

# Freshman Composition as Disaster Response

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FIRST, A DISCLAIMER: this essay is meant to reflect neither well nor poorly upon the problematic disaster responses the U.S government undertook in 2005. There are political points to be made about those events, some of them quite damning, but that's none of my business here. My discussion will not issue from the politics of hegemony per se, nor from economics, but from the pragmatics of common experience, noticing first what its most expert practitioners notice: disaster response is hard—almost forbiddingly so. College writing is hard too, for many of our students, and I want to set forth what I see as a pattern of similarities between those two sets of difficulties. This is intimately relevant to our treatment of the plagiarism issue, as these difficulties might account in some measure for, among other things, students' willingness to cheat. I will develop a line of thinking initiated for me by the German psychologist Dietrich Dörner: his work *The Logic of Failure* (1997) shows how people engaged in difficult, high-stakes, time-sensitive decision making (such as disaster response, food aid planning, etc.) tend to enact a set of irrational, unwise behaviors that look a lot like the stubborn quirks of our composition students.

Let me list Dörner's most significant observations, and then I'll discuss a few of them in more detail in terms of college composition. First, he notes, people in that sort of trouble tend to neglect certain aspects of planning, especially reasonable goal setting; they tend to focus their attention with a sort of tunnel vision, leading to poor timing and a measurable neglect of side effects and practical consequences; they tend to handle the information-gathering part of their task unwisely in two complementary ways, at times getting mired in unnecessary detail and at other times ignoring obvious complicating data; they

tend to ascribe their problems to a single cause instead of the more usual multiplicity of causative influences; they tend to mentally leap to pseudo-problems removed vertically (that is, by increasing or decreasing abstraction) or horizontally (by association) from the problem truly at hand; they tend to revert to methods that have worked for them before, even when the earlier problems were significantly different; and they tend rather passionately to evade and reject analytical self-assessment and reflective self-regulation.

Dörner isolates and describes these tendencies by means of computer simulations—Sim City-type stuff—played by real-life disaster responders. He ramps up the pressure and complexity to approach real-world disastrousness,

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provoking in short order the kinds of failure he hopes to train his subjects to avoid in the long haul. My thesis is that the Dörner connection shows how high-stakes, time-sensitive fear and stress exacerbate many of the writing problems we find in college composition courses, fueling the rationalization to cheat. Luckily, Dörner's best bet to ameliorate this failure-proneness is what most of us already provide for

freshman writers: lots of simulated practice with guiding feedback. But the problems are stubborn.

So, which patterns of failure make the most difference in student writing? For now, three related categories will do: first, the tendency to adopt unrealistic, egocentric goals and purposes; second, tunnel vision; and third, the stubborn, almost robotic allegiance to grade-school forms and purposes that correspond, as I see it, to a kind of “knee-jerk methodism.” (The residual Freudian in me wants to mention, by the way, that these are all instances of *condensation* and thus relate in some way to the trope of metonymy, the putting of the part for the whole.) Realistic, harmonious goal-setting gets frustrated in two ways, one of which hardly needs mentioning: procrastination rules! But another aspect of disturbed goal setting is more insidious: many of Dörner's overwhelmed subjects contrive to force a comforting false simplicity and clarity by focusing on foggy abstractions instead of setting pragmatic goals. Likewise, it takes a while, in my classes anyway, to persuade students that their job is more limited and practical than to prove their favorite glittering, platitudinous generality, e.g., “everyone has a right to their own opinion.” In a task already fraught with pressure, Dörner's subjects and ours exacerbate their bad situations by adopting goals that are not anchored to practicality.

But consider, alongside this allegiance to high-altitude fogginess, the false clarity of grades, the number-one self-reported goal our students set for themselves. Grades are even more confoundingly confused between abstraction and concreteness than money is (see Marc Shell [1995] on money's slipperiness in this regard). They are supposed to measure "How'm I doin'," but when writing we do at least twenty things at once; the single grade represents, and thus masks, a complex multiplicity of assessment considerations. This sort of simplification might seem attractive as anodyne to overwhelming complexity—that is, the seeming comprehensibility of the abstract "B" understandably trumps the largely opaque complex of readers' actual reasons to feel "This paper is good, but not really outstanding." But when one's only purpose in writing is to get an "A," that purpose is practically solipsistic, and plenty of our students' papers vividly reflect this absence of actual, shareable communicative purpose.

Dörner's solution to this particular kind of failure reminds me of one of the composition teachings most resisted by my students: to include goal setting and situation assessment in a recursive routine of periodic, intermediate adjustments. Despite my describing, explaining, illustrating, and formally requiring evidence of this recursive process, I find it awfully hard to get students actually to do it, and so, I'm sure, do most of us. When the end of the semester is near at hand and yet students still ask whether they are allowed to make reasonable adjustments in the theses they had chosen before drafting (a premature choosing, contrary to my advice, of course), one gets the idea that something well beyond laziness makes them regard their initial goal choices as inviolable. Their grade-school teachers had them choose theses before drafting, and that's that. In this as in many aspects of student writing, we might be tempted to think the students simply have no common sense; but, to be fair, they might feel little reason to expect reasonableness to prevail. "Not much sense being practical," one student told me recently, "when the whole assignment seems totally impractical." Common sense, in this somewhat irrational institution, is a work in progress for us all.

On this point, let's turn to Mike Rose's idea that students often figure out their rhetorical situations in unfortunate ways. His well-known thesis in *Lives on the Boundary* (1990) is that students' writing hang-ups are not primarily emotional, as many assume. Rather, they are often what Rose calls "cognitive," meaning that they result from conscious, although mistaken, calculation. This, I think, harmonizes perfectly with Dörner's "logic of failure." Rose touches on the grade-confusion problem, for instance, in terms of those students who, Bartleby-like, prefer not to realistically assess their poor performance because they misidentify grades as markers of generalized personal worth, so when grades seem too low, they feel simply wrong, insulting, and therefore dismissible. My cross-attribution of this bad calculation to Dörner's pressure hypothesis does not

contradict Rose, but rather fills out and strengthens the theory, connecting stressed-out feelings with stressed-out thought. And at the point of contact between these explanations we glimpse a very un-pretty picture of withdrawal from social interaction into an armored self. (Savvy readers will note that the residual Freudian here shows his Reichian coloration.)

Of course, high-school habits are hard to break under any circumstances, and to the extent that our students have been trained to first form a thesis and then draft a paper about it, dialogical reasoning finds no ready place in their writing routines. The set pattern of five-paragraph themes floated free from real-world purpose long ago, as a critical glance at, say, Edgar Roberts's perdurable *Writing Themes About Literature* (1991) will show. Even so, this unfortunate ground condition seems insufficient to account for the tunnel vision we encounter in students whose essays lack the give-and-take of reasonable discussion even when their classroom conversation shows them fully capable of it. My own observations on sentence-level style reinforce the Dörnerian connection: I'm thinking of those students who, however fluent in conversation, persistently write in a choppy, disconnected way, as if the act of writing narrowed their windows of consciousness to the width of only one sentence—or less, which would account for the prevalence of broken predications. Tunnel vision can help explain the uncanny recurrence of sentence-level problems such as the typical absence of—nay, resistance to—transitional phrasing and the abiding presence of sentence-structure monotony. This correlation between stress and the narrowing of attention is, by the way, a commonplace of psychology (e.g., Winstanley, 2005).

As with tunnel vision, so with knee-jerk methodism, or in our case the persistent reluctance to abandon simplistic formats and artificial, make-work purposes that are appropriate, if at all, to children's schoolwork only. Their high-pressure situation seems to dictate to risk-averse students that they must at all costs *be right*: not play, not explore, not create, but stay on safe ground. Dörner describes more than once the unfortunate twists of reasoning people under stress will perform in order to preserve their sense of their own competence, when humility would be the more realistic attitude to take. And the part of Dörner's solution appropriate to this part of the problem is very simple and yet very hard—nothing more than the oracular dictum, *gnothi seauton*, “know thyself.”

