlation between improvement of reading and improvement of writing skills.

Writing Courses: The English Department at the University of Alberta offers the following writing courses: Eng. 214, Writing for Engineering Students; Eng. 290, The Craft of Writing; Eng. 307, Essay Writing for Education Students; Eng. 308, Advanced Essay Writing for Education Students; Eng. 309, Expository Writing (full year); Eng. 540, Theory and Practice of Expository Writing--together with several creative writing courses.

The President's Committee on Testing and Remediation tests incoming students in all faculties except, at present, Agriculture, Engineering, and Rehab. Medicine, and failing students are required to take remedial writing instruction

(about 20 hours per term) offered by the Committee.

A very few other writing courses are offered on campus, e.g., CIV E 500 (Civil Engineering Report Writing.

Chris Bullock

* | * | *

COHORT REPORTS

Ian Pringle (Linguistics, Carleton), has two very important announcements for us. The first is that "the third and last collection of papers from the 1979 COTE conference [this one entitled Learning to Write: First Language/Second Language, ed. Freedman, Pringle, and Yalden] is about to appear. This is not being published by COTE, but rather by Longman, in England; anyone interested in copies should order it through their book-seller. Although the focus is not so exclusively on the post-secondary level as it is in Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, I think most of the book will appeal to those with . . . serious interest in writing. . . . ISBN 0-582-55371-7." [Here's a list of the authors in the volume: Britton, Bereiter and Scardamalia, Widdowson, Graves, Wilkinson, Kirby and Kantor, Odell, Kinneavy, Kaplan, Kameen, Witte, Bennett, Martin, Dixon, Squire, Winterowd, Johnson, Raimes. How can the book miss? J.A.R.]

COTE plans to publish a monograph series, and Ian has been appointed general editor. Hence his second announcement: "I would like to invite your readers to submit prospectuses for short monographs for consideration by COTE. The prospectus should explain in some detail the content, the projected audience, the approximate date by which a completed ms could be ready. The general guidelines for monographs are that they must make sound research accessible to practising teachers; the kind of length we have in mind is between 40 and 120 pages of print. (The NCTE research reports might be a good model.) The procedure for handling prospectuses is as follows: those that I judge to be promising I will bring to the publications committee for review. The publications committee may then ask to see a complete manuscript. If that is accepted by the publications committee, the committee will recommend that the Executive authorize publication, and if it does so, COTE will publish it, distribute it in Canada and try to arrange distribution in the U.S., the U.K. and Australia."

* | *

Andrea Lunsford (U.B.C.) suggests that we might consider forming teams of consultants who would travel to schools for only travel expenses. The American organization, WPA (Writing Program Administrators) has organized such teams, and the concept seems to be working well for them. She wonders if anyone among the readers

of this newsletter would have ideas about how to fund such a program.

[Given the good response I've been getting with the "Consultants form", there appears to be enough expertise here in Canada to allow us to put together such teams. (See my very brief "report", on the last page of this newsletter.) J.A.R.]

* ! *

Mary Maguire (Director of Student Teaching, McGill; Co-Chair, COTE 1983, Montreal) has sent along some good news: "Irena [Gerych, Co-Chair, COTE '83] and I do not envision solving 'the Canadian scholars problem' by one conference; however, we will try to do our bit to ensure that Canadian scholars are approached, invited to present at the conference and in particular such opportunity is available to individuals working at the post secondary area. There will be a definite post secondary strand running through the conference. Hopefully, we will see some positive results and more involvement at the post secondary area.

"To bring you up to date on the conference thus far; there are some additions to our list. The following Canadians have agreed to present

Donald Gutteridge	John Oster
Bryant Filion	Carl Braun
John Stevens	Ann Forester
David Doake	James Montgomery
Michael Bristol	Robert Bracewell

We certainly hope to see 'lots' more."

And she adds: "We are very open to whatever you [i.e., W&R/T&P Newsletter] would like to do.... do tell us how we can be supportive to W&R/T&P."

[Looks like the ball's in our court, folks.]

* ! *

Patrick Dias (Director of the Writing Center, McGill) suggests the following as possible sessions at COTE:

1. A forum for secondary school teachers.
2. A business meeting or advertisement for a meeting for people interested in W&R/T&P at either the post secondary or all levels. And,
3. An information session on reading and writing approaches /programmes in Canada.

[Thanks to Mary Maguire for sending Patrick's ideas along. Personally, I'd like to see both 2. and 3. occur. With regard to #3: I will describe the theory and practice of the S.T.U. Writ-

ing Programme--a course both unique and innovative, not only in its precise combination of assignments and methods, but also in its objectives. Who will join me, to describe his or her course? (In a ninety-minute session we could describe no more than two, I think.) NOTICE: The deadline for proposals is coming fast: January 7, 1983. J.A.R.]

