

The Sentences Write Themselves

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Clichés are a kind of ceremony, I think, well-worn ruts, smooth stones. - Ander Monson (109)

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire offers two types of classrooms. In the “banking model,” the teacher’s “task is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his narration” (71). The other classroom is based on “problem-posing,” where “students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (81). I asked my class of first-year writers to read Freire and write in response to what seemed to me a fitting question: what would the ideal classroom look like? From the first paper I read: “I think the ideal classroom should combine both of Freire’s concepts.” From the second: “I think the ideal classroom would be a combination of a lecture like classroom and discussion.”¹ From the third: “Personally, I believe that the ideal class is a combination of these two concepts that were presented.” There is a pattern here. All three avoid the difficult moments of Freire’s pedagogy—when he talks of hegemony, oppression, narrative, epistemology—in favor of the easy answer, and they each do it in a remarkably similar sentence relying on the same metaphor of combination.

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I.A. Richards laments a response “that prevents the reader himself from entering into” a text (222). Such a response shuts down inquiry, since the reader is unable (or unwilling) to fully engage the ideas at hand. I see a bit of that in my students’ reductive responses to Freire. I also see what



David Bartholomae calls the commonplace, a “culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement that carries with it its own necessary elaboration” (“Inventing” 63). Once the student writes that a classroom needs to combine Freire’s two approaches, there is no need to carry this line of thought any further. The commonplace does the work for the writer. This is why William E. Coles pushed so hard against the commonplace—which he called “Themewriting” produced by “Themewriters” trying “to sound the way they think they ought to sound, the way they think English teachers want them to sound, the way they think they have been taught to sound” (17). Verlyn Klinkenborg, in *Several Short Sentences about Writing*, deals with the same problem. He calls it a “volunteer sentence,” which seems an apt description of what my students wrote:

You may notice, as you write, that sentences often volunteer a shape of their own

And supply their own words as if they anticipated your thinking.

Those sentences are nearly always unacceptable,

Dull and unvarying, yielding only a small number of possible structures

And only the most predictable phrases, the inevitable clichés. (44-45)

These sentences volunteer not only their syntax (“a shape of their own”) but their ideas too (“their own words”), and they are comfortable, easy, welcome, so ingrained in the classroom that they anticipate not only our thinking, but our reading and writing as well. They are the smooth stones the Monson of my epigraph speaks of, their rough edges worn away from so much handling. But when Monson calls this a cliché, cliché seems, to me, to understate how well-run those ruts are—that is, until I see Monson call the cliché a ceremony, a word heavy with ritual, with habit, with script, with rehearsal

and performance of the familiar.

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Here are those three sentences again, set alongside eight others from the class:

I think the ideal classroom should combine both of Freire’s concepts.

I think the ideal classroom would be a combination of a lecture like classroom and discussion.

Personally, I believe that the ideal class is a combination of these two concepts that were presented.

Personally, I think the ideal classroom is a combination of both the banking concept and the problem-posing method.

The ideal class should be a combination of both banking and problem-posing.

The ideal class should be a class with balance.

The ideal classroom scenario is a mix of both of these concepts.

I think it would be a healthy mixture of the two, banking and problem-posing.

I think that the ideal class should be a mixture between banking and problem posing.

I believe that there needs to be a mixture of both of Freire’s concepts in a classroom.

I think the ideal classroom should be a mix of the banking and problem-posing concepts.

Nothing in excess, everything in moderation governs these responses. All follow a This-is-That structure, saying This (the ideal classroom) is That (a combination, a mixture, balanced). The responses rely on metaphor just as Freire does. That the classroom should be a combination appears five times, a mixture five times also, and balanced once. “Should be” appears five times, “would be” twice, and “needs to be” once. These modal verbs make the tacit argument that this ideal

classroom does not yet exist. Nine students write “I believe” or “I think.” The five that do not open with an “I believe” or an “I think” still share a syntax and diction nonetheless: the duo “Personally, I believe” and “Personally, I think” and trio “The ideal class should be,” “The ideal class should be,” and “The ideal classroom scenario is.” Such similarities led one student to remark during class discussion, “I don’t even know which one I wrote!”

