

# Polanyian Perspectives on the Teaching of Literature and Composition

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## Introduction:

M. Elizabeth Wallace

We may not have Polanyi's blessing on what we are up to here today. One of our panelists, Sam Watson, told a story yesterday about Polanyi's complaint when visiting an American university: "You are all discussing my thoughts and my books-- that's wrong; you should be looking at, talking about, *other things*, focusing on *other things* you want to explore."

While I understand Polanyi's complaint--in a sense, the greatest compliment we can pay his work is to return with new energy and commitment to our individual explorations, our callings--often I am struck with how much my students need to confront Polanyi's ideas before they are even able to truly *look at or talk about or focus on* other things.

Their confused ideas about what knowledge is and how they know things--and why they know things--prevent their seeing and knowing, result in paralysis or fruitless, directionless activity. For instance, my own reading of Polanyi helped me to see clearly for the first time essential contrasts between Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, the authors I focused on in my doctoral dissertation. Hardy, who was both impressed and depressed by Darwin's findings and by the dictates of positivist theories of knowledge in the late 19th century, created a character in *Jude the Obscure* whose life's ambition was to attend Oxford University and whose life's tragedy was his inability to get in. In an attempt to convince us that Jude's tragedy was a loss for all humanity as well, Hardy has Jude lament near the end of the book that there was only one thing he would have been able to do well in his life-- "I could accumulate ideas and impart them to others" (Part VI--Ch. 10, 317).

Lawrence, in a sense rewriting *Jude*, allows the heroine of *The Rainbow*, Ursula, to attend university, eager to hear "the echo of learning pulsing back to the source of the mystery" (Ch. XV, 404). But eventually disillusioned with academia, finding only mechanistic views of life and thought from her professors, Ursula Brangwen leaves the university and sets out to "create a new knowledge of Eternity in the flux of Time" (Ch. XVI, 456).

The contrast between Hardy and Lawrence's theories of knowledge-- how knowledge is discovered and/or created and transmitted--became essential to my understanding of the differences between these two writers, as well as their profound affinities. And I could never have seen that aspect of their work without Polanyi's achievement behind me.

How could a scientist, first a medical doctor in his native Hungary, then professor of physical chemistry at University of Manchester in England, finally a philosopher of science, help me see the work of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence

as if for the first time? By constructing an alternative ideal of knowledge, arguing that science would long ago have destroyed itself if it indeed proceeded by the strict, detached, objective, impersonal, explicit rules we assumed it proceeded by. His goal in *Personal Knowledge* (reference hereafter abbreviated as *PK*), his major work (first published in 1958), was to examine closely how scientists actually worked and to show that

into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge. (*PK* xiv)

Without it, *all* knowledge would be impossible.

His painstaking and compelling examination of the bodily roots of all knowing, of apprenticeship and temporary submission to a master (or mistress), of all knowing as a skill, of the necessity of indwelling and passion and commitment, of the tacit knowing that underlies and supports all explicit knowledge, of the relations between thought and speech, tradition and discovery, doubt and belief, the sciences and the humanities--all *strengthen*, rather than shake, our confidence in the ability of scientists--indeed, scholars in *any* discipline--to competently test and verify their insights, to state them precisely, and to persuade their colleagues of the truth of those insights and their bearing on reality.

Yet, in saying that, I realize that my reading of Polanyi has redefined all these words--words like "test," "verify," "precision," "colleagues," "truth," "reality." For instance, in Polanyi's world, a mind is more real than a stone because it is capable of revealing itself in more surprising and unpredictable ways.

I suspect that our four panelists today will shortly be convincing proof of that Polanyian insight as they contemplate the ways Polanyi's thought has influenced their teaching, influences Polanyi himself would not have been able to predict.

## Peter Elbow

It's a treat to talk about Polanyi. I read Polanyi a long time ago, in the early seventies. I knew then that it made a big dent on me, but I let it fade. Looking back on it recently, I'm indeed embarrassed at how deeply I had internalized and perhaps not credited his thinking.

I want to look at several quotations, three important themes in Polanyi, and talk about how they relate to some of my practices in teaching.

(1) On page 71 of *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi writes:

If everywhere it is the inarticulate which has the last word, unspoken and yet decisive, then a corresponding abridgement of the status of spoken truth itself is inevitable. The ideal of an impersonally detached truth would have to be reinterpreted, to allow for the inherently personal character of the act by which truth is declared.

