



“Failure Is the Way We Learn”: An Interview with William E. Coles, Jr.

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*Recently he has focused on writing novels for young adults: *Funnybone* (with Stephen Schwandt, 1992), *Another Kind of Monday* (an ALA Best Book for Teens, 1996), and *Compass in the Blood* (2001). His emergence as a writer of fiction should come as no surprise to those familiar with his books on composition, for he frequently “fictionalizes” in them, using novelistic devices to recreate for the reader the experience of teaching and learning composition. His writings on composition are among the earliest and best examples of creative nonfiction in composition studies. We spoke with William Coles at UC Davis on May 17, 2002, after a two-day visit to the campus during which he met with a children’s literature class as well as a graduate student teacher training seminar, and gave a public lecture. His generous spirit and brilliant mind were in evidence throughout the visit and throughout this interview, a conversation that we much enjoyed.*

WOE: How were you taught writing?

COLES: Oh, pretty much the way my students tell me they are still being taught: with what I absorbed as a set of rules and regulations. You began with a kind of throat-clearing first paragraph called the introduction in which you announced what you were going to talk about. Then in three or four follow-up paragraphs (called the body) you made points or gave examples or listed reasons. And finally you concluded (with a paragraph called the conclusion) in which you said again what you imagined you'd already said. It was all very bloodless stuff. If the form was followed; if you had clear topic sentences, good grammar and correct spelling; if the paper, or theme as we called it, was clear, unified, and coherent; then you were certifiably literate. If the English was good, then the writing was good. Questions like why anyone would care to write the sort of stuff I went on about in my papers, or why anyone would want to read it, were never given a hearing, really—and to be absolutely honest, as an undergraduate I'm not certain I'd have wanted the boat rocked anyway.

In graduate school, the only teacher from whom I learned anything about writing—this was at the University of Minnesota—was Samuel Holt Monk, who spoke of “twitches” in my prose, by which he meant my fondness for meaningless doublets and triplets: “we must be cautious, careful, and circumspect”—that sort of thing. “You know,” Monk said, “who will do this same thing sometimes and sounds very empty when he does? Samuel Johnson.” “Well,” I thought. “Dr. Samuel Johnson. That's not bad company.” So when Monk added that from then on he was simply going to write “Johnson” in the margins of my prose whenever he thought it was called for, I accepted his right to do so. Without my being aware of it, that was one of my first lessons in the kind of marginalia that could help a writer—and in how my appearance as a writer could be evaluated and adjusted.

I got my first full-time teaching job at Amherst College, and it was Theodore Baird there who absolutely revolutionized the way I thought about writing. Ted may not have made my mind, but he certainly made it run, and more through his observations than through explanations. He explained very little really, but what he observed had a way of forcing listeners into explanations that in my case exploded into whole galaxies of meaning. He once said that Jane Austin writes “teachers' books”—a wonderful observation, it seems to me. And maybe not so wonderful, but equally important to me were his calling Kafka “boring” and saying that Scott Fitzgerald writes “for suckers.” And I'll never forget the way he dismissed an article once by saying that it was simply

journalism: "He writes one sentence that writes his next ten for him." My whole notion of Themewriting spun off that.

Bill Pritchard characterizes Ted as saying to people's faces what most of us would say only behind their backs, which he did—and to tremendous effects sometimes. Roger Sale was burbling on about something one day, and Ted began to look out the window. When Roger stopped, Ted turned to him and asked very pleasantly, "Why do you go on in that boring way?" Roger never forgot that, and in *On Writing* says that even though the remark wasn't about his writing, it was the only remark that taught him something real about writing. All of us who worked with Ted wanted his intellectual approval—the more because we knew he would never give it unless he believed it were warranted. He was very discouraging with anyone who tried to turn him into a God or a Daddy—which was very good for all of us. Just his presence forced us to take responsibility for what we said and wrote, for who we were. I was told a story recently about a young girl's hearing Bob Dylan for the first time. "Mommy, is that God singing?" she asked. "Why would you think that?" the mother wanted to know. "Because his voice is funny, but it doesn't make me laugh." Ted was that way.

WOE: What was it like going from teaching with Baird at Amherst to other schools, to a technological institute and then to a state-related university?

COLES: Well, it certainly was a learning experience. What I tried to do at first was become Ted, using his mannerisms and locutions, figuring no one outside Amherst would catch me in my mimicry, which no one ever did, but I never won over any of my colleagues at Case Institute of Technology either.