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Klinkenborg says volunteer sentences offer “only a small number of possible structures” (45), and Mina Shaughnessy explains how these sentences write themselves:

Before a practiced writer begins a sentence, he has—or feels that he has—almost an infinite number of ways of saying what he has to say. But with each word he writes down, the field of choices narrows. The sentence seems to take its head and move with increasing predictability in the directions that idiom, syntax, and semantics leave open. (44)²

I see this narrowing in my students’ responses to Freire. Each starts from a similar place—“I believe” or “I think”—this opening to be expected since the assignment asked for the student to speak in response to Freire. The sentence then progresses to language from the prompt—“the ideal classroom”—these students having been taught, from elementary school onward, to repeat the question in their answer. The sentence then must move to a modal verb (since this ideal classroom does not yet exist) and a linking verb (since this is an exercise in imagination and in metaphor): “I believe the ideal classroom should be.” The modal having set up the subjunctive and the linking verb asking for a metaphor, the field of choices has narrowed. In this syntactic space, the student knows that moderation is good and extremes are bad, and recognizing the banking and problem-posing models as extremes, she turns to an easy metaphor and completes the sentence: “I believe the ideal classroom should be a balance between banking and problem-posing.” And so

it goes, with little variance, for eleven writers writing eleven volunteer sentences.

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There’s a certain appeal to the volunteer sentence. It is effortless, writing itself and carrying with it its own thinking. Richards speaks to that same appeal, calling it the “stock response,” which is made of “views and emotions already fully prepared in the reader’s mind” (14). The writer can sit back and let the stock response take over: “The button is pressed, and then the author’s work is done, for immediately the record starts playing” (14). Richards continues, switching metaphors from the record player to the clothing store:

A stock response, like a stock line in shoes or hats, may be a convenience. Being ready-made, it is available with less trouble than if it had to be specially made out of raw or partially prepared materials. And unless an awkward misfit is going to occur, we may agree that stock responses are much better than no responses at all. Indeed, an extensive repertory of stock responses is a necessity. Few minds could prosper if they had to work out an original, “made to measure” response to meet every situation that arose—their supplies of mental energy would be too soon exhausted and the wear and tear on their nervous systems would be too great. (228)

Richards sees the stock response as a matter of convenience, of necessity, a person grabbing it off the rack like a tee-shirt. He acknowledges there are times when the stock response is rhetorically advantageous—after all, it is better to have that shirt than to be naked, to have “no responses at all.” But despite its utility, Richards writes that “there are in most lives fields of activity in which stock responses, if they intervene, are disadvantageous and even dangerous, because they may get in the way of, and prevent, a response more appropriate to the situation” (228). Note the shift: Richards now gives the stock response agency. It is no longer something plucked from a closet but something that can move on its own. It lumbers. I note his verbs: stock responses intervene, they get in the way of, they prevent. Compare Richards’s verbs to Klinkenborg’s:

volunteer sentences volunteer, they supply, they anticipate (44). They certainly do, which is why the stock response can be both a utility and an impediment, both a necessity and an obstruction.

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Lad Tobin writes that many students are “driven by the understanding (or misunderstanding) that every essay needs a neat resolution at the end” (165). And because they “are not yet ready to deal with the ambiguity or unresolved tension” arising out of their writing, “pat resolutions may provide them with a means of dealing (or not dealing) with problems” (165). Tobin speaks of the “resolution” as a concluding statement: the writer writes herself into that place and stops there. But for my students, these sentences were starting points into reading Freire. The sentences were the first sentences of their papers, the stock response a beginning, a point of entry.

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In *The Orator's Education*, Quintilian asks, “Do not commonplaces belong at the very heart of lawsuits?” (2.1.11). What Donald Russell has translated as the “heart” of an argument—*medullis* in the original—can also be translated as “marrow.” Whether heart or marrow, the commonplace is vital to rhetorical practice. Hence Quintilian’s use of “belong,” which suggests an importance, a priority, an urgency even, to make use of the commonplace.

In classical rhetoric, the *topoi*—Greek for places; the Romans call them *loci*—are places of rhetorical invention. The earliest use of *topoi* refers to the physical location on a papyrus scroll where rhetors gathered evidence. These are the places rhetors go to make an argument. The term evolved to be a metaphor for invention, and in that evolution, it took on two forms. Quintilian uses the *loci communes* (the common places) to refer to “set pieces against luxury, adultery, and the like” (5.10.20). The *loci communes* are equivalent to our stock responses and volunteer sentences. Quintilian distinguishes

these from the *loci argumentorum*—the places of argument, places which have much more potential for rhetorical invention:

[They are] the areas in which Arguments lurk and from which they have to be drawn out. For just as all things do not grow in every country, and you would not find a particular bird or animal if you did not know its birthplace or its haunts, while even kinds of fish differ in preferring a smooth or a rocky bottom, or a particular area or coast (you would not land a sturgeon or a parrot-wrasse in our waters!)—so every Argument is not found everywhere, and we have therefore to be selective in our search. (5.10.21-22)

Quintilian’s “lurk” is a form of *lateo* (from which we get “latent”). The verb has connotations of something prowling, hidden, unknown, concealed, and by applying the verb to arguments, Quintilian makes the argument alive. There is an agency here not unlike that which Klinkenborg and Richards give the stock response, but for Quintilian, it’s different. The *loci argumentorum* do not supply, they do not volunteer, they do not prevent nor get in the way. With their animality, the *loci argumentorum* are something elusive, something that must be tracked, followed, searched for, drawn out. They are arguments that must be pursued.

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The commonplace, the stock response, the volunteer sentence—these are all inventive. They provide words when the words won’t come. They also shut down inquiry. Contrast that use of the commonplace with the keeping of a commonplace book. Bartholomae explains:

For years I have kept a commonplace book—more recently in a computer file. It is a collection of passages drawn from my reading and teaching, and it includes passages from student papers. In my mind I am recording moments of striking eloquence. When I turn to them, they stand as quick reminders of what has captured my attention; for my writing they serve as points of reference to individual performances and positions in a larger field or debate. I often use epigraphs at the beginnings of essays, and I almost always use them in assignments

I write for courses, and the commonplace book serves as a source for these. (“Living in Style” 1)

I, too, keep one, gathering passages from Klinkenborg, Annie Dillard, David Fleming, Kathleen Jamie, Anne Lamott, Guy Davenport, Gloria Anzaldúa, Herman Melville, Jim Corder, Joan Didion, Ben Lerner, Jacques Derrida, Joseph Harris, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Thornton Wilder, Eric Hayot, Eric Hoyt, Ander Monson, Stacey Waite, Isaac Anderson—an assortment of writers whose sentences I find compelling and whose sentences become the starting points for my own (see Moe, “Breathing” and “Scorebooks”).

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My students’ responses to Freire are not unexpected. They are using the terms given them. Stanley Hauerwas writes:

...theologians do not get to choose the words they use. Because they do not get to choose the words they use they are forced to think hard about why the words they use are the ones that must be used. They must also do the equally hard work of thinking about the order that the words they use must have if the words are to do the work they are meant to do. (115)

I do not read Hauerwas as speaking to, or about, theologians alone. So it is with student writers, and any writer, for that matter. We do not get to choose the words we use. Freire offers “banking” and “problem-posing.” I offer “ideal classroom.” The students must work with these. Hauerwas says the writer must think about the order of these words, about what the words mean, about why these are the words that must be used, and I add that the teacher must help in that work, helping students to see “the work [these words] are meant to do,” and also to see what other words—Freire’s oppression, hegemony, narrative, epistemology—might have work to do as well.

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Richards warns that the teacher not give a stock response to the student’s own stock response (181), and I admit that often, when I see sentences like these eleven, my immediate

response, my pedagogical commonplace, is “don’t do that.” But if I am to model the type of inquiry I want my students to practice, I need to read generously. Consider the following two sentences:

I think the ideal classroom should combine both of Freire’s concepts.

