



THINKING WRITING

FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING
THROUGH WRITING

CAROL BOOTH OLSON





Thinking/Writing

Fostering Critical Thinking
Through Writing

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University of California, Irvine
California Writing Project

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THINKING/WRITING: FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH WRITING

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Thinking/Writing

*This book is dedicated to Owen Thomas
who taught us that our job is not to put
language into kids' heads, but to help them
express "the extraordinary wealth of
linguistic knowledge" that each of them
already possesses through writing.*

We have to reinvent the wheel every once in a while, not because we need a lot of wheels, but because we need a lot of inventors.

Bruce Joyce



Foreword

Reflections on the Thinking/Writing Project

My connection with the teachers who are the authors of this book began nearly ten years ago when I was invited by the National Writing Project site at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) to serve as a consultant to an advanced summer seminar on writing and critical thinking for thirty experienced teachers who had previously completed a UCI Writing Project Summer Institute in Composition. I found there an indefatigable group of teachers, thoroughly committed to each other and to their ambitious collaborative goal. Their aim was to forge a theoretical framework and a set of workable lessons for systematically using writing to promote more cognitively demanding and more refined thinking in students at all grades and in all subjects. To this end they embarked first on the task of familiarizing themselves with the current state of knowledge about writing as a cognitive process, about learning theory, and about intellectual development. By the time I arrived, they had been meeting for about a week and (guided by the organizational genius and intellectual resourcefulness of Project Director, Carol Booth Olson) had already collectively read, reviewed, and assimilated as large a body of professional literature as a graduate professor might assign in a semester. They had also begun to develop some exciting prototypes for classroom lessons and the outlines of a persuasive theory of instruction.

As I revisited these teachers over the years, watching the continuing growth of their expertise and of their manuscript, my admiration and affection for them also continued to grow, as did my sense of wonder at their continuing commitment to each other and to their collaborative project. I was particularly struck by the remarkable synergy that their collaboration seemed to produce. As a group they energized and continually drew out the best from all their members and from anybody else who came into their circle. In the middle of one of my own presentations to these teachers, I found myself articulating ideas that constituted a real advance for me in my own thinking about the teaching of literature. I hastily made some notes on a scrap of cardboard, outlining my new thinking. These notes became crucial to me in much of the research, writing, and instructional development work I have been engaged in over the past several years.

A Book for Our Time

Looking now at the finished manuscript which is the latest product of the synergy I experienced and witnessed on my visits to the thinking/writing project, I am struck most by how much this volume may be seen as emblematic not only of the processes that produced it, but of transformations that have taken place in the past decade in the teaching of writing and in the professional lives of writing teachers—transformations that the teachers of the thinking/writing project helped to pioneer and advance. I do not think I am claiming too much for this book, then, when I suggest that it is emblematic of the current moment in the field of language arts education and that its content, its rhetorical structure, and the conditions of its production all represent and enact what I take to be the most important developments of recent years in the teaching of writing and in the profession of teaching.

Thinking/Writing is first of all emblematic of the present moment in the history of teaching writing for its particular approach to the teaching of critical thinking through writing. It is unapologetically and emphatically a process-oriented book. Indeed, its fundamental premise is that the writing process itself is a model and enactment of the processes of critical thinking and an essential instrument for critical thinking in all disciplines. This approach to teaching writing and thinking reflects a body of research that has emerged over the past two decades in composition and allied fields, but has not found universal acceptance until recently in the larger community of teachers. The publication of *Thinking/Writing* at this moment testifies to the widespread need among teachers throughout the country for curricular materials, right now, that will help them implement a process-oriented approach to the teaching of writing and thinking in classrooms at every grade and in all academic subjects.

Thinking/Writing is also a representative book for our time in its fundamental rhetorical structure; that is, as a book in which classroom teachers

present to other teachers model lessons that are research-based and classroom-tested. The key element here, marking this book as representative of an important transformation in our professional world, is that it is an instance of classroom teachers teaching other teachers—a concept for professional development programs that was largely dismissed by the educational community until it became the seminal principle of the National Writing Project professional development model in 1976—a principle that is only now gaining wide acceptance among district and school-site planners of staff development programs. The teachers who in this volume present lessons they have tested and perfected in their own classrooms presume to do so not because they hold advanced degrees or have been promoted to supervisory positions in their schools. Their principal qualification as authors derives from the commitment they made a decade or more ago to their own continuing professional growth through active membership in a community of professional colleagues. This meant that they committed themselves to learning from colleagues, to learning collaboratively with colleagues, and contributing their own expertise to colleagues.

