

Avoiding Learned Helpfulness in Composition

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Many teachers, in a misguided effort to help students improve writing skills, emphasize mistakes. These teachers identify every mistake that students make on composition. This red-penciled attack by teachers—though well intentioned—has great potential for harm. Psychologically as well as linguistically, young writers are in a high risk situation. If they regularly receive overwhelming amounts of criticism—no matter how noble the goals of that criticism—discouragement is a likely outcome. Injury, not improvement, is inescapable; and subsequent attempts at the writing process become frustrating, if not futile. In short, because early experiences play a crucial role in shaping a student's attitude toward and success with writing at more advanced grade levels, there is latent and long-range danger in saturating his or her first efforts with well-meant, eminently valid admonitions and directives. Indeed, "The Child is Father of the Man"—or the woman—as one struggles on and through the continuum that is composition skills.

Psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman concurs. "Learned helplessness" is the term and the concept which he has developed to encapsulate the feeling of inadequacy eventually befalling the individual who senses virtually no success in a frequently attempted endeavor. It is Seligman's contention that when a person—any person—believes or intuits that he or she is unable to control or predict the occurrence of adverse events over an extended period, that person reacts by evolving a set of behaviors which militate against subsequent success. Typical of those behaviors, contends Seligman are, (1) a lowered initiation of voluntary responding and (2) an increasing difficulty in learning that responses produce logical or just outcomes (1975, p. 82f).

Seligman hastens to add that although "learned helplessness" is possible at any age, youngsters are the most likely candidates for it (1975, pp. 150-151). Their mental, emotional, and behavioral resources are inadequate for coping with an excess of reactions which their elders may well shower upon them in a charitable attempt to be constructive and useful. Those reactions

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overwhelm, not strengthen, especially if they happen to be negative or, equally important, if their recipients perceive them as such. Critically significant in this regard is Sherif and Sherif's statement: "For we do not see with our eyes alone, and hear with our ears alone, but we see and hear at the same time, with our attitudes . . ." (1969, p. 325).

In the writing process, "learned helplessness" commonly translates into refrains like "I don't know how to start," "I don't have anything to say," or—most crippling of all—"I hate writing!" Students discouraged by it approach composition with fear and reluctance; and, even when launched on an assignment, show little enthusiasm for it. They commonly write little (less, certainly, than do their more confident classmates); complete assignments early; and produce a cramped, barely legible handwriting, visible evidence, perhaps, that they do not want their comments read. Most tragic of all perhaps, they display little desire to experiment in and with prose; they employ vocabulary, word forms, and syntax which they know to be "correct." "Safe" writing, often devoid of honesty or conviction, surfaces as their finished products—and as their hallmark. Lacking is the courage to write imperfect composition, compositions in which imperfections are a sign of growth and change.

In the seventies it is understandable that numerous teachers have, unknowingly, developed "learned helplessness" in their students. The pressures—and the press—for accountability, basics, and competency (dare we call them the new *A, B, C's*?) are forcing them into no-frills, no-nonsense methodologies characterized by frequent tests. The public wants results, and conscientious teachers are committed to providing them. Such an "end product" emphasizes demands, they sense, that they unabashedly inundate student compositions with red ink and that they ferret out every flaw that appears in those compositions. Theirs is well-intentioned pedagogy: Their goal is thoroughness; their enemy, error; the result, discouragement.

Such an emphasis, it is worth noting, hardly nullifies or contradicts a tendency that has characterized our society since its founding. Rudolph Dreikurs (1964) purports that ours is a mistake-oriented culture, tending to focus on weaknesses rather than strengths. Most people, he explains, have grown up thinking about what they and others do wrong as opposed to what is done right. It is a rare individual, he further states, who, focuses on the successes of the soon-to-close day. Instead, what has gone wrong receives attention, and troubled sleep, perhaps even insomnia, lies ahead.

In the midst of such a mistake-oriented culture, and in the face of unprecedented demands for proof of proficiency, what can teachers of writing—especially elementary school teachers of writing—do to avoid educating for "learned helplessness"? They can make a commitment to:

(1) focus and emphasize—in their thinking, speaking and writing—matters which they do well and are successful at in their lives. We must stress the positive in our own lives since it is almost impossible to be helpful and encouraging with others if we are negative and discouraging with ourselves (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963)

(2) evaluate student writing selectively, not intensively. Unless we discipline ourselves to responding only to matters of importance (giving greater attention to fluency rather than to editing), we mislead students into believing that all matters are equally significant in the writing process; supply them with a surfeit of comments to act upon in their revisions and/or their next papers; and invariably inundate them with the negative (Reising, 1978)

(3) emphasize the positive in reacting to student writing. If we are to expect students to grow in composition skills and confidence, we must become masters of contentions like “You do a good job of . . .” “You have improved in . . .” (Reimer, 1967)

(4) be specific in responding to student writing. Normally, our comments can carry more meaning for and to students if we shun generalizations (e.g., “Work on punctuation”) and employ precisely worded statement (e.g., “You need a comma here.”)

(5) stress conferences in their teaching. Don Murray (1968), the Pulitzer Prize winner, has demonstrated that mini-conferences—conferences lasting no more than a minute or two (perhaps held during class time, perhaps not)—represent a potent weapon for good in our work with student writers.

(6) expect errors in student writing. Mistakes are an integral, unavoidable part of growth in composition prowess, and we must educate ourselves to utilizing them in the teaching—learning process. In the words of Dr. Dreikurs “A mistake is the opportunity to try again.” (1964, p. 108)

“Learned helplessness” is not inevitable. Those who teach writing can contribute to its demise by exploiting—in our pedagogy and in our thinking—a new term and a better concept, one laden with unique potential for social good: “Learned helpfulness.” Certainly, Seligman, Dreikurs—and our students—would not be disappointed if we did.

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