I'm focusing here on the word "inarticulate." The famous word in Polanyi's work, of course, is "tacit" (cf. *The Tacit Dimension*), but I love it that he also insists on the word "inarticulate." I feel often inarticulate, and Polanyi is getting at the fact that what we can say rests on a foundation of what we can't say. He talks at length in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Personal Knowledge* about the paradox that what humans achieve through language actually rests on a *root* ability that we share with animals and infants--the root ability to simply match a sign or symbol with an experience. Polanyi's thought here connects with what Eugene Gendlin and Sondra Perl talk about in exploring "felt sense." They point out that if I say something and then you ask me, "Is that what you really meant to say?" (or if I ask myself that question after writing a passage), the interesting fact is that I can give an answer. I can sense whether these words match something. This obvious experience has profound implications. What is the source of that answer? How is it that I can know whether these words are right?

As teachers of writing, we often run into students who say, "I know what I want to say but I just can't find the words." We often reply, "If you can't say it, you don't know it." It's a handy thing to say to students. But I'm more and more interested in that naughty sentence--"I know what I want to say but I can't find the words." Polanyi is inviting us to take it seriously. Perhaps it's used in a naughty way sometimes, but it's important to remember the Polanyi dictum that we know more than we can say. Once I start taking that seriously, a lot of things follow.

To be personal, I found that I couldn't function well, especially in an academic world, to the extent that I took seriously the first dictum: "If you can't say it, if you can't put it into words, you don't know it." That dictum simply knocked me out as a functioning person in the academy. As I've gradually begun to function better, I've realized that it comes from being willing to dignify and take seriously the fecundity of the inarticulate, to trust that my grunting and my fishing around are in fact getting at something. Only when I do that, both for myself and for my students, do I sense I'm getting progress.

Polanyi wants us to honor and develop and dignify the inarticulate. Gendlin and Perl have developed a teaching practice that trains people when they put out words to stop for a minute and say, "Wait, is that what I wanted to say?" Eugene Gendlin's work, focusing on the bodily dimensions of that question (which of course fits Polanyi too), suggests for writers a reflective routine like the following: "Pause for a moment. You just said or wrote something. What's your felt sense of what you're trying to get at? Do these words match it or not match it? And where in your body do you experience this felt sense?" This practice helps us move closer to what we want to say. And we can learn to be better at it. One of the characteristics of people who write badly is that they sail along writing without ever stopping to ask, "Wait a minute, what am I really trying to get at?" Such writers never practice articulating the felt sense.

A related teaching practice is freewriting, writing out of inarticulateness, writing when you don't yet know what you want to say and trusting it--plunging into the unknown. The practice of freewriting follows from this Polyanian insight about the priority and fecundity of the inarticulate.

Reading out loud--whether it's a text we've written or something we're studying--has become another important part of my teaching. I want to call reading out loud "a raid on the inarticulate." It's an enormous source of wisdom. I often say, "Let's stop talking about the text for a while, let's just read it out loud." New insight and wisdom come from the indwelling in the text. In short, we know more than we can say. Going with that insight carries me a long way.

(2) Another theme. On page 59 of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi writes:

We pour ourselves out into [our tools] and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them. . . . Our subsidiary awareness of tools and probes can be regarded now as the act of making them form a part of our own body. The way we use a hammer or a blind man uses his stick, shows in fact that in both cases we shift outwards the points at which we make contact with the things that we observe as objects outside ourselves.

We put our focus outward to the end of the cane or the end of the hammer. Polanyi continues:

While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as external objects. We may test the tool for its effectiveness or the probe for its suitability, e.g. in discovering the hidden details of a cavity, but the tool and the probe can never lie in the field of these operations; they remain necessarily on our side of it, forming part of ourselves, the operating persons.

Then he makes one more turn into the next paragraph: “Hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools.” That is, we use words and language as tools in the same way. I take the hammer, I take the cane, and in a sense I pour my body out into the end of the thing so I don’t feel like I’m touching the hammer or the cane but rather the nail or the street. I do the same self-pouring into language. This seems a potent, pregnant theme in Polanyi; I’m struck in retrospect with how much I got from it and how it informs what I do. Again the same simple teaching practices grow from it.

