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Out of the Box

I was attempting to order from the menu of a little restaurant off of a two-lane highway near Saumer, France. Since I was the only one in the family who knew any French (three years of high school), my wife and five-year-old son were depending upon me to make some suggestions. I was pretty sure that none of us would enjoy snails, even in garlic sauce, so I knew to avoid *les escargots*. While *le steck* may have been a possibility, I knew that *filet de cheval* meant not cow, but horse.

After more searching, I discovered *les frites*, or French fries and *le pizza aux thon*, which I took for some sort of pizza, though I wasn't sure what kind. Although there were perhaps 80 other possible selections on the menu, I didn't know enough French to make any other choice. Although I could have asked the waiter for a word-by-word translation, he was frantic taking orders, retrieving food from the kitchen, and operating the cash register, so I decided against asking him. Instead, I gathered up my cool, and in my best French ordered *le steck beuf avec les frites* (beef and french fries) for my son and wife and, for myself, *le pizza aux thon*.

To my horror, *pizza aux thon* turned out to be a pizza covered with heaping portions of tuna. As I carefully picked off the tuna (which I loathe), I thought of some of my former students who had grave difficulties reading and writing. I remembered the halting, painful way in which they wrote and how I used to wince while reading their well-intentioned, but poorly constructed compositions.

When I ordered off that French menu, I wondered if my thought processes were similar to those of my former students who lacked the vocabularies to express what they really wanted to say. They, too, grappled to put ideas into words, had gotten easily frustrated, and ended up reverting to the few words they knew. Perhaps they knew all too well that they were creating the academic equivalent of a tuna pizza with every new effort. But, what else could they do? Like my own fumbling around for words in French, they were constrained by their limited vocabularies and the difficult, abstract exercise of transforming thought into language. They found themselves in a box where they kept coming up with the same words to express the litany of ideas running around in their heads.

It was a box most of my remedial students had known since first grade. When I assigned a descriptive essay about a fellow student in class, Sylvia wrote,

> "Steve is a big guy. He plays on the football team. He likes to wear baggy clothes and gold chains. His favorite class is math because Coach Smith is the teacher."

After an interview with Steve, several conferences with me, and two editing sessions with her writing group, Sylvia wrote,

> "Steve Hardy is 5'9", has brown eyes, and lots of muscles. He plays offensive tackle on the Mustangs football team. At school, Steve wears baggy clothes and gold chains. His favorite class is math because Coach Smith is the teacher and he lets you talk while you work."

Although Sylvia's fifth draft may have improved slightly on the original, the quality of writing is not significantly better. If I had asked Sylvia to revise her paper one hundred times (and I suspect she thought I asked for as many revisions),

she probably would have turned in one hundred roughly comparable essays.

The most common method of teaching writing today—"the process approach"—has been promulgated by the National Writing Project for over 30 years. By now, this method that advocates that students *brainstorm-draft-and-revise* has replaced so thoroughly the "outline method" as the "one true way" to teach composition that it is included in recent editions of *Warriner's*. Despite its widespread acceptance, an essential shortcoming of "the process approach" is that it requires students to think and write within a two-dimensional box (see Figure 1).

Many teachers (I, among them) used to believe that all that was necessary to turn struggling students into writers of considerable skill was to get them to write more. After almost two decades in secondary schools (as a teacher and professor), I have come to the conclusion that persistence alone is not enough. In truth, it never was. The "process approach" to writing presupposes that a student has an idea, possesses at least a modicum of control over syntax, and has an appropriate vocabulary. If a student happens to be short in either (1) ideas or (2) syntax and vocabulary, he/she has nowhere to go. Ideas will not magically spring forth and students' vocabularies will not expand by simply asking them to re-read and revise a composition. Students need something outside the box to help them enhance the quality of their writing. In the years that I taught writing as a process, some of my students learned to enjoy writing and some of my students eventually became more skilled at writing, but I never had a student take a quantum leap from tuna pizza to a gourmet's five-star meal. And that's exactly what I wanted.

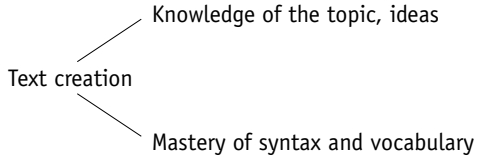

Figure 1. The two-dimensional "process approach"

Seizing upon Student Proclivities

To get students engaged in writing, I felt like I had to relate to students where they live and breathe. Today, much evidence suggests that students are reading less and tuning into electronic media more. Perhaps the most telling statistic regarding the dramatic shift to electronic media is the comparison of the time spent online versus the time spent reading books. As depicted in Figure 2, the last year that Americans spent more time reading books than surfing on the Internet was 1998. By 2003, the average time spent online will be double (32 minutes daily) that spent reading books (16 minutes), and the average American will spend 6.2 hours interacting with electronic media every day (Veronis, Suhler, and Associates, 2000).