“Know thyself,” I want to say, is precisely what the person under high-stakes, time-sensitive pressure tends to neglect. This self-forgetting shows especially in the goal-setting arena, where Dörner's subjects tend to skip out on sustained goal assessment, leaving implicit goals opaque and conflicting goals unreconciled. One's stress-narrowed window of attention typically leaves the self out of the critical picture. And knee-jerk methodism, when it functions as a

guarantee of being right, is yet another symptom of this same forced deficit of critical self-regard. I've seen students literally drop their jaws when they realize we actually do want them to court the disaster of finding fault with their own assumptions. And egocentric defensiveness—an experiential aspect of condensation—plays prominently in all of the failings Dörner enumerates; thus our students, like his disaster responders, often stand by discredited methods, such as the template-bound high-school essay format, partly in order to ensure that failure, if it occurs, touches only the method and not the writer.

Many of these students, as my friend Tom Bertonneau pointed out to me, no matter how confused they know their writing to be, hold dear the hope that they, through the window of their compositions, will be found to be glorious after all. (I really do think they are glorious, but not in quite that way.) American exceptionalism, revved up by the opportunistic commercial media, provides a ready-made ideological support for that hope: “Hey—since there might, after all, be exceptions to any rule, I'll bet I am one!” Glitteringly reductive generalities such as “everybody's got a right to their own opinion” come to signal wishful reductions such as “every intellectual problem is a pseudo-problem if I say it is,” “nobody's really an expert,” and “no one can prove anything,” so “anything I choose to say is inviolably personal—my opinions are sacred!” It's important to note, though, that our present, early 21st-century freshmen and sophomores grew up drinking out of milk cartons that literally advertised kidnapping hysteria in an era permeated by grievous exaggeration of the perils of life in our society. Those of us over thirty or so, I submit, have no sure way to know how that feels, but I'll bet that, in the extra-mean world this generation inhabits, exploring ideas and submitting to self-critique feels far too chancy when one can recite sparkly truisms instead—or copy and paste them off the Internet.

Intellectual maturity, as I understand it, consists in the habit of reconstructive self-examination, moderation in all things (including moderation), humility without apology, and direction not by but toward others. But the commercial wing of our culture nurtures and protects its favorite aspects of our immaturity as vigilantly as a full-blown paranoid nurtures and protects his sources of imaginary inside information. An odd thing happens, though, to those who

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refuse to grow up: even as they spout egalitarian platitudes, their underlying structure of assumptions tends very strongly to be authoritarian, according to which the only thing of positive value in the world of ideas is received certainty—so, at least, cognitive development theorists such as William G. Perry (1999) and Patricia King and Karen Kitchener (2004) point out. Plagiarism can thus seem a reasonable response when we demand, as I think we must, that students seriously face up to and work with uncertainty. When we present our demands in authoritarian terms, so much the worse; and when we mischaracterize plagiarism as theft or trespass, worse yet.

Plagiarism cannot be effectively opposed by worsening the conditions that bring it about. We may need, purposefully and publicly, to ease up on grading but buckle down on academics—get more rigorously reasonable in our expectations and our explanations. At present, it seems to me that learning by trial and error feels too unsafe for many of our students to willingly risk it, yet I see no other way for them to learn to write well, so something’s got to give. “Maintain Standards” is an egregiously vacuous slogan unless it means standards of workmanship, honesty, usefulness, compassion, and respect. As long as students feel as though writing class is hitting them like a disaster, we should expect to receive disaster-like responses to our assignments. When we learn how to make it look and feel both fair and safe for students to accept what we offer, I believe we can cultivate genuinely purposeful thinking-through-writing with much less cheating than presently occurs.

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