But at Case I did develop a composition course for students highly professionalized in science. Based on my experiences as an undergraduate engineering student at Lehigh, I figured there could be tremendous possibilities if I offered writing as a form of language using, an idea as germane to the study of the sciences as it is to the study of the arts. For me to invite those science students at Case, for whom English courses didn't have much more priority than they'd had for me when was in engineering, to understand that language is the primary, if not the only way we have—as scientists or as anything else—of running order through chaos, thereby giving ourselves from moment to moment whatever identities we have, was to have a chance of persuading them that writing really could have something to do with them. I spun some wonderful things out of that idea. I think Ted was pleased, by and large pleased—nothing pleased him completely—with what I did. He

was always generous about the books I wrote, even though the first couple were very dependent on him. But with *Composing II* and *What Makes Writing Good*, I began to find my own ways of connecting assignments with one another, of building something into, say, assignment three or four that comes floating back as a concern in assignments seven, thirteen, and twenty. And I found my own ways of being playful in the midst of serious inquiry—which is more important than I think is generally understood. How oppressively serious-solemn-preentious so much academic work is. But there's no question that the way in which a good sequence of assignments mimes a mind in the act of finding a direction for itself, searching for equilibrium in its acknowledgement of all contradictions, there's no question that I got that from Ted.

WOE: You mentioned the way you put the notion of writing as a form of language using at the center of the course. But it seems to me that there's another kind of theme or motif or essential guiding principle that runs through the courses you create in your books, and that's "know thyself."

COLES: Oh, yes, and that, by the way, is more my way of going at things than it was Ted's. Like Wittgenstein (whom he claimed never to have read, a claim I've always doubted—what the hell; he read everything else), Ted was tremendously interested in exposing balderdashy ways of talking about and locating the self and in exposing jargons of all sorts. But I don't think he was explicitly interested in writing as a way of growing or realizing one's own potential. Writing as a way of knowing, as a way of coming to know, yes, this interested him a great deal, as did assignments that revealed how much of life is mysterious and inexpressible. But self-realization was not what I'd call a characteristic concern of his assignments. Maybe it would be fairer to say that that was the sort of line he did not want either to crowd or to cross.

WOE: How did you pick upon the notion of getting kids to explore their selves?

COLES: It was through my study of twelve-step programs that I came to understand that addicted people break dependence on alcohol or drugs or whatever by renaming the world and by becoming somebody else through that renaming. It was that that helped me understand why so many Amherst students at the end of Ted's course—I was one; every term I was one—would be able to demonstrate, not just say how, but demonstrate, that they understood things about the world and themselves that made everything new. They were no longer dependent

upon, that is addicted to, their old formulaic ways of seeing the world. They had in fact become different people. The putting together of what I'd learned from English 1-2 at Amherst with the healing principles of the twelve-step programs led me to experiment with constructing assignments that would enable students to develop as people, as their own people. My belief that literature could do that—it had done it with me—was why I'd majored in English to begin with.

WOE: One of the things you often do in your courses is to have the last assignment look back at the first in order to sum up the course. Is this your own idea rather than Baird's?

COLES: Oh no. Ted did it too, but in a different way. He always asked students in the course's next-to-last assignment to look back over the term and make their own sense of the order of the assignments: How would they explain why eleven followed ten and came before twelve? In addition, though, he would always construct assignments for a final paper and a final exam that would have none of the course's language in them, but would always turn out, after you got inside them, to involve problems that had been central to the course all term. I remember the final exam for a course in which the subject had been logic, I think, asking students to explain to a Man From Mars where people were able to see reality as it Really Was, what really happened in a disputed play of a football game. People kicked that problem around the campus for over a year—to Ted's great delight, of course.

WOE: In several of your sequences you ask the students to explain the trick of Themewriting. Clearly, this is intended to be a fun interlude in the course, but it also seems to be a moment when teacher and student can recognize each other.

COLES: Can celebrate together, yes, by demonstrating that though writing can indeed be reduced to just a trick performed mechanically, routinely, meaninglessly, it is possible to describe this trick in such a way as to show how it can also be something else. It's kind of like Pope's being other than dull in talking about dullness in the *Dunciad*.

Of course, this is harder to do that most students initially realize. In *Composing*, I have an assignment that asks the students to represent how Themewriting is done with drawings and color. What usually happens with the assignment, however, is that the students, without realizing it, draw Themes about Themewriting—by rendering it as a huge bog, for example, or by drawing three squares labeled "Introduction," "Body," and "Conclusion"—which don't represent how Themewriting is done at all. Still it's a wonderful assignment with which to show students how deeply Themewriting—oversimplifying,

skating over the surface of things, being imprecise—is engrained in all of us as a way of doing the world. I'm not being extravagant when I say I believe that Themewriting is an addiction.