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the drift towards electronic media, it does mean that many students may enter secondary school with less of a background in reading books than in the past. Not surprisingly, the largest segment of book buyers is the group over the age of 65. Americans under the age of 25 buy the fewest books, about 4% of total book sales (Heath, 1997). Unfortunately, most adolescents do not look in

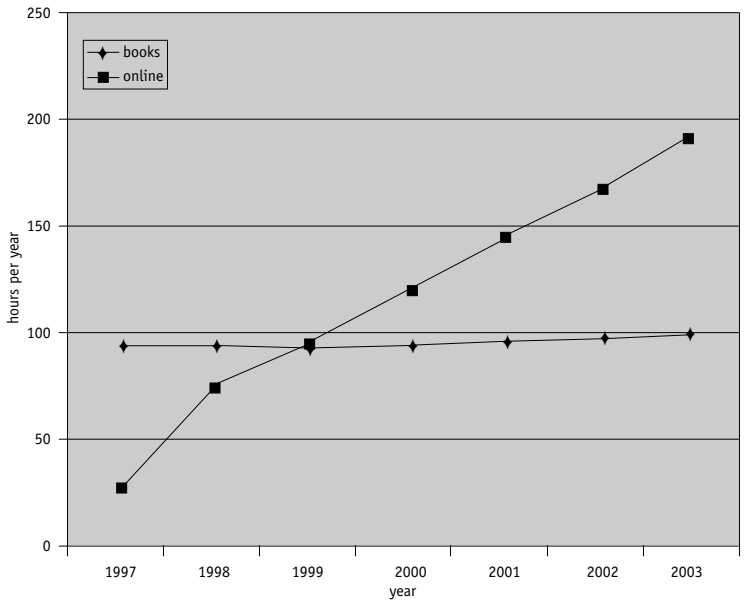

Figure 2. Time spent reading books versus time spent online

the dictionary for words that they hear in films, and they rarely surf over to www.wordsmith.org to see the latest word of the day. Mostly, it is through reading books that students get exposed to unfamiliar words and learn about sentence rhythm, syntax, and style. As students have moved away from books, their vocabularies have dwindled. In 1945, before the widespread proliferation of television, the number of words in the written vocabularies of 6- to 14-year-old children was 25,000; in 2000, the number of words in their written vocabularies is estimated to be closer to 10,000 (*Harper's* Index, p. 11). Whether one adheres to the theory of the steep drop in knowledge of words among school-age children or not, the points I am trying to make are ones that most secondary teachers would readily concede:

- most students are avid users of image-based media, such as television, videos, the Internet, and film;
- few students enter the classroom with expansive vocabularies.

Going Remedial

I knew a teacher at a local secondary school who had a large section of students in a remedial language arts class. None of the students in his class had yet been able to pass the writing portion of the state assessment. Of the four tracks at the school, the students in his remedial class were at the bottom, below "advanced," below "regular," and below vocational tech. The class began with 26 students, though by spring (when I taught), two students had been indicted for felonies, eight had dropped out, and four had stopped coming or transferred to a different school. When I took over as teacher for four weeks, I had a rather small class of around twelve students.

Because I wanted to engage each of the twelve students in an activity, and I wanted to make sure they actually wrote, I decided to try a "scripted poem." With a scripted poem, I could give students a prompt, walk around the room, and make sure everyone was participating. To begin, I discussed with students the nature of poetry—how poets used words carefully and purposefully. I read aloud two of my favorite poems ("Reapers" by Jean Toomer and "Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow), then briefly highlighted with students the poet's effective use of language and rhythm—"Black horses drive a mower through the weeds, And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds" (from "Reapers"); "Our hearts, though stout and brave, Still, like muffled drums are beating funeral marches to the grave" (from "Psalm of Life").