* ! *

STRANGE . TURNS, EH? Our colleague at Concordia, Harry Hill, relates that Concordia has instituted a writing requirement--at the insistence of the students:

Concordia University Senate has made the sitting of a test in "competence in written expression" (called the university Writing Test) mandatory for all graduates, beginning in September 1983.

This has been in the wind for some years, as various committees and task forces studied the problem of illiteracy. So much committee work went into the study of literacy while illiteracy increased that finally, nine months ago, the Students' Association produced a resolution demanding that a compulsory writing test be instituted in order to qualify for graduation.

The test is simple, thanks to the help of the Educational Testing Services in Princeton, whose topics for the New Jersey College Entrance Board have been carefully constructed over years of consideration. Gertrude Conlan of ETS heads the Test Development Department, and her holistic grading practice shows that 7,000 20-minute writing tests can be graded by 40 graders in two days accurately and reliably.

Students at Concordia are asked to write 300-500 words on a topic chosen from a set of four or five.

The test has been given several trial runs at Concordia, and has received much publicity:

"CONCORDIA WILL SET UP TESTS FOR LITERACY--AT STUDENTS' REQUEST" (Montreal Gazette, October 6th);

"WHY NOT BE LITERATE?" (editorial, Montreal Gazette, October 7th);

"MONTREAL UNIVERSITY TO SET LANGUAGE TEST" (Toronto Star, October 6th); and

"CONCORDIA FIGHTS ILLITERACY" (The Globe and Mail, October 7th).

The gist of these articles, and the gist of the facts, is that new students will have to pass the test before receiving a degree. The Students' Association made the point that a "significant proportion of graduates remain functionally illiterate even after three years of study at the university level" and expressed a desire to make sure their degrees had some value.

The student newspaper, The Link, gave prominent coverage to the test week after week, with headlines such as "CAN STUDENTS READ AND WRITE?"; "TESTS HAVE TWOFOLD BENEFIT"; "ENGINEERING STUDENTS GIVE THE UNIVERSITY WRITING

TEST ITS FIRST DRY RUN".

Whether or not this means some kind of return to conservatism in the student body, the move is a good one that tells us something about our teaching. The message of these students who have made Concordia spend the money on this test (about which more information will be forthcoming as the trial runs provide proper and useful information) is clear: whatever discipline we are in, teach us how to express ourselves in ink.

Persons interested in receiving copies of the test and trial-run results should write to

Harry J. C. Hill
Coordinator of Composition Courses
English Department
7141 Sherbrooke St. West
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec H4B 1R6

* ! * ! *

UPDATE ON READERSHIP: This third issue of W&R/T&P will go to 114 people. I cannot estimate the extent to which that number represents our total potential readership, but my guess is that there are still others here in Canada who share our interests and concerns but who have not yet heard of or seen this newsletter. I think we should continue to try to reach those people; they are valuable to us, and we can be valuable to them. Here's a rundown on our numbers, province by province:

Alberta.....	25	Nova Scotia.....	5
British Columbia.....	15	Ontario.....	17
Manitoba.....	3	P.E.I.....	1
New Brunswick.....	13	Quebec.....	26
Newfoundland.....	0	Saskatchewan.....	8

Please continue to do whatever you can to bring W&R/T&P to the attention of colleagues who might find it useful or stimulating. The larger our numbers, the better our chance of survival and success. Anyone who cares about language, language processes, language-use processes, language acquisition is a potential reader. Or, more specifically,

--anyone who teaches writing and knows there's more to it than telling students about topic sentences, correct usage, and methods of development;

--anyone who teaches literature and knows that his or her students are missing something if the only thing that really matters in the classroom is the literary artifact;

--anyone who tries to make sense--through research, scholarship, theorizing--of what happens and what it means when people use language, acquire language, make sense with language.

Teachers, researchers, scholars, theorists--they are all, it seems to me, potential members of the community we are trying to create.

* ! * ! *

"Present-day invention and pre-writing techniques . . . assume that students need to discover something to write about, which implies that they must feel motivated to write before they are motivated to say something, before the experience of a writing situation which includes the need to say something. We send students in search of something to intend, then, as if intention itself were subject to free choice."

John T. Gage, "Towards an Epistemology of Composition,"
Journal of Advanced Composition, II, 1 & 2 (1981), 2.

* ! * ! *

CONSULTANTS: I now have a file of twenty-five CONSULTANTS. That is good. We know who you are. What is not good is that none of the names in the file has come recommended by someone who has seen these experts at work: all are people recommending themselves. So, I'm running the CONSULTANTS form one more time, but this time I'm stressing the need for you to send me names and addresses of people who (1) teach in Canadian institutions, and (2) have taught you important things about writing and reading/theory and practice.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

AREAS OF EXPERTISE (e.g., evaluation, course design, the writing process or reading process, and so on)

James A. Reither, Editor
W&R/T&P Newsletter
St. Thomas University
Fredericton, N.B. E3B 5G3