- Reading out loud: pouring yourself into the text, pausing for a while before talking, not putting so much emphasis on analysis, but making the text part of yourself.
- Freewriting: pouring yourself into the act of writing, indwelling in the tool.
- Invisible writing: turning off the computer screen and writing when you can’t even see your words.

Polanyi observes that if we think too much about the words while we’re reading, we lose the meaning. Similarly, if I think about writing as I’m writing, I can no longer focus on the meaning. Freewriting is an exercise in not focusing on the writing act itself. Invisible writing, which Sheridan Blau recommends, *forces* you to put your attention on your meaning and not on the writing.

I’ve had a sense in the last year, as I moved out of an administrative job into a full-time teaching job, of pouring myself more into my teaching. Somehow I just wanted and needed to take it more seriously. As I’ve done that and tried to figure out what it is I’ve been doing, I have a sense that I’ve been putting myself into it more, being in the classroom more, being more present there. It’s a little scary; and it’s made me realize why I hadn’t been doing that so much before. I’m talking metaphorically here, necessarily, but it does feel like some kind of pouring of one’s self into the activity.

(3) Very quickly, let me just call attention to a third theme.

A child could never learn to speak if it assumed that the words which are used in its hearing are meaningless; or even if it assumed that five out of ten words so used are meaningless. And similarly

no one can become a scientist unless he presumes that the scientific doctrine and method are fundamentally sound and that their ultimate premises can be unquestioningly accepted. We have here an instance of the process described epigrammatically by the Christian Church Fathers in the words: *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in search of understanding. I believe in order that I may understand. (*Science, Faith and Society* 45)

The Polanyian phrase is “fiduciary transaction,” which suggests the act of belief that’s necessary, that underlies any act of knowing. I cite Polanyi in my “Doubting and Believing” essay (*Embracing Contraries* 253-300), but I see now that merely citing him doesn’t do justice to the degree to which I had simply internalized his point and was essentially borrowing it. And the “fiduciary transaction” is central to my teaching. When I write and when I try to help my students write, the necessary thing is the act of trusting it, the act of believing it. Freewriting is an act of believing that meaning will come.

Further, a form of feedback that’s useful is to ask readers to believe what you’ve written. We think of feedback as criticism, but often when I put out a text I want to say to somebody (and I encourage my students to do this too), “Don’t give me any criticism yet, pretend that everything I’ve written is true here and be my ally, see it better, give me more evidence, help me out.” And of course, reading out loud is an act of believing the text. How can I read this text (this question is especially useful in reading a hard text) in such a way that it makes sense? Simply trying to get different students in a classroom to read the text so it makes sense is an act of having to indwell or believe in the text and take it seriously.

## Louise Wetherbee Phelps

This is my battered copy of *Personal Knowledge*, and when I was asked to speak here I really had to think very hard about how Polanyi has influenced my teaching because his thought has completely disappeared into my tacit knowledge. I don’t think very much about it analytically--I just use it. I looked in the book and found that the date I had written in it when I got it was 1976, which I think means that it was Sam Watson who introduced me to it at the seminar where I first met Sam. I’m not a Polanyi scholar, but Polanyi is part of my personal tacit tradition of seminal thinkers. I was fortunate enough to construct recently in my basement some library stacks, and one of those shelves is reserved for the people that I go to the most often. They’re not put in any content category. They’re just people whose work I need, often when I’m writing, usually to recover something so deeply internalized that I’m not sure where I read it. That’s where my copy of *Personal Knowledge* is. I think Polanyi would approve.

I’m not presently teaching undergraduates and haven’t been for a couple of years because I’ve been trying to create a writing program at Syracuse. I’ve been doing curriculum development, working with others to design a four-year sequence of writing courses, and teaching the teachers of the writing program, who went through an abrupt and difficult transition from what had been to a new program. This fall I’ve been teaching a class of new teaching assistants and trying to help teachers in the program build a sense of intellectual community. I looked at our curriculum documents, my own writings about the program, the things we’ve been doing in what we call the “writing studios,” even the things we’re arguing about, and I found I could trace Polanyi’s ideas and, even more deeply, his ethics. Even though Polanyi was not directly cited in most of these documents and papers, I often found that I had cited people who drew on his work. Let me give some examples of how he turned up in three of the things we’ve been doing:

- (1) teaching writing as a skill to undergraduates,
- (2) teaching teaching as a skill to graduate students,
- (3) building intellectual community in a writing program.

