

## DISCOVERING "THE SYSTEM"

Twenty-five years ago, I was desperate for a way to break out of the old instructional mold in which I had been flailing since I started teaching — you know the one I mean, where I lectured and my students listened, where I explained what this work or that work meant and my students nodded in agreement, and where, at report card sensitive intervals, my students wrote down on tests what they half-remembered or (worse) paraphrased my lectures in their essays.

I wasn't a bad lecturer (there were few audible snores while I was lecturing; notes were taken, jokes laughed at) and many of my students wrote and tested well — some of them very well indeed. The problem was that my students and I were all trapped in a model where remembering was privileged over learning, where coloring inside the lines trumped creativity, and where the students' desks arranged in orderly rows were a metaphor for the numbing sameness of our daily toil (a numbing sameness relieved, of course, when my lectures included lots of good jokes.)

What was worse, the way that I was teaching the reading literature had little in common with the way that I read myself, outside of school, and the way that I taught writing had almost nothing in common with the way that I did my own writing. The way I read had taken me through college and graduate school. The way I wrote had gotten me published in magazines. The ways I wrote and read seemed real. Why couldn't my students and I, together, do real reading, real writing?

### **Sitting Around, Talking About Stuff**

As I was chewing over that question in my journal one day, I worried my way to what turned out to be half of the answer — I would drag myself off the stage and structure my classes around my students' reading and around writing and talking about what they read. (Full disclosure: my half-answer in my journal that day was inspired by a young woman who had been the editor of the school magazine I was advising. Looking back on her year as editor, she said the best part of her experience was "sitting around, talking about stuff.")

All right — we would sit around and talk about stuff. But how would that work?

The bare bones of my half-answer were these: I would make reading assignments (there were content constraints on coloring outside the lines, after all, and after a course in American Literature my students would be expected to have at least skimmed *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter* — the old "cultural literacy" rag, don't you know.) I would make those assignments, and

then we'd sit around and talk (and write) about what we were reading. We would keep daily journals. We would talk (at length) a couple of times a week. And we would write — a lot.

When I got off the stage (after, of course, I had arranged all the props and without letting go of my puppeteer's off-stage strings), there were more questions, most of which happily answered themselves.

“If I'm offstage, who will call on students to speak?” (Easy — the student who has the floor recognizes the next speaker, and if the next speaker isn't talking, we all sit in uncomfortable silence until someone takes the bait, steps up to the plate, takes the hand-off and carries the ball. I don't interfere, except to — sometimes — correct a grievous error in fact.)

“How can I get grades out of all of this?” (Easy, too — “The more you write, the more you talk,” I told my students, “the higher your grade.”)

And “How will I grade the students' papers?” (Simple — I won't. In what's close to forty years now as a writer, I have never had an editor “grade” something I've submitted. Sometimes a story's just rejected; sometimes a poem is just accepted without a peep from the editor. In the best cases, though, an editor will find something that I really hadn't seen in what I've written and work with me to bring that to light. So I became an editor, not a grader.)

There were little flourishes in my plan, bells and whistles like individual writing conferences and peer reviewing and credits for attending and writing about cultural events, but that was the basic plan — we would read and then sit around talking and writing about what we had read. And no lectures. No tests. No “grades” until I totaled up each student's points halfway through and at the end of each quarter (or when a student or a troubled parent asked how the student was doing.)

And it worked!

When I say “worked,” I don't just mean that “The System,” as students almost immediately began to call it, “worked” in the sense that it was functional and functioned. I also mean my students and I worked like beavers. No, I wasn't designing and grading tests anymore, but I really hadn't anticipated that students would be willing to rewrite a paper two, three, four, even more times — or that I, as editor and not grader, would have to be willing to read every draft. Nor had I anticipated that, when I no longer had all of the “right” answers, it would be so hard for me read as my students were reading, to hear them when they were talking.

At the end of The System's first year, I was flushed with success. My students' course evaluations were almost universally positive, their writing had grown assured and even stylish, and we had broken new ground, I thought, when students clamored for individual conferences over winter break and when more

than a few classes had been crushed by a discussion's being cut short by the bell.

### **Discovering "Textual Power"**

But The System as it stood was only a half-answer — good bones, but without skin, muscle, and flesh.

That muscle and flesh was supplied when a colleague pressed a book into my hands and told me I had to read it. He was a good enough friend to trust belaying me when we were rock climbing and to pick me up and dust me off when I crashed on a ski slope, so I read the book — Robert Scholes' *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (Yale, 1985.)

