



The poetics of writing instruction

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Abstract: *As Gordon Taylor pointed out in several seminal articles on our discipline, language and academic skills practitioners are faced with a dilemma. Dealing solely with the form, or structure of a student's text, leaving questions of content (and presumably, the student's understanding of that content) to subject or discipline lecturers, the language and learning adviser risks only scratching the surface, of seeing the symptom but not the cause of a student's difficulties. Similarly, the content specialist who does not have an insight into the discursive element of the student's work may know when a piece of writing is inadequate, but may be unable to help the student progress or develop. That is to say, a sharp division between form and content cannot be maintained and exclusive focus on grammar may be of limited help to the learner. The task for the language and academic skills adviser is to find a balance between form and content, without assuming the role of discipline expert, or ignoring the influence of language (grammar or discourse). The paper reviews previous discussions of the philosophical foundations of writing and academic skills instruction (Taylor's, in particular) and considers the potential value of an approach based in poetics. As opposed to a hermeneutic response, which considers only what a text means, or a formal approach, which might look at grammar or rhetoric, poetics considers how a text is made, and thus offers insight into a student's writing process.*

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At the risk of straying outside the borders of our discipline, I want to begin by reading a poem. Some of you may be familiar with the poem already; no doubt you will also realise that my choice of this poem in particular is far from innocent. Over the years since its first publication it has increasingly been taken as an index of the problem of reading and interpretation, or the limits of interpretability (Caraher, 1991; Jones, 1995). As such, with some careful qualifications which I will make in a moment, I think that the poem highlights some issues we face in working with student writing, specifically, the issue of how to negotiate the tension between form and content, competence and performance, or in another guise, the interconnection of skills and knowledge:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

The untitled poem is by William Wordsworth; it first appeared in 1800, in the second edition of the groundbreaking book he published with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*. For some, knowing this context might be sufficient cause to accept the strangeness of the verse without question, enabling the reader to paper over the more obvious gaps in the text. That is, the fact that it is written by a canonical poet, is rhythmical and rhymes, and appeared in a book full of poems is sufficient to forestall any further concern about its field, tenor or mode. If this putative reader also shares a cultural expectation that obscurity is a key feature of the genre, or mode, then he or she needn't trouble any longer over the lines, except perhaps to savour that mystery or to enjoy their music.

However much the text might be appreciated as a kind of music, an incantation, if the prejudice (literally, the pre judgment) that poetry is permitted a degree of vagueness, these eight lines could be said to lack both coherence and cohesion: Who is speaking? Who are they speaking to? Who or what are they speaking about? Why?

To get more specific, what is the relation between the speaker of the first two lines and the 'she' of the next six? The points of reference indicated by the pronouns of the poem are withheld. But this is not the only grammatical problem. The irregular syntax of the first line leaves the relation between subject and object uncertain, giving us a choice: did the spirit seal the slumber, or the slumber seal the spirit? The adjective 'human' in the next line raises questions too. Were the speaker's fears something other than human, or did the speaker have no fears at all? For the latter reading it has to be assumed, at a minimum, that the speaker is human – but can the same be assumed of the 'she' of the next line, a 'thing' who could not feel the touch of earthly years? If not human then what? Animal? Spirit? Statue? Or dead?

The fact that the remainder of the poem is relatively straightforward, grammatically, has to be set against the fact that it does little to resolve this uncertainty. A kind of parallel may be discerned here: we don't know if the 'she' is beyond the reach of earthly years because she has died (could no longer feel), or because she is immortal (never could feel) just as we can't be sure whether the speaker woke or fell asleep. Here, I am beginning to fall prey to the natural impulse to find cohesion in a text which one supposes should be cohesive, or to recuperate the meaning of the text on a thematic or figurative level.