I don't want to sentimentalize his influence--a real danger in talking about the influences of profound thinkers on a field as eclectic as ours--so I will try to point out how using Polanyi's ideas in each of these areas entails problems. Polanyi does not offer pat answers to these problems, although in some cases they are conflicts or tensions that his own work deals with thematically.

(1) The first example is the notion of skill. The writing studios are organized around the idea of writing as a tool. We think of ourselves as teaching an activity, as in an art studio. We *need* a concept of skill; but each time you use the word, everyone objects because they associate it with the debased idea of a skill as mechanics and rules. I've been arguing that we need to reclaim the notion of skill for writing, and I just finished writing a paper called "When 'Basic Skills' Are Really Basic and Really Skilled." (In that paper I cited someone else, but when I went back and looked, in fact that person--Jerome Bruner--had cited Polanyi.) I decided to take head-on the political pressure at many universities to teach basic skills and say, "Sure, we teach basic skills and here's what that means and it doesn't mean something reductive." I drew on Bruner's Polanyian concept of skill, which connects to the idea of tools that extend the mind. I related language as a personal skill to a set of practices or classroom activities by which it is taught and learned in use.

One of my concerns in the essay was how to talk to new teachers about what we're doing; we're trying to get them to teach inventively and critically from the day they walk in the door. Many are teaching assistants in masters programs and are only there a year or two; we're asking a lot when we have them start by inventing a syllabus as they come in. What could I tell them that would help them? I named ten basic "skills," by which I meant kinds of instrumental knowledge that we teach, ways of doing things with your mind and with language. For each, to make it concrete and teachable, I listed specific studio practices--activities we engage students in that represent the objective correlate of the skill and that are therefore ways of learning intellectual skills by doing them. From this perspective, reading and writing and talk all became skills because they were instrumental to other intellectual and social purposes.

But here are some of the problems we discovered in thinking this way. First, since we also thematize in our studios the idea of critical thought (we call it "reflection"), there's a tension between the tacit skill--grammar, for instance--that you use as an instrument for some other purpose and the emphasis on reflection, trying to make what is normally tacit focal, trying to become self-conscious about what is highly unspecifiable, in order to gain better control over it. We are concerned about destructive analysis. When does it become right to move into formal statements about skills that are strongest when they're left tacit? When is it right to stay with the intuitive? And how do you get back once you've gone out there and made the informal formal, the inarticulate articulate? How do you get back to using language like an instrument?

Another problem is the whole issue of critical thinking, which is interpreted by most students and teachers as the exercise of doubt. But Polanyi says that the tacit is a-critical and that learning a skill requires submission to authority (*PK* 264,53). How compatible is this with teaching critical thinking? There is a conflict in the teachers between their desire to teach in a Freirean mode of empowerment, encouraging a critical attitude toward authority, and their recognition of students' need for the authoritative tradition that makes tacit learning possible. Polanyi writes,

“The society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition” (PK 53), and in essence a writing program is a society that is trying to communicate a teaching tradition.

Even when you do redefine “skill,” another problem is that skills or ways of *doing* things are devalued in the academy in favor of explicit formalized knowledge. And teachers, especially graduate students, constantly lean toward teaching writing as an object, as content. Each one of the writing studios has a topic or topics of inquiry, but the point is not the topic but the process of inquiry as skilled activity. There is constant slippage from teaching inquiry as a skill, an activity, to teaching the content being studied as formal knowledge. There is ongoing debate in the writing program about what’s studio-like and what’s not, and somehow it circles around this conflict in values.

Skills are subject to critique because they don’t have intrinsic values, but can be put to any use. This is the same critique made by Plato of ancient rhetoric--that because it’s instrumental by its very nature, rhetoric doesn’t have content and doesn’t have values. E. D. Hirsch makes the same criticism of composition for teaching skills, or process, independent of a cultural heritage, a moral content. Another form of the critique flips the first one around and says that the problem is that writing skills *are* imbued with values. This is the cultural critique that says skills as we teach them are ideological and we are naive or dishonest in treating them as instruments for students’ freely chosen purposes. Again, there are no easy answers, although Polanyi’s thought certainly refutes the claim that instrumental kinds of knowledge (like rhetoric or skills) are necessarily amoral.

(2) The second major area of my work that Polanyi has influenced is teaching new teachers to teach. The theme of the whole writing program--for teachers as well as students--is “reflective practice,” a phrase taken from Donald Schön’s *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. When I’m teaching the teachers to teach, all the problems I just mentioned that occur with the students occur again at the level of the teachers. Schön calls that the “hall of mirrors,” a wonderful image for that constant repetition or replication of problems that the teachers have in the problems that the students have and vice versa.

Schön draws on Polanyi when he describes teaching as an unspecifiable art best understood by reflection in action and by dialogue between students and teachers. In my class of new TA’s, I encountered strong resistance to the idea that teaching is an unspecifiable art. Like their students, they wanted specification, formalization, rules, syllabus, structure, and answers. Paradoxically, sometimes the strongest resistance comes from the same people who object to talking and reflecting about *writing* because they fear it will destroy their own or the students’ ability to write. (Many of these TA’s are creative writers.) So there’s a paradox there in their own thinking.

They also resist the idea that belief or apprenticeship or submission to authority are necessary to learn how to teach. They say that this relationship to a tradition puts them in an uncritical position. They don’t want to take up new ideas and try them out, including the broad concepts or tradition of the program they are asked to teach within, because they are being taught in their graduate classes that doubt is the highest intellectual value. I again have no answers, but I do want to mention that in desperation I resorted to Peter Elbow’s essay on systematic doubting and believing in *Embracing Contraries* when they didn’t understand or “believe” the Polanyi I gave them to read. That did help some. I also wrote a “correspondence” to them saying, “Please read Donald Schön’s book as if you were putting on a diving suit. You’re in the water, and you have to have a diving suit on. You can’t go in without a diving suit, although you can change diving suits later if you want to; but you’ve got to put a diving suit on. Please just put this one on for a little while.” And that helped a little, too.

(3)Polanyi has influenced a third major area of my work: The creation of intellectual community. We're trying to create intellectual community among our teachers so that they can create intellectual community among students. But a community has turned out to be a very difficult thing to forge among disparate people with different goals and different reasons for being there. Teaching the studios has to be learned by participating and systematically believing in a particular teaching, learning, inquiring community. It requires radical change, the creation of a new social architecture: you have to build a tradition together since the old one is bankrupt and no one is ready to accept a new framework at face value. You have to inspire commitment.

In this process I found myself often relying on Polanyi's concept of conviviality (see *PK* 217). He used it primarily to describe the international scientific community and its continuous network of scientists mutually relying on one another for feedback and appraisal, but we are certainly trying to create the same sense of collegial interdependence locally in our writing program. We want to build a network in which we can depend on both the criticism and the support of our colleagues, depend on a combination of belief and doubt. Some ways we're doing it include team teaching, collaborative learning, shared projects of inquiry, an in-house journal, frequent letters or "correspondences" to one another, working papers on curriculum, and coordinating groups where teachers meet to create their own agendas and talk about teaching.

Finally, I want to stress that as crucial as Polanyi's concepts have been to my teaching, his ethics have been even more important. Personal knowledge as he defines it *does* have a moral dimension our discipline needs, an acknowledgment of the claim of truth on us as inquirers, affirming reality on the one hand and taking responsibility for action on the other.

## Sam Watson

Long ago I realized two things as a teacher of composition. One, I realized that some of the attitudes that students exhibit and that I found most frustrating came from me. I want them to be inventive, I want them to think reflectively, and wouldn't it be nice if I didn't have to? The attitudes that are most problematic are ones that they pick up from us and from the structures within which we and they work. And indeed when the structure or the *way* things are said contradict *what* is said, students go with the tacit message rather than the explicit one. That's powerfully true and it's the way we operate in the world and we would have all been killed off long ago if we didn't do that. But that was a turning point, an important insight for me. Another was realizing that as a teacher of writing, one of the things I wanted to do was survive. And that it was quite possible to teach writing in such a way that one would not survive. So I quite brashly and from that moment on set up my courses so that I learned things. I tell students at the outset, "I'm here to learn some stuff. And if you learn things too, that's all right with me. But I'm here to learn." Frankly, I don't think it hurts students to see a teacher trying to learn something.