I think the ideal classroom would be a combination of a lecture like classroom and discussion.

The only difference between these two is that the first assumes the reader’s familiarity with Freire; “both of Freire’s concepts” glosses the text. The second explicates Freire, but his actual terms are absent. In using “lecture like classroom and discussion” for banking and problem-posing, this student offers a commentary on Freire. That commentary, though, is subtle. How did the student move from banking and problem-posing to “lecture like classroom and discussion”? The student does not get to choose banking and problem-posing, but she translates them into her own terms. A small step, yes, one that is fairly predictable, yes, but a step nonetheless, even as it is subsumed by the stock response within a volunteer sentence that has written itself. I see space for revision here: this stock response could be a starting point to inquire into how the student moved from Freire’s terms to her own, and how that movement might fit within the larger arguments Freire makes concerning pedagogies of oppression.

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Roland Barthes describes the writer’s relationship to the commonplace as something to react against rather than a final destination:

...his endeavor is to react against a banality. And often what he must oppose is not the banality of common opinion but his own; the discourse which comes to him initially is banal, and it is only by struggling against that original banality that, gradually, he writes. ... In other words, what he writes proceeds from a *corrected* banality. (137, emphasis his)

I read Barthes as describing the writer who resists the *loci*

communes. For Barthes, these banalities are a starting point. The writer must be aware of her position within these common places, how she locates herself amid and against and alongside them, aware, too, “how much work goes into resisting the allure of the familiar and the easily proven” (Miller and Jurecic 113).

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In the first sentence—“I think the ideal classroom should combine both of Freire’s concepts”—I see a similar, subtle work. This is the only sentence of the eleven that does not use a linking verb. The student does not say the classroom should *be* or would *be* or needs to *be* or *is* but that the classroom should *combine*. This is a classroom that does something. It has agency. It is a classroom that takes a direct object and acts upon it. I am not sure how this student uses the term “classroom”—whether it means the physical classroom, those in the classroom, a curriculum—but whatever its semantic range, this classroom (as the student understands it) has the potential to act, to do, to combine. This is not a classroom that merely exists but a classroom that does things on its own accord. There is space here to interrogate this curious grammatical construction, space to slow down, space to work carefully and patiently with how Freire might speak to this understanding of what classrooms do. This student could begin her revision by looking to the verbs Freire uses and considering what those verbs suggest about teaching and learning.

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Stock responses become stock responses because they are, to some extent, true. They would not be in such heavy circulation were they not. Paul Kameen, in *Re-reading the Poets*, addresses this tension between the trite and the true. Kameen writes of his experience as an undergrad reading Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” He read, alongside it, a piece of criticism that cut heavily into the poem’s final stanzas for being overly moralistic. Kameen

agreed, reading those stanzas as “a vacuous adage” (51). He likens the trite closing of “Rime”—a stock response, right there in Coleridge’s poetry—to the phrase “true happiness comes from within,” a phrase he’d heard over and over from his mother and a phrase he’d “dismissed...as a bromide” (51). But years later, after a bout with serious medical issues, Kameen concedes, “It was during that time that I came to fully understand the meaning of the phrase ‘true happiness comes from within.’ Because there are times when there is simply no other place it can come from. And when it does come from there, the expression is no longer a cliché. It is filled with moral force” (52). He realizes, “The mariner had earned an abiding right to these dicta and filled them with significance” (51). In contrast to the writer who comes to the stock response out of naiveté or lack of life experience—this is why, according to Richards, most students resort to the stock response, though I don’t think he’s charitable enough to them (232-33)—Kameen comes to the commonplace because of his experience. He ends there. It is a destination, one validated by life, one with hard-learned moral force.