However, to give in to this impulse any further would stretch the analogy I want to draw between the difficulties of reading this poem, and the situation of language and learning practice. For now, I would simply note that in order to 'read' Wordsworth's poem, it would seem necessary either to supply information for which there is scant textual evidence, or look beyond the text itself to a context or category in which such uncertainties cease to matter. But this step beyond the text is not entirely without peril. The satisfactions of poetry are not purely formal, though some critics and poets have acted as though they were. Any formalist reading of 'a slumber' which sidestepped the question of sense by looking solely at prosody too quickly turns the text into nothing more than a trinket. In short, in strictly formal terms this fragment doesn't stack up particularly well. Rhythmically, it poses too little challenge to be of much interest. This was no less true in Wordsworth's time than our own, though for different reasons: the late Augustan audience had the complexities of Pope's Alexandrines, or Milton's blank verse to compare this bit of common, or ballad meter

against, while modern ears expect a little less regularity in the beat, and regard rhyme with suspicion, if not derision.

In this way, these eight lines present us with a dilemma. As I have already mentioned, we can reject the text as irredeemably obscure, or treat it as an example, and perhaps not the most interesting example at that, of a relatively simple poetic form. No doubt many of you might be happy at this point with either choice, so long as I stop talking about it, but I want to urge caution. The dilemma faced here is not unlike the dilemma we face each time we sit down to read a student's text which has gaps or seems incoherent, lacks cohesion or as the student's marker might put it, is simply 'unreadable – often with the rejoinder, 'go see language and learning to have your grammar fixed'.

It is at this point that some qualifications become necessary. It seems, first, that in order to show some respect for the law of genre, or the proper borders of the disciplines that we ought to treat a poem differently than a student essay. Poetic license should no more be extended to student essays than we should set about 'correcting' Wordsworth's poem (not even the odd punctuation). The difference, it might be said, lies in a presumption about the source and status of the confusing elements—as I mentioned, the presumption with a poem is likely to be that the indeterminacy is a deliberate strategy, whereas with the student essay, ambiguous syntax, pronouns without antecedent, and indeterminate propositions might be classified as 'simply' mistakes. Insofar as this equates to a presumption about authorial intention it is not really a problem for the analogy I want to draw. It has been argued by literary theorists of many stripes, from the 'new critics' to the 'deconstructionists' that to invoke 'authorial intention' is simply to invoke another text, an 'unreadable' one at that, and thus cannot resolve confusion in a text with any finality. On the other side, I think LAS practitioners would generally agree that to assume a student's incapacity as a starting point is fraught with pedagogical and ethical problems.

The difference is also not a matter of what one does with the text: it might be said that with the poem the reader must respect and accept uncertainties, whereas with the student text the advisor is 'bound' in a sense to 'correct' it. However, to step too quickly around an interesting question about the ethics of reading, the reader of a

difficult text always, inevitably 'corrects' the text to some degree, as I have done even in the simple act of trying to specify more clearly what 'confusion' there is in 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal'. Call it paraphrase or interpretation, reading is rewriting – an act of recovery that seeks to bring latent meanings to the surface, or a species of translation whereby the meaning of the text is carried over into a new 'language', or more accurately, a new genre or context.

The analogy, I think, lies in the fact that the reader of the difficult poem does not have access to a 'meaning', intended or not, which would enable them to 'correct' the text with any certainty, just as the writing instructor who stands outside and presumably does not possess disciplinary, content knowledge can't necessarily know how to 'correct' the student's text. Wordsworth's poem, in short, raises a question about how to read without recourse to an 'authorised' meaning. What I have been trying to demonstrate in smuggling some poetry into a language and academic skills conference is nothing less than the limit of a purely 'grammatical' or 'formal' response to textual indeterminacy.