Some activities absorb tremendous energies and some create energies. Polanyi said this about intellectual positions: some destroy energies and some create them. He saw us embroiled in a philosophical world view that sapped energies, and he articulated an alternate vision which would enable us to create energies.

Since finishing my dissertation ("Michael Polanyi and the Recovery of Rhetoric") in 1973, I haven't been able to get away from Polanyi. Many of my teaching practices are colored by Polanyi's vision. Underlying all my teaching

is the desire to help people establish access to the tacit, to what's beneath, to the subsidiary, to our embodied sense and knowledge, to our sense of ourselves as persons and as knowing agents. Such access enables insight, discovery, and growth--both institutionally and personally--and my desire to help establish such access to the tacit plays itself out in my experience in three contexts.

One is writing projects. The National Writing Project may well be our nation's most successful program for the professional development of teachers. It's an embodiment of Polanyi's ideas although not intentionally founded on them. I hear Jim Gray, NWP founder and director, saying time and again, "Teachers know things! Teachers KNOW things!" The writing project is not a deficit model; it does not assume teachers are empty vessels to be filled or that they are misinformed beings to be "fixed." It is a bottom-up model: it brings teachers together to tap the often unarticulated knowledge that they bring from their classrooms and their own writing. Teachers generate tremendous energy by accrediting themselves and each other as knowers, tapping into wells of tacit knowledge.

In the fall of 1987, I brought together 71 teachers from the Southeast for two days of professional writing. Out of that writing project weekend came a book--*Writing in Trust: A Tapestry of Teachers' Voices* (Southeastern Educational Improvement Laboratory, 1989)--to which 60 of those teachers contributed. The book tells stories of educational transformations in themselves, their students, their schools, and their communities. Something about both the informality and the intentionality of the setting enabled them to write, even though they kept asking me, "Sam, what do you want us to write? How do you want us to write it?" Sound familiar? I kept saying to them, "We have met our audience, and it is us." We discovered we had things to *write* when we heard ourselves *speak* with each other; we were able to articulate to ourselves and make accessible to others insights and questions we hadn't known we had. Real strength and energy is given in that kind of informal, yet intentional and intensive collaboration. I can understand what I'm saying when I talk with someone I trust. I come to hear it sometimes for the first time.

The second context in which I try to foster a Polanyian appreciation of the tacit is the university, the place where I work, UNC Charlotte. Is the university a safe place for writing? Is mine? Is yours? For the writing of our colleagues, for ourselves, for our students? Too often students and faculty are afraid to write, and little wonder. Writing is grist for evaluation rather than response; abstracted critical standards are imagined which perhaps no text measures up to in the end and which, more importantly, thwart promising beginnings. One of our UNC Charlotte philosophers sums up the shift in orientation we're working for: "we are giving ourselves permission to begin before we are finished." I want to see the university become a place that's safe for writing. And I think that'll mean a place that's safe for learning, too.

Four years ago, our university began requiring two "writing-intensive" courses for graduation; providing these courses is now a formally articulated goal for UNCC. But whether, and how, this goal is reached will be determined largely by the kinds of *informal* talk among faculty that goes on behind closed office doors, in lounges, and over beer. We're trying to help our university become a place where informal talk and contact feeds into, rather than contradicts, achievement of the formalized, publicly articulated goals of the institution.

To that end we've held ten 3-day faculty writing retreats so far from which some faculty have returned saying, "This has changed my life and I've begun to write for the first time ever." We've had occasional faculty seminars by guest consultants such as Nancy Martin, Paul Ricoeur, Louise Phelps, Janet Emig, and Peter Elbow. We've had semester-length faculty writing groups. In 1989 we began a student writing contest, offering an award for the best essay about a student's writing experiences. We will publish this set of essays annually for distribution to faculty so they can learn from students' experiences with writing. We have also published *What's Happening with Writing at UNC*

*Charlotte?*, a booklet in which professors describe how they incorporate writing into their courses. All of these deliberately unobtrusive efforts aim, first, to shift the climate of institutional opinion about student writing and the role it can play in instruction and, second, to enable professors to seek each other out as resources, tapping a knowledge we too seldom realize we have.