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I don’t think I can make any claims for those eleven responses to Freire as having the moral force Kameen talks about. And I don’t think I can make any claims for them being good sentences. They need revision. They march, dutifully, ceremonially, from “I” to “the ideal classroom” to the metaphor of balance. There is no “however” nor “although” nor “since” nor “because” nor “furthermore” that might qualify the assertion. There is no parenthetical aside nor em-dash that would open up space to comment on what’s been said. There is no comma nor colon nor semicolon that would enable a writer to set two ideas in relation to each other. (The three commas that do appear either set off an opening phrase or set up an appositive—none do the work of subordination.) I’m not saying that a good sentence must necessarily make use of punctuation and be complex, but I do think students could



complicate their work with Freire if they returned to him, re-read him and re-read him again, getting to the point where these eleven sentences would no longer suffice, no longer be up to the task they need to perform, these students thinking hard about the order their words must have if they are to do the work they are meant to do.

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I've been reading these sentences as volunteer sentences, as commonplaces, as stock responses, as cliché, and they certainly are these things. But so too they are habituated. Students have been schooled into engaging a text this way. They've been taught to seek the middle road. And, in a political climate as rife as ours, they've been taught (both in school and socially) to avoid conflict. That is what these sentences do. By seeking a balance between banking and problem-posing, the sentences avoid saying anything someone could disagree with. As Monson says, these are sentences "we like to say because they reassure us" (109)—not only by their platitudes, but more so by their form, by a certain habituated even-handedness wherein syntax balances two extremes, "banking" and "problem-posing" teetering on either side of an "and." When we teach students to unlearn the habituated response, to return to their first answer and push against it, to question the ease of the volunteer sentence and the thinking it supplies, we teach a habit of mind that shapes how we engage the world. For if our students are going to do more with Freire, and if our students are going to say something of consequence in our current moment, they must write sentences that resist their habituated ease.

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Endnotes

1. Convention requires a [sic] following this student's use of "lecture like," its hyphen missing. Rather than insert [sic] into student sentences—which muddies the text, distracts from what the student accomplishes as a writer, and reinforces the notion that what distinguishes student writing is error—consider this footnote a blanket [sic] for all material quoted in this essay.

2. See also Stanley Fish's "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." There, Fish describes how each successive word of a sentence shapes the possibilities for how the sentence might end. Fish employs the same metaphor as Shaughnessy, arguing that the "range of options" available for completing a sentence "narrows considerably" as words are added (24).

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Cleft sentences (It was in June we got married.) Inversion Made from, made of, made out of, made with No sooner Not only but also Word order and focus Word order: structures. Using English. Parents often blame themselves for the way their children behave. We use a reflexive pronoun to make it clear who or what is being referred to. Compare. The director of the company wrote to us himself to apologise for the dreadful service. (or The director of the company himself wrote to us to apologise for the dreadful service.) We don't use reflexive pronouns on their own as the subject of a clause, but we can use them with a noun or pronoun to emphasise the subject Themselves is a plural pronoun. Since it is used reflexively, it is used in contexts where the subject of a sentence is also its object. And since it is plural, it refers to more than one person. For example, They fooled themselves into thinking they could win, but they never had a chance. "Who will guard the guards themselves?" goes the old Latin proverb. What does theirselves mean? Theirselves is a dialect form of themselves that is widely shunned and rarely crops up in written English. It is slightly more common to hear spoken than written, but even in spoken English, the use of theirselves is a marker of poor English. Consider this chart that graphs theirselves vs. themselves in written English since 1800. The usage of theirselves in written English is so low as to approximate zero. Finish the sentences. He looked at himself in the mirror. : him himself I'm not angry with you. I'm angry with myself . : me myself Margaret had a nice time in London. She enjoyed herself . : her herself My friends had a nice time in. themselves. Complete the sentences. I like her. I like him. They often write to . . . each other. . herself. himself. themselves. each other. I don't know him. 1.5 Write sentences for the pictures. Use: afraid, angry, cold, hot, hungry, thirsty. She is thirsty. They're cold. He's hot. He's afraid. They're hungry. She's angry. 1.6 Write true sentences, positive or negative. Use is/isn't or are/aren't. It isn't hot today. It isn't windy today. My hands aren't cold. Brazil is a very big country. Diamonds aren't cheap. Toronto isn't in the US. Write true sentences, positive or negative.