In this, I am following Gordon Taylor who defined this limit with particular clarity in at least five articles published over two decades from 1980 to 2000. I'm not going to try to summarise any of the articles in detail (partly because I expect many of you are familiar with them anyway, and partly because it wouldn't be possible to do justice to them for those who aren't) but I hope to draw from them some key points about how we might approach our practice, insofar as they relate to what could be called 'poetics'. What I would argue is that Taylor's approach to student writing in fact does correspond quite nicely with 'poetics' as 'an account of a literature's construction, its provenance, purposes and strategies'. I'll say more about what 'poetics' is and how it might offer a useful model / theory of writing instruction following that.

The first point is that while Taylor would probably say 'error' rather than 'indeterminacy' I am sure that he would agree generally with the view (widely held in literary studies) that indeterminacies of the kind we find in Wordsworth's poem are neither to be ignored, nor to be treated lightly or quickly. The closing paragraph of Taylor's 1988 essay, 'The Literacy of Knowing: Content and Form in Students' English' makes this clear:

The deficiencies in students' writing, it should now be clear, are in some measure due to confusions or vaguenesses about content. What students' writing does is furnish us with evidence of these confusions and vaguenesses. We should treat it as we customarily treat evidence – not, so to speak, as a self-evident conclusion about poor grammatical knowledge and training, but as the documentation of some perturbation that needs interpreting or explaining. (Taylor, 1988: 64)

In his earlier essay, 'Errors and Explanations,' Taylor had set out seven principles around interpreting and explaining 'the evidence' as such. The first one is really an assumption that grounds the other principles and is that 'Student's writing errors must be assumed to be explicable; errors are not random.' His next principle concerned the need to respect the individuality of the student, and the student's text – that is, that generalisations based on surveys of a large number of texts are less productive than detailed analysis of single texts. His third principle explicitly refers to literary criticism in stating that the 'primary datum for analysis is the essay itself, not what the student may say about the text or the process of composition'. None of these principles, as I have already intimated, would jar with an approach to texts based in poetics.

The broader point of connection with poetics here is that the gaps, or lacunae in Wordsworth's text are 'productive', interesting in their own right. The goal moreover with *poetics*, as opposed to interpretation or aesthetics, as such, is not to resolve them, but to keep them open as long as possible. Resisting both the rush to judgment (is it any good?) and the demand for 'meaning', final and authoritative. Poetics is a 'negative capability' ('to be capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason') to borrow Keats' term.

Taylor goes on to present a few more principles which it would be good to pause (rather than pass) over, particularly his careful distinction of errors requiring analysis and those which do not, but I want to jump ahead to his eighth point – perhaps the most complex – which is that explanations of errors which consider the 'paradigmatic' rather than syntagmatic are to be preferred.

What Taylor suggests is that when we are looking at 'errors' deemed to be 'significant' then we should start by looking at the writer's choice in terms of 'meaning' rather than syntactical choices. Taylor does add that this should apply unless a relationship between paradigmatic choices and the particular error can't be established. That is, while there may be cases where an error is evidence of the student's having not learnt 'a particular structure', the possibility that errors are indications of a difficulty or confusion with a particular concept or idea must be explored.

The broader point to which this relates is that any approach to teaching 'better' writing which ignores 'content', focusing only on form or grammar, or which looks only at content (such as ED Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* in which it is argued that 'knowing facts' in and of itself will improve writing) is inadequate. This point, is in fact the crux of most of Taylor's arguments, his aim being to find points of intersection and overlap between form and content, as well as other apparent dichotomies which, in his view, have restricted our understanding of the nature of the relationship between understanding and composition itself. These include most prominently the dichotomies between universal and particular, knowledge and skills, thinking and speaking, parole and langue, competence and performance, all of which are susceptible to mediation along the lines Taylor suggests.