And finally, what kinds of influence does Polanyi have on me in the third context I want to talk about--my writing courses? I've already confessed that I want to survive those courses and I've set them up so I can learn within them. Two things I trace back to Polanyi are my concern with writing-to-learn and my practice of exchanging personal letters with students about each submitted paper.

My students come to me almost never having used their writing (or never having been aware that they are using their writing) to extend their understanding. There is no way I can preach them into that orientation. Believe me, I've tried. Didn't work. But I wanted them to experience that, so one thing I do, beginning at the middle of term, is ask them to shift the nature of their daily journal so that from then on they're doing a few minutes of writing every day to extend their understanding of the materials in some other course. Frequently they are surprised by what comes out of that writing-to-learn, surprised in ways that I can't predict and that I can never insist on ahead of time. But realizing how writing can help them think, remember, and understand, how writing can lead to discovery, how writing can be useful to the *writer*, always contributes to their growth as writers.

Since I believe they need to reflect on the writing they're doing, all responses in my classes take the form of correspondence between the student and me. A paper is always accompanied by a "Dear Sam letter"--Dear Sam, here's how I went about writing it, here's what I see going on in it. The student isn't expected to be self-critical but to pose questions and suggest what the heart of the paper is and especially to remark on any surprises that came in the writing. My response is a "Dear Jane letter," a letter back to that student. At the very least it gives the advantage, which seems to me a necessary thing for writing, of writing *to* somebody, of having a real audience out there. Sometimes it's hard to convince students that I am that, that I want to be a real audience and these are real letters. But I started doing it from utterly selfish motives, just because it's so deadly to write comments on student papers and it's so much more fun to write letters. My aim is that we will carry on a semester-length conversation, in writing, centered on that student's writing.

Our letter exchanges model some easily forgotten truths about writing--that it exists in a social context and that it is addressed *to* someone(s). In the letters, we are attending from what's beneath, articulating some of the contexts, constraints, processes, and potentials that never get completely articulated in a final text. Thus one freshman writes me:

I really don't plan what I'm going to say. Somehow my stories are better when I do this. Do you understand what I mean? It's sort of like freewriting a paper. Do you think this is an acceptable method?

Without this student's letter, the fine question she poses would not be accessible to me or perhaps even to her. And Polanyi helps me say to her that she is onto something important about writing: the spontaneity and discovery she describes are necessary dynamics for *any* writing which might make a difference.

An older student, Perri Sherrill, wrote the following as part of an end-of-course reflection on her work:

Just four months ago I thought there was one way to write: the right way. I used a formula, got good grades, and didn't get much of anything out of the writing I did for school assignments. In the past three months that has all changed. I've been trying to figure out at exactly what point this great change in my attitude took place. It was starting to emerge at midterm. I can see that when I reread my coursebook letter to you. Think of that--I can see something in retrospect. . . .

I really think that the assignment of revising a paper is what opened my eyes to what can happen with an idea or one piece or product. I said before that I'd never revised a finished paper in my entire life. I always did my revisions within the paragraph. I would not go on to the next until each one was perfect in my eyes. The form and the words may have been "right," but I was always frustrated with the formality of my writing, and I am sure that the content showed how narrow my focus always was. I would never change direction from the three points I had mentioned in my introductory paragraph. In the first letter I wrote to you, I said that I didn't feel like I could ever really freewrite. I am still practicing that skill, but I see what you were talking about when you replied that ideally writing has to be a combination of structure and free- writing. If I start with freewriting about my ideas in general, then I have an abundance of material to choose from when I start writing the actual piece.

[In my writing for this semester] I find glimpses of my personality, learning styles, and philosophies laid out in an amazing amount of order. I use the word "amazing" because I was genuinely amazed at how organized this disjointed series of thoughts and writing samples appears in my journal entries and in the writing assignments with the accompanying letters. What pulls it together for me are the composing observations and letters. [In an education course,] I just finished writing a unit plan, and I wrote my way into understanding what I wanted the unit to do. When I think about it, I wouldn't have considered a unit plan "real" writing before now. What's even more amazing is the fact this unit is one of the best pieces of work I've ever turned in. (No, I haven't gotten the professor's response yet, but I'm sure he must feel the same way--we students know these things.)