And there it all was — the rest of The System, its skin, flesh, and muscle.

“Reading and writing are complementary acts that remain unfinished until completed by their reciprocals,” Scholes wrote, and “The move from a summary of events to a discussion of the meaning or theme of a work of fiction is usually a move from reading to interpretation,” and “any group that has identified its interests as a class can mount a critical attack on a story's codes and themes from the position of its own system of values.”

What Scholes' book gave me — and my students, and The System — was the motivation to read, interpret, and criticize; the critical framework in which to do that reading, interpreting, and criticizing; and the language to describe how we read, interpreted, and criticized.

### **Reading Power**

With Scholes, we practiced reading by “writing within the text” (the term is adapted from Scholes) — alternative versions of the text which invite the reader to “retell the story, to summarize it, and to expand it” and encourage the reader to think of the text as “a version of events that might indeed seem quite different from another perspective” (Scholes, 28.) Writing within the text, we experimented with alternative genres, with alternative points of view; with gender reversals, different ethnicities, religions, ages, and social classes.

And what experimentation we did! In a matter of weeks my classroom was a garden blooming with experimental flowers — poems reimaged as short stories, short stories transformed into quilts and photomontages and comic books, essays erupting into videos, novels revealed as Delta blues. Someone was always onto something new, and my students and I reveled in the newness.

### **Interpretive Power**

After we had written within the text, we moved on to interpreting it, moving “from the level of the specific events narrated ... to a more general level of social types and ethical values (Scholes, 29.) Following Scholes’ advice, we looked for repetitions and oppositions in the texts we had read, remembering always that “interpretation ... is not so much a matter of generating meanings out of a text as it is a matter of making connections between a particular verbal text and a larger cultural text” (Scholes, 33.) We called this kind of writing “writing upon the text” (another term borrowed from Scholes.)

Not that writing upon the text was easy. Why did characters we liked — Huck Finn, King Lear’s Cordelia — have to be more than just characters? Why did they have to represent “social types and ethical values”? Why couldn’t they just be good ol’ Huck and poor, sweet Cordelia? But we soldiered on, and suddenly this girl was saying, “Wait! Cordelia’s a daughter, and so am I” and this guy was saying, “Hey, Huck’s like, you know, an abused child, and I have a friend who — .” Or put it this way: my students found a way to take authors’ bacon, bring it home, fry it up in a pan.

### **Critical Power**

And finally we wrote criticism (calling this kind of writing “writing against the text” — another borrowing from Scholes), remembering that “criticism is not a matter of personal preference but of collective judgment. The critic must speak for a group or class on issue of importance to that class” (Scholes, 35.)

Now everyone knows that adolescents imagine themselves to be the ultimate individualists — we were all like that, once — and my students, who were almost always high school juniors, were all that, so they resisted the idea of “collective judgment” in criticism and the notion of speaking “for a group or class.” But there came magical days, as when all the girls in the class stood shoulder to shoulder defending feminism and Adrienne Rich and the boys, stunned, tried to organize themselves against her. Or the evening when I was reading a previously home-schooled Christian young woman’s writing against the text of *The Scarlet Letter* and felt her angst as she struggled with her “personal preference” and the collective judgment of her Christian community (which had no truck with Hester Prynne’s adultery) and finally, painfully, came down on the side of her community: “I love Hester, but — .”

And there it all was — The System, complete.

### **Completing The System**

Or almost complete, because up until now, for narrative clarity I've left out my friend Susan — colleague, peer-reviewer, editor, sounding board, ally, critic, sometime co-author, and peerless antagonist — without whom The System would have been stillborn. She was the earliest adopter of The System. Together we read madly to fill out students' reading lists with material. Together we devised rubrics for writing assignments. Together we recruited more advocates for The System. And always we argued over details. Never, though, did we disagree on the Big Picture, on our theme — that our students' learning, not our teaching, was paramount, and that sitting around, talking and writing about what we read was the key that unlocked that learning.

And, gloriously, it didn't end there.

John, a student teacher who became a trusted colleague, signed on to the project, adding to and modifying The System, proving as he did so that The System wasn't a cookbook or a set of codified lesson plans but an organic process that was always evolving in new and exciting directions.

Ann, a student who went on to become an exemplary teacher, carried her own version of The System into distant schools, and other former students who became teachers continue to report that this or that element of The System worked in their classrooms, too.