Next, I read a bad poem (my personal attempt to write the world's worst poem) aloud and asked students to identify exactly where the poem fell short. Finally, I asked students to write out responses to the scripted poem, which I call "hometown." The format for "hometown" follows:

Name of hometown

Two verbs that reflect your hometown

The landscape (hilly? dry? What kind of buildings?) – 4 words

Smell/tastes of your hometown – 6 words

Music, song, or sounds that remind you of your hometown – 8 words

Kind of people who live there – 10 words

An important event in your life – 12 words

Another important event (repeat the previous line if you can't think of anything else) – 12 words

A dream or nightmare – 10 words

An influential person – 8 words

Specific advice someone once gave you – 6 words

A description of the weather – 4 words

Your hometown plus an adjective

After each prompt, I walked around the room to insure that every student was writing and to answer questions, such as "Hey, Baines, is *boring* a verb?" After we finished, I asked students to go back over their poems with a keen eye to ferret

out unnecessary words and to add more precise, revealing language in places where their poems needed shoring up. Then, I placed students in groups of three. Students read their poems aloud to members of their group, received suggestions regarding how to improve their poems, and tried to revise them based upon the input from their peers. When all the groups were done, I asked for volunteers to read their poems aloud to the entire class and a few reluctantly complied.

Shay wrote about her hometown of Boston (I have typed out her poem as she wrote it):

> Boston
> Breezey, gigantic
> Rockey and brown pastra
> It smells fresh like a batch of red roses
> An old art gallery like a museum
> It crazy people, unruly people, intelligent people,
> and kind friends
> I met 10 girls when I first got there
> I met 10 girls when I first got there
> A dog chase me home and I past out
> My dad has 4 children in Rome
> Money doesn't grow on trees
> It's fun
> Rocky Boston

Using the old process model of writing, this would have been Shay's final draft, a poem into which she invested considerable time and effort. After putting the finishing touches on her poem, I asked Shay and the rest of class to find images that represented each line. I had brought in numerous old magazines, such as *Ebony*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Jet*, *People*, and others (gladly donated by a local library), so that students could choose from a number of sources. For two days, students did nothing but find and clip pictures that represented lines from their poems. Then, students pasted the images together on a sheet of white paper, wrote the line/prompt number of the poem (1–13) on the back of the paper, and gave them to me. I took the images to my office and saved them to a 3.5" disk using a cheap scanner purchased last year. I labeled each disk with the student's name.

Over the next two days, I recruited three graduate students and borrowed four laptop computers (all of which had the software program Powerpoint) to take with me to class. There were four writing groups with three students in each, so each graduate student and I worked with a specific group. We helped students to insert their images and poetry into a Powerpoint presentation. We encouraged students to consider font, placement of images and text, color, and other variables in transferring their poems into Powerpoint. Some students preferred to insert the images and text themselves, while others directed the graduate students as to their preferences. Shay decided upon the colors, font, and format herself and inserted her own images and text.

In moving to Powerpoint, Shay corrected some initial spelling errors, altered a few words, and chose some interesting images, fonts, and colors. After her Powerpoint poem was finished, I asked Shay and the rest of the class to select music that would serve as suitable accompaniment. Although I allowed students to bring in their own CDs or cassette tapes (as long as I screened them first), no student brought their own music to class, so we supplied students with 20 possible discs, ranging from music of the Celtic harp to a funky bass/drum/guitar instrumental mix. Shay chose the instrumental mix.

Finally, when students had finished selecting the appropriate music and perfecting their Powerpoint poems, I brought a boombox, amplifier, and microphone to class on the day of the presentations. Shay recited her Powerpoint poem into the microphone as we projected her Powerpoint presentation against a wall of the classroom while the instrumental mix played in the background (see Figure 3). When she was done, everyone applauded.

Revising with Images and Music

As the final step in the Powerpoint poem exercise, we asked students to revise their poems so that the music and images were reflected in words. That is, we asked students to rewrite their poems so that a reader who did not see the Powerpoint presentation would see the images and hear the music selected through the force of the words alone. After a day of contemplation, Shay wrote:

Figure 3. Shay's Powerpoint presentation

Boston
Enormous, vast rocky pasture
Nonchalant, airy, freshly cut grass
Bumpy jolts of tan and cream
Aroma like a batch of yellow and white gardenias
An old science lab with green bodies
Only the insane stay in erratic homes
Intractable people, undisciplined rules
Affectionate lovings, sympathetic helpful friends
I found $100 in a Wal-Mart parking lot
And a big brown husky sharp-eyed dog chased me home and I runned up a tree
My dad has four children in Rome City
Can't have your cake and eat it too without paying out
Projects, unresolved hopes
Scruffy Boston

While her post-Powerpoint poem may not be grammatically perfect, Shay made several impressive revisions. Most notably, she chose some fairly sophisticated words—*enormous*, *vast*, *nonchalant*, *airy*, *jolts*, *aroma*, *erratic*, *intractable*, *undisciplined*,

affectionate, *sympathetic*, *husky*, *sharp-eyed*, and *scruffy*. She said that she felt her revised poem fit more closely with what she remembered about her hometown of Boston. She closed the poem with the provocative phrase—"unresolved hopes." I printed out her (and each student's) presentation by selecting the 6-slides-per-page format in Powerpoint. Students were given hard copies of what they had created and seemed proud of their multimedia poems.