I don't know that Michael Polanyi's name was ever mentioned in Perri's class. But her reflection stands as an accurate gloss on his thought. In retrospect she sees order which was not apparent at the time; what reveals and indeed constitutes that order are her reflections, the actions of her own mind at work, matters which usually lie, properly, beneath focal attention.

Polanyi helped me learn the importance of attending from what's beneath. In writing projects, I see that kind of attending energizing teachers and transforming classrooms. In my own university, I see it crucially complementing the institution's visible structures and announced goals. And in my writing classes, Polanyi's thought encourages me to become a learner with my students while they articulate some of what lies beneath their finished texts and begin to use writing to extend their understanding and make discoveries of their own.

## Janet Emig

Into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known. (*PK* xiv)

What is this nonsense? A person? personal? passion? commitment? I mean, do we really want this? We want commitment to what? Do we want commitment to learning, generically? Do we want commitment to the assignment? To us as an instructor? To the curriculum? To the department? To a theory? I mean, is it possible we might even want commitment to the student's own mind?

Here's Polanyi talking about belief:

I believe that the function of philosophic reflection consists in bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid; that I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding; that I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this programme of self-identification. (*PK* 267)

Well, how do we find that as a program, perhaps as a directive, to ourselves as teachers of reading and writing? Do we believe it for ourselves? Is it possible that we even believe it for our students? Their *own* program? Divorced from our agenda? Divorced from our directives? Divorced from our assignments?

What an unfashionable figure Polanyi is in this assemblage, an MLA Convention. What an unchic group we are, those of us in this room. And all of us in such a problematic field. And such reactionary concepts. What draws us? What draws all these anachronisms together? What does Polanyi believe?

He believes in belief. He believes in the intellectual necessity of belief. As others have pointed out, he believes that we know more than we can tell. He believes in connoisseurship. He believes that passion is a necessity for learning, that we can't learn unless we're passionate. He espouses conviviality and argues that knowing is social, friendly, not confrontational. He's comfortable with paradox, with tension, that neither moves into simple-mindedness nor into some kind of fascism.

Connoisseurship is one of the major concepts in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Personal Knowledge*. What is it, first of all, as Polanyi talks about it?--a profound, unspecifiable expertise gained by long experience and intelligent striving while immersed in a particular discipline. I hope we like to think of ourselves as actual or potential connoisseurs, but are we comfortable with thinking about ourselves as possible models? That means that we as teachers are not only givers of assignments, we are writers. And what do we do in colleges and universities where we receive thirty-page memos telling us that writing does not exist? And what do we do when those of us in writing research say, as Lucy Calkins has been saying lately, that teachers of writing to young children do not need to write? I'm making some kind of equation here between being a connoisseur and being a model. Writing teachers who don't write themselves perhaps contribute to the fact that much teaching of writing is almost a systematic reversal of what, in Polanyi's terms, should be *focal* and what should be *subsidiary*. We focus on the hammer, considering its weight and heft, and don't notice all these students who are smashing their thumbs.

Polanyi makes another point I find enchanting--to have a problem is to have made a discovery. Not just to *solve* a problem, to *have* a problem.

To see a problem is a definite addition to knowledge, as much as it is to see a tree, or to see a mathematical proof--or a joke. It is a surmise which can be true or false, depending on whether the hidden possibilities of which it assumes the existence do actually exist or not. To recognise a problem which can be solved and is worth solving is in fact a discovery in its own right. (PK 120)

In some of the recent work on developmental psychology among adolescents, there's a stage above problem solving--the stage of problem creation. It's more interesting, it's more complex, it's probably far more sophisticated. Finally, Polanyi happens to believe in the ethical dimensions of what we do--of reading and writing, of dealing with students, of attempting to create communities. With Teilhard de Chardin, he believes in the existence of a noosphere:

Here is the point at which the theory of evolution finally bursts through the bounds of natural science and becomes entirely an affirmation of man's ultimate aims. For the emergent noosphere is wholly determined as that which we believe to be true and right; it is the external pole of our commitments, the service of which is our freedom. (PK 404)

I love uttering these old-fashioned words. Polanyi goes on to define a free society as "a fellowship fostering truth and respecting the right." And then he ends with this sentence, which should give us all comfort: "It comprises everything in which we may be totally mistaken" (PK 404).

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