The approach Taylor takes to resolving the dilemma is to focus on language: for instance in exploring the dichotomy between (knowing) subject and object (known) as a contemporary version of the ancient battle between rhetoric and dialectic, Taylor (following the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer) argued for a third term 'language', through which both knower and known are mediated (Taylor, 1995). But for this to work, it is essential to have a theory of language, or a grammar, which doesn't focus exclusively on the internal structure or logic of the language in question – which can be a species of formalism, and also tends to ignore both speaker and hearer of the language. I doubt that I need to mention in much detail here that Taylor consistently refers us to Halliday's Functional linguistics as a grammar which 'hooks on to the world', or one which considers the relation between language, speaker and world.

It is at this point that I want to depart from Taylor, not because I think the recourse to Functional grammar is problematic, but because I think that poetics offers an alternative way to resolve, or reconcile, at least to work around the dichotomies and dilemmas which are Taylor's point of departure.

The sense of 'poetics' that might be most immediately familiar is as one of the three branches of classical study, alongside rhetoric and ethics. In this sense poetics could be summarised as an account of poetic forms, and that is in large part what Aristotle provides. The modern equivalent of this kind of poetics is *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which gives what seems an exhaustive survey of forms.

The sense of poetics that I am drawing attention to here is slightly different: the word comes from the greek verb *poein* 'to make' and the idea of poetics that is useful retains this 'active' sense. This sense is captured by Mark Jones, who writes that poetics is 'an account of a literature's construction, its provenance, purposes and strategies.' (1995, 3) For many literary scholars the rule of thumb, not elucidated except in practice is that poetics is concerned with how a text is made, or *how* it means, not what it means. In this way it is akin to a structure, or grammar of literature, or perhaps more accurately, 'a grammar of composition', which is a phrase that would resonate with Gordon Taylor's writings. Two qualifications are necessary at this point. The first is that poetics is not a theory, or one theory among others, as such, but a 'mode' of reading which is practiced in a variety of ways. The second is that despite being largely associated with literature, this mode of reading is not limited to literary (creative) texts in the sense that all texts are 'made'.

Thus, in respect to LAS practice, in particular, I am not suggesting that poetics is simply a way for advisors to approach reading student texts. I think it is, in fact, a way of thinking about what it is we aim to teach students – not the content of their course or their texts, and not simply teaching empty forms (formulas), or grammar. That is to say, it gives both students, and ourselves, something to do with difficult, 'unreadable' texts other than coming directly at an unknown 'meaning' (which is unproductive) or focusing on something that is ultimately irrelevant to the problems at hand (such as 'grammar' or form). More generally, an interest in poetics might shift

the emphasis in our teaching from attention to writing, to attention to reading (both the student's reading of their own texts and reading of content).

By way of summary then I would argue that there are four key principles upon which a 'poetic' reading of a text can be built. These in turn are closely aligned with the sorts of principles upon which Taylor thought LAS practise could stand, as elucidated in particular in his 1986 essay in *Applied Linguistics*, 'Errors and Explanations'. The first principle is that gaps and indeterminacy are always significant and interesting. The second is that rigid distinctions between form and content can't be sustained. Third that the reader should be concerned with how a text 'means' in relation to writer and reader, and to other texts and contexts rather than simply seeking to judge the text against a predetermined 'meaning' or 'standard' (aesthetic or grammatical) and finally, the aim is to open, and hold in 'suspension' various textual possibilities, rather than to 'end' the discussion. On the last point there are clear implications for LAS practitioners as well as students. Among the primary goals of higher education (even if our university administrators have forgotten this) is encouraging the opening of questions. If lifelong learning means anything it has to begin with the ability to recognise that the answers we have now are not the only ones, and that there is always room for more questions.

That is to say, we as LAS advisors should not necessarily be satisfied with the answers we have now about why students write in the way that they write, and should, as Taylor advises, critique simplistic or positivistic accounts of students' writing deficiencies wherever we encounter them. Secondly, in answer to the question about what it is we can do if not teaching content and not simply correcting form: I would argue we should be seeking to teach students the art of slow reading, call it *poetics* if you like, which is not simply a skill, but a critical attitude toward the readings that constitute their 'subject', whatever that might be.

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