The lessons presented in this volume are therefore much like the inservice workshops that these teacher/consultants/authors regularly conduct for teaching colleagues in schools and at conferences throughout the country. They demonstrate lessons that derive from actual classroom practices, that have been refined through discussions with colleagues and through an examination of current theory and research, and that are presented in the context of a theoretical framework which accounts for the efficacy; so that they meet the test of being both successful and principled practices.

Finally, as the collaborative effort of some 30 teacher-consultants from the National Writing Project site of the University of California, Irvine—all working under the inspired leadership of site director Carol Booth Olson—*Thinking/Writing* demonstrates the intellectual power and productivity that is possible within a community of teachers who continue to collaborate over the years for their own professional development and for the improvement of their teaching. Such collaborative communities, almost unheard of previously in American education, are at this moment becoming a regular feature of the academic landscape, variously organized as institutes, teacher-research groups, and special interest groups—most of them sponsored by National Writing Project sites.

In characterizing *Thinking/Writing* as a representative book for this moment in the history of American language arts instruction, I do not, of course, mean to suggest that it is a typical work or that its authors are typical teachers. The book and its authors are representative in the sense that they are exemplars for the profession of teaching, this book representing exemplary teaching practices and its authors representing model classroom practitioners working together in an exemplary community of colleagues. I feel blessed by the opportunity I had to become part of that community on my many visits to the UCI Writing Project over the past several years and I feel

privileged now to be able to invite all readers of this volume to participate in that community by adapting the materials in this text to their own purposes as collaborators with the teachers who offer this book in the spirit of collegial generosity and professional fellowship.

Sheridan Blau, Director
South Coast Writing Project
University of California, Santa Barbara



Preface

What We Did Last Summer...Or...The Process of Collaborating on a Product

During the summer of 1982, thirty Teacher/Consultants who had been previously trained at the UC Irvine site of the California Writing Project returned to the campus for what would turn out to be the first of an ongoing series of Second Time Around Institutes. United by a common concern about the rather limited depth and range of critical thinking we were seeing in the writing of our students across grade levels, districts, and educational segments, we set out to explore ways to provide students with much needed practice in thinking and writing—practice that would enable them to tap the full range of their cognitive potential. With a lot of hard work, some healthy disagreement, and a certain amount of serendipity, we managed to forge a vision in that first summer of an instructional model designed to foster critical thinking through writing that combines basic principles of learning theory, composing process research, and the practical strategies of the National Writing Project. Further, we developed a core of rough drafts, many of which were refined to become the demonstration lessons which you will find in this book. The purpose of these demonstration lessons, simply stated, is to motivate teachers to think critically about critical thinking and to recognize the potential of using writing as a tool for promoting cognitive growth.

We were tremendously proud of the fact that we generated a product during that first Second Time Around project. However, it was the *process* of collaborating on that product that got us hooked, kept us coming back for the ensuing four summers to work on this concept and the curriculum materials which grew out of it, and which keeps us returning for projects which have spun-off the original Thinking/Writing effort even to this day, almost a decade later. It was the process and not the product which forged our “community” of learners, to use Donald Graves’ term. It was and still is the intellectual stimulation of growing together as learners and the bonds of mutual respect and affection which gradually developed that inspired such an extraordinary commitment on the part of these extraordinary teachers.

A number of individuals facilitated our learning process by lending their support, encouragement and expertise to this project. Carl Hartman, former Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at UCI, provided the impetus for our original Second Time Around program by requesting that the Writing Project focus its efforts on the translation of what we were learning in the Summer Institutes into some kind of curriculum materials, and by offering to provide seed-money to get this effort underway. Carolyn Lawson, Assistant Superintendent of Savannah School District, helped us to identify what we sensed was a missing stage in the writing process and to label it *precomposing*. While we did not have the pleasure of working with Linda Flower and John R. Hayes personally, their research on the role of planning in the composing process also contributed significantly to our emphasis on precomposing. Sheridan Blau, Director of the South Coast Writing Project at UC Santa Barbara, was a constant source of inspiration as we watched his own concept of humane literacy evolve over his several visits to our project. Aaron Fink, a consultant to The College Board, gave us a wonderful morale boost when he called our lesson the work of “scholar practitioners.” Bill Strong, Director of the Utah Writing Project, offered support and encouragement by inviting us to present the Thinking/Writing model at his Summer Institute and identified a core of Utah teachers who participated in our first evaluation of the effectiveness of the Thinking/Writing lessons. Charles Cooper, Coordinator of the Third Writing Program at UC San Diego, helped us look more closely at our model and recognize the need for providing opportunities for student reflection. George Hillocks, Professor of English and Education at the University of Chicago, was instrumental in enabling us to re-see our lessons with an eye to whether or not they provided practice in the cognitive task called for in the writing prompt. And, finally, Owen Thomas, the former Co-Director of the UCI Writing Project, to whom this book is dedicated, taught us to believe in the remarkable linguistic abilities of our students and then modeled his own philosophy by believing in our ability to find our own voices as writers.