The dramatic improvement in Shay's poem was due in no small part to her ability to work off of new sensory inputs—visual and auditory. By attaching images and sound to her ideas, she was able to think outside of the box in revising her poem. This "out-of-the-box" approach might be diagrammed as shown in Figure 4.

The concrete nature of the images and sounds allowed Shay to work outside of the realm of the abstract to find words that better fit with the ideas and feelings swimming around in her head. As she revised, Shay would point to an image in her Powerpoint poem and ask members of her writing group, "What does that look like to you?" When she heard a response from one of her peers that she thought would fit, Shay would delve into the dictionary to read a definition, think about the word for a minute, then try it out (by inserting the word into the poem and softly saying the line to herself). Sometimes she would consult a thesaurus or ask me how to pronounce a particular word. The procedure of finding a word of approximate meaning for the images, then hitting the dictionaries and thesauri, was one that several students in class adopted during the final phase (from image to word).

For the seventh line, one in which she was to describe "the kind of people who live there," Shay had written, "crazy people, unruly people, intelligent and kind friends." She walked over to several groups, pointed at the related slide, which contained a portrait of Frederick Douglas, a photo of a white teacher surrounded by black students, and a photo that included Whitney Houston, and asked, "What do you call people who don't change? What do you call people who will not change no matter what?"

Eventually, one of her classmates responded, "You mean *stubborn?*"

Shay responded, "Yeah, but *stubborn* means it's hard, but you can still change 'em. I need a word that means they ain't changin' for nothing." Shay went to the thesaurus and looked up *stubborn*. She found a few words whose meanings were unfamiliar and wrote them down. Then, she looked up these unfamiliar words in the dictionary. Finally, she asked me, "Baines, *intractable* mean you not going to change for nothin'?"

I nodded.

Shay said, "That's how those people are in Boston. They don't care what you say or do, they not going to change their minds."

When I asked Shay about why she eliminated "breezy, gigantic," she said that one of her classmates had informed her that *breezy* and *gigantic* were not verbs, which according to the scripted format, they were supposed to be. She decided she didn't particularly want verbs in her poem. About the fourth line, "bumpy jolts of tan and cream," she said, "That's the music, Baines. That's what the music sounds like." Regarding her change from "Money doesn't grow on trees" to "Can't have your

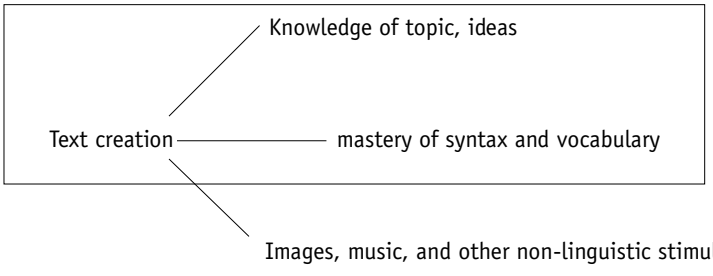

Figure 4. The addition of visual and auditory input expands thinking during writing.

cake and eat it too without paying out," Shay said, "That's my dad. He want everything just his way, but he don't want to have to mess with any details, like giving us money to live on."

In my opinion, Shay made a quantum leap from her first draft (which would have been her "final product" if I had stayed with the "process approach") to her post-Powerpoint revision. Although Shay's progress was evident, several other students made similar, or even greater, gains. Perhaps the most marked improvement from draft to post-Powerpoint poem was made by Josh.

Josh

Josh was a quiet student who had some serious problems with writing. His pre-Powerpoint poem was as follows (I have typed what Josh wrote):

Rome
Blowing winds
Dirth roads, grass, hills, streets
Paper mill, qutar pounds, coutry breeze, flowers
Rap, DMX, drums, reminds, freesytales
Nice people, outgoing people, smart people, understanding, sheild
Graduate from high school, go college, help people
Family, job, life, almost hit by a car
Mad was atfer me, ran from them
Martin Luter King-equality, windom, outgoing person
Winter snow cold breeze
Rome small

Even if one ignores the misspellings, there is not much in Josh's work that offers a new perspective on life in Rome. Josh uses *people* three times, *breeze* twice (*blowing* once), and does not communicate with much style or lucidity. However, in transferring his poem to Powerpoint, Josh made several small revisions that enhanced his poem (see Figure 5). For example, because he knew that the poem would be cast against the wall of the classroom, Josh became very alert to misspellings and worked diligently to correct them. His Powerpoint poem was as follows:

Rome
Smell bad food
Hot, dry, colorful, a long way

Cool breeze
Pretty and fragrant
Old school rap, meaning of the song
Only the strong survive

Intelligent, they know what's going on, jammed together
Graduate from high school
Musical
Goal setters
Go to college, help people, succeeders

Family
A teacher, caring
Martin Luther King, equality, wisdom, outgoing person
A job, life

A wake-up call, somebody's trying to tell me something
Summer mind girl
Rome small

What is interesting about Josh's post-Powerpoint revision is that he significantly altered his poem to create a better flow. He added some descriptive words, deleted some lines, and added several new lines. After he transferred his images and music back into words, his post-Powerpoint poem was as follows:

Rome
Fresh country smell
Light, loud color
Sometimes don't taste right
Unfashionably fragrant like a grand of roses
It travels the distance

Giant-sized hat, super ropes and crazy flowers
Strong teeth jug made of steel
Black minds stay together
Stepping up and taking it to the next level

Smooth music
Time for women to come and do
Guiding, getting ready for life
Somebody there for you
Teacher getting you ready for the real

A man
A wish man cares
Is not going to take it lying down

Making money fun
Love sings exhilarating

Figure 5. Josh's Powerpoint presentation

A wake up call
Somebody trying to dime you out with giant sized guns
Boulders for arms
Lots of pretty bodies, coke cola space
Fine sex
Like black question

What I find remarkable about Josh's revision is that, perhaps for one of the few times in his academic career, Josh moved beyond the boundaries of the assignment into new territory because he was excited about what he was writing. His poem became a statement of self-expression and he became invested in the quality of his art. The first five lines of his post-Powerpoint revision were influenced heavily by the first five images. However, in the sixth slide, he altered the text from "only the strong survive" to "strong teeth jug made of steel," a play on the image of the shark. From there, Josh shifted lines to where he thought they

belonged. For example, he transformed "Martin Luther King, equality, wisdom, outgoing person" (from his Powerpoint poem) into "A man/A wish man cares/Is not going to take it lying down." For the image of Mariah Carey in the studio and the text, "A job, life," he wrote, "Making money fun/ Love sings exhilarating." In the last stanza, Josh wrote the expressive lines, "Somebody trying to dime you out with giant sized guns, boulders for arms." Although I have no idea what "coke cola space" might mean, Josh seemed to think the phrase was chock full of meaning. Instead of closing with "winter snow cold breeze" (from the pre-Powerpoint draft) or "Summer mind girl/Rome small" (from the Powerpoint poem), Josh closed with the more enigmatic phrase, "Fine sex/Like black question."

Josh asked, "Hey, Baines, is it okay to start with Rome, but end up telling what it's like to be me—Josh, a black man living in Rome, Georgia?"

I nodded.

Conclusion

Although aspects of my multimedia experiments involved some expensive, high-tech equipment, a teacher could easily apply the principles of using images and music without using laptops, Powerpoint, graduate students, or LCD projectors. A teacher who has access to a cassette player, paper, and crayons, and is unafraid to ask librarians for their discarded magazines can do the same exercise with 35 students in a classroom barren of computers and extra help. Instead of scanning pictures into a Powerpoint presentation, students would paste pictures/collages on paper, then write the accompanying line from the poem. Of course, posterboard and transparencies would work well, too. While music on the cassette player blasts away, the student stands in front of the class, displays the pages of the poem one at a time, and recites the poem. Because so many students are shy types, I still suggest that you find a way to amplify the voice. A $20 karaoke cassette player (one that allows you to sing along with the music) would do nicely. Although technology gives the assignment a little sheen, a computer is not required to enhance composition through images and music. The important thing to remember, whether you go high- or low-tech, is to ask students to go back and translate their multimedia poems using words alone. That is the step where some students finally take off.

I do not contend that Shay, Josh, and the rest of the students in the remedial class were inexorably changed through the process of transforming poetry into images and sound, then back to poetry (though they all eventually passed the writing portion of the standardized exam). However, during my brief, month-long tenure with them, I watched these students evolve from struggling, frustrated writers to enthusiastic poets. By their own admission, many of the students' post-Powerpoint revisions were light years ahead of anything else that they had ever written. Teaching writing by linking it to the visual and aural may give some students the impetus to make quantum leaps that would be impossible through purely linguistic appeals. By writing out of the box, students seemed to transcend that maddening two-dimensional space of thought and word where they may feel trapped. The images and music, though perhaps not perfect matches for the ideas floating around in their heads, at least provided a solid foundation from which students could work and think. Perhaps students who struggle with writing need no longer settle for a steady diet of tuna pizza. That possibility alone seems revolutionary.

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