WOE: Is it accurate to say about a writing course that a certain amount of initial failure is not only inevitable but also desirable?

COLES: I think it is, yes, in several ways, and for that reason ought to be considered as something other than failure. It ought to be named and planned for, built into a course and then capitalized on.

Let me be clear though that by renaming failure I don't mean I think we ought to lie to students: to tell them something is a "nice try" when it isn't, or "possessed of certain strengths" when it doesn't have any. We do a great disservice to our subject, our students, and ourselves when we lie about what ought to be taken seriously in a writing course and what shouldn't, because we lie about a good deal more than writing. We lie about what creativity requires. We lie about how sloppiness and stupidity are recognized and judged by thinking people. We lie about what's smart or insightful and what's just run of the mill. We lie about the learning process, how far it is reasonable to imagine that a beginner in anything—let alone with a subject as complicated as writing—is going to be able to get in ten or fourteen weeks. We lie about what it means to grow up. And to say, "I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings" is a cop-out. There are all kinds of ways of telling students that a given piece of writing isn't good enough without mortally wounding anyone.

WOE: One of things writing teachers love about reading *The Plural I* is the directness with which you confronted students when they turned in lousy papers. Are we free today still to have that kind of directness you had in 1965?

COLES: "That kind of directness"? Well, probably not. I was working with a very particular group of students, remember, all of them male, at a very particular school, an institute of technology, at a very particular time in history. Also, I'm not sure I *was* quite as direct in the flesh as my narrator is. You have to remember that that guy isn't me. The narrator of *The Plural I* is a fictional creation. I don't mean that I think he has no connection with how I go about things, but I do know I'm not as good as he is in a classroom. My timing and tone aren't as infallible, day by day. I don't always know the right question for a given student, the way he seems able to. Sometimes I just lose patience with their smugness, or stupidity, or boredom. Has anybody got any business working with the young who doesn't realize how really awful they can be?

I still try to be direct with students, you understand. I'll intimidate if I think there's something to be gained that way. I tease a lot. But I have a better sense than I once did of how I can fool around with people and make it count for something. I don't make fun of students, though. I don't think I ever did that.

WOE: Is this why some of the time you yourself write the "bad" student sentences or paragraphs to use as examples in class?

COLES: Exactly—and I make more and more use of the technique the longer I teach. "This is a piece of writing," I say, "done by a member of this course [which I consider myself to be] who was a student in a different term [which I certainly was]. And I use this paper with his permission [which I'm happy to give]." It's an ideal way, without hurting anyone's feelings, to show students what certain kinds of bombast look and sound like in order to help them avoid it. It's also a wonderful way of giving students techniques for determining the hollowness or phoniness or tedium of certain kinds of writing. "In that first paragraph there, with which other sentence of the six comprising it might you begin? With any one of them! Really! What kind of writing would you say that paragraph is made up of then?" Too often I've heard beginning teachers tell students something like "this line is forced or "this is just B.S." The real problem always is how you help the students to recognize when a line is forced or when something is just B.S.

I did once have someone in composition research say angrily to me: "But you're passing off *your* efforts as students' efforts." "Yep," I said. "In certain cases that's exactly what I do. I don't know why it should be so hard for some people to understand that our subject is *writing* rather than students in composition courses.

WOE: I love the way in your courses, as dramatized in your books, that students' texts become the center of the course—and how those texts become a kind of single text that all members of a class can make reference to. When that happens it seems to be one of these moments where people start to take themselves and each other seriously as writers.

COLES: Yes. It's an electric moment in a class when a student makes reference to something that has happened in the course—anything that's happened in the course—outside the hour we're meeting. I say it's electric. I make sure that I celebrate the moment so as to try to make it electric. I also seed such happenings by myself making the kinds of connections I want students to make: "Well, let's feed the problem to Jim here, who said last Friday that he found the final paragraph of the second paper addressing Assignment Eight 'offensive.' Is this final

paragraph in this paper 'offensive,' would you say, Jim?" Communities have to be built, in other words. They don't just appear—and of course sometimes the students' engagement with me and with each other is better than others. I had very good students the term I did the assignments in *The Plural I*. I was very lucky.

WOE: You talk sometimes of a sequence of your assignments having an effect like the effect of nonsense. What exactly do you mean?

