

# conference report

## Report On The University of Chicago's Conference On 'Writing, Meaning And Higher Order Reasoning'

The University of Chicago's Continuing Education Program's conference of Nov. 17-20, 1983 was entitled 'Writing, Meaning and Higher Order Reasoning: The Third National Institute on the Relationships among Intellectual Development, Critical Thinking and Effective Writing across the Curriculum.' While the conference was not without its problems (a few of which I'll mention shortly), it was a fruitful, interdisciplinary exchange of views on the pedagogy of writing and thinking.

The 'writing' and 'thinking' elements of the program were not very well integrated. There were talks on developmental psychology by such thinkers as Michael Basseches (Assistant Professor of Human Development, Cornell University), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Chairman of the Committee on Human Development, and Professor in the Departments of Behavioral Science and Education, and of the Social Sciences in the College, The University of Chicago), Robert Kegan (Senior Lecturer, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University), and Reed Larson (Director, Post-Doctoral Programs in Adolescent Psychiatry, and Research Associate and Assistant Professor in Psychiatry, Michael Reese Hospital and Medical Center, and Lecturer in the Social Sciences Division, The University of Chicago). There were talks on composition theory and writing across the curriculum by such thinkers as Ann Berthoff (Professor of English, University of Massachusetts-Boston), Wayne Booth (George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English, the Committee on the Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Methods, and the College, The University of Chicago), Paul Connolly (Director, Institute for Writing and Thinking, Bard College, and Professor of English, Yeshiva College), Donald Lazere (Professor of English, California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo), Elaine Maimon (Director of the Writing Program, Associate Dean for Curricular Research, and Associate Professor of English, Beaver College), and Joseph M. Williams (Professor in the Departments of English and Linguistics, and in the College, The University of Chicago). However, little attempt was made formally to connect these two lines of input. In fact, this integration was left to those of us who attended the conference to accomplish in informal group discussions.

The assignments for group discussions were as follows: (1) Writing and Higher Order Reasoning: Toward a Working Definition; (2) Using Writing to Foster New Modes of Reasoning and Invention; (3) Toward a Developmental Approach to Linking Writing with Higher Order Reasoning and Invention. Perhaps some of the informal group discussions were fruitful. The ones I attended were not very useful.

The psychological model which provided the conference's only formal input concerning higher-order reasoning was derived from Piaget, Kohlberg and Perry. I found the use of this model at the conference a bit unsettling. The psychologists and educators seemed all too often to be saying 'Johnny can't write/think yet because he hasn't reached a high enough stage of cognitive development.' They seemed to treat learning as a biological or ontogenetic process, rather than a social one. When I would ask, 'What am I to do? I am a professor of Philosophy and you are telling me explicitly that students are not "ready" yet to learn logic, ethics, etc. How can you account for my/our **successes?**' they had no straight answers. It seems ironic that educators are beginning to apply developmental psychology as a Procrustean bed at a time when the accuracy of the "stage" approach to cognitive development is coming under heavy attack in psychology. (Indeed, the presentation by the psychiatrist Reed Larson was severely criticized at the meeting, on the grounds that his "empirical results" were highly subjective and the result of a poorly-designed study.)

The composition theorists had many illuminating ideas about teaching writing, and teaching it across the curriculum. Indeed, this input was the "meat" of the conference, providing useful techniques and strategies to promote better writing skills. Unfortunately, these speakers had little to offer about the development of higher-order reasoning. They seemed to assume that teaching writing is teaching higher-order reasoning. (This assumption seemed belied by the talk of Ann Berthoff: although she is a famous composition theorist, her attack upon cognitive psychology was a tissue of anecdotes, innuendo, and non sequiturs.)

Although this discussion points out shortcomings of the conference, I hasten to add that I found the conference both enlightening and useful. I learned techniques for writing assignments which I have already put into practice, with favorable results. It was also useful to see how psychologists divide the outcomes we expect of students into different layers or stages of difficulty and development. Above all, it was the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas concerning the pedagogy of writing and thinking which made this a useful and therefore successful conference. ●

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