We were also fortunate to receive grant awards from several agencies to refine and enhance the Thinking/Writing concept and curriculum materials. The California Educational Initiatives Fund (Bank America/Chevron) provided the initial start-up funds in 1982-83 to further the work underwritten by

the UCI in Summer '82. Subsequently, we received a three-year grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, 1983-1986, to build upon the work supported by the CEIF award. These funds were augmented by the California Writing Project Advisory Committee, who enabled us to allocate some of our stat support as matching funds. Most recently, the Office of the President, University of California contributed funding so that we could undertake a large scale research study of the Thinking/Writing model. The support of these agencies enabled those of us in the Thinking/Writing group to let ideas percolate and evolve over a number of years. The book you see today bears a resemblance to that original manuscript in 1982, but it is a product of much deeper reflection because of the revisions it underwent.

Sheridan Blau maintains that two kinds of thinking are entailed in composing and revising—commitment and detachment. *Commitment* involves finding enough value in what we have to say that we are likely to make the effort required to get our ideas straight, even for ourselves, and then having the faith (often in spite of feelings to the contrary) in our capacity to meet the challenge of articulating those ideas precisely for our readers. *Detachment* involves the intellectual skill of distancing ourselves from our writing in order to take the perspective of a reader. This perspective enables us to move from writer-based to reader-based revising—in other words, from getting things



straight for ourselves to getting things straight for a reader.¹ As Sheridan says, “The more writers want to have an impact on their readers, the more they need to understand how readers are likely to respond to their discourse.”² Over the years, as the Thinking/Writing model and manuscript evolved, we experienced these twin processes of commitment and detachment over and over again. Working in small peer response groups, we served as an audience for each other’s lessons, piloted them in our own classrooms to see what worked and what didn’t, looked for missing rungs in the instructional ladder and collaborated on revisions. Interestingly, as our commitment to the total project grew, so did our detachment from our own individual work. In fact, ownership of the manuscript—the entire manuscript—became communal. Although the lessons and articles have individual by-lines, they are a product of a whole group process.

In a sense, then, the greatest debt we owe is to each other. In my own case, it has been the greatest privilege of my professional career to work with the colleagues listed below:

Susan Adams
English Teacher
Culver City High School
Culver City USD

Michael Carr
English Teacher
Valley Junior High School
Carlsbad USD

Virginia Bergquist
Teacher
Meadowbrook Elementary School
Irvine USD

Evelyn Ching
English Teacher
Villa Park High School
Orange USD

Brenda Borron
English Teacher
Saddleback High School
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Sunny Hills High School
Fullerton Joint Union HSD

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Irvine High School
Irvine USD

Sue Radar Willett
English Teacher
Capistrano Valley High School
Capistrano Valley USD

Susan Starbuck
English Teacher
Long Beach Polytechnic High
School

Special thanks to Catherine D’Aoust for her thoughtful reassessment of several sections of the manuscript.

Members of the UCI Writing Project staff also contributed to the production of the *Thinking/Writing* manuscript. Henia Alony and Greta Brooks painstakingly typed all the lessons before we had access to computers. Sheryl Palmer and Penelope West transferred the manuscript onto the Macintosh and created all of the computer graphics. When the Writing Project Office was burglarized, leaving nothing but the telephone hook up and one xeroxed copy of *Thinking/Writing*, Anna Manring patiently embarked upon a “cut and paste” to insert all of the revisions. And Chris Emerson-Orbaker kept the UCIWP inservice ship afloat while we all pursued the completion of this collaborative effort.

In the same way that we came to value the process of collaborating on a product as much or more than the product itself, we hope that it is the model which underlies our demonstration lessons rather than the individual lessons themselves that informs your thinking about thinking and writing. Our intention is that these lessons will serve as a vehicle for you, as teacher/readers, to discover your own process. Therefore, we invite you to collaborate with us—to make *Thinking/Writing* your own by rethinking, reshaping, and modifying the lesson prompts and activities to fit the interests and needs of your students. In short, we encourage you to use the lessons as a point of departure to arrive at your own destination.

Our hope for students is much the same. What we’re really after is to provide students with enough guided practice—enough points of departure, if you will—to enable them to develop a range and repertoire of conceptual, problem-solving strategies that they can apply with confidence as *autonomous learners* to future thinking/writing challenges.

It is with these hopes in mind and in the spirit of collaboration that we offer you this book.

Carol Booth Olson

Notes

¹Sheridan Blau, “Competence for Performance in Revision,” in *Practical Ideas for Teaching Writing as a Process*, ed. Carol Booth Olson, (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1986), 140.

²Blau, 141.



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