COLES: I'm using "nonsense" there not in the generic sense of the term, as a synonym for gobbledygook or gibberish, but in the sense that describes what Lewis Carroll, say, is doing in *Alice in Wonderland*. Plainly, or it becomes plain after a time, the narrative presence in *Alice* is constantly inviting readers to put together what will not go together the way we expect it is going to and should. Once this is understood, the reader takes a place alongside the narrative presence of Carroll, someone in on the joke that things in *Alice* are constructed precisely to frustrate ordinary (and pedestrian) ways of understanding them. I'd say my sequences of writing assignments create a relationship between assignment maker and students like Carroll's relation to readers of *Alice in Wonderland*. Which is to say that the students who most benefit from working with me—like the ideal audience for a writer of nonsense—are those whose heightened consciousness of language has moved them to a special kind of community: "I can now show you how I know that I am not being led to some cheap predetermined conclusion—such as thinking that to see all ideals, aspirations, and hopes as socially constructed is to be made free. Rather, I am being invited to use my skills as a language user to create a place for myself beyond such formulae and here goes."

WOE: When you designed a course in which you had each of, say, twenty-two students write thirty papers, how did you mark their work responsibly and have time for anything else—particularly if you had two sections of such a course?

COLES: I used to read between three and four thousand papers a year when I was teaching at Amherst—we all did, and I think did responsibly—mainly because there wasn't anybody around to tell us that it couldn't be done. We never put grades on the papers (I still don't) so we were freed from having to write a lot of self-vindicating stuff: "Here is why this paper didn't get an A." Also, our texts for composition courses at Amherst (and everywhere else I've taught writing ever since) were always student papers (reproduced anonymously, of course). That pushed us all to develop a highly metaphoric way of commenting on

student work that was finally, I think, a lot more effective than mumbling on about organization and focus and the like. Once, for example, I spent a good half hour in class trying to get hold of an opening paragraph on some thumping platitude or other—on how good it was for all people to have choices or some such. “This is just bulletproof,” one student cried finally in exasperation. And from that moment on, that metaphor was the only written comment needed for that kind of writing from that group. The metaphors have been different in different terms, of course. “Skywriting” was one we got some mileage out of one term, I remember, and “cocoamarsh.” I got more and more into the habit of using terminology from our classroom conversations in my comments. “You called this kind of writing ‘mayonnaise’ in class not two periods ago.” For an attentive student that’s all one needs.

Of course you have to adapt your style and manner to where you are, but for me that’s meant mostly quantitative change. A set of English 1 assignments for Ted always consisted of thirty papers, thirty-two if you count the assignment for a long paper and the final exam. A new assignment for every class period. A paper due every period. A fresh set of assignments every year. Never repeat. I tried doing things that way when I was working by myself at Case and at Drexel with small groups of colleagues, but if you’re working with other teachers, each of whom is teaching two or sometimes three courses in composition of twenty-two students per course, and you ask them to assign, read, and mark thirty-two papers from each student—you ask for more trouble than the enterprise is worth. By the time I got to Pitt I was still designing assignments in sets of thirty, but only twelve to fourteen were writing assignments; the rest were class exercises.

WOE: You’ve written that your course doesn’t study “examples of what is called academic discourse, whatever that phrase may mean.” Are you making fun of the phrase “academic discourse”?

COLES: Oh, yes. I guess I was. I get irritated with the phoniness in our profession sometimes, with the use of a term like “academic discourse” to suggest that a group of essays some English teacher has decided students in a composition course ought to read represent the way historians or social scientists or philosophers talk to one another, or are examples of how students taking courses in those departments will be expected to talk. I’ve done enough work in writing across the curriculum to know that that’s more than a little arrogant.

Secondly, what are essays of “academic discourse” like those of Walker Percy, say, or John Berger, or Clifford Geertz doing in a composition course? I mean what are they really doing there, not how

do their popularizers defend their use of them (“Here’s Geertz looking at a cockfight: now you look at something in your life as though you were Geertz, etc. etc.”), From what I’ve seen at the University of Pittsburgh, where TAs and part-timers teach most of the composition courses, all too often such essays become excuses for turning the focus away from the students’ writing. The essays are so hard for students to figure out, but raise issues so trendily interesting to teachers, that the majority of class time goes to articulating the issues rather than looking at writing. Exactly the same thing happened with me when I was supposedly teaching composition in a writing and literature course as a graduate student, by the way. All I knew as a TA about teaching writing was what I’d experienced, so I had little to draw on. In consequence, I did what our TAs do. I taught where my head was—which happened to be literature in those days, in that that was what graduate study in a Department of English focused on. So I taught the *Henriad* and the *Orestia*, and I gave my students the word according to E.M.W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis and E. E. Stoll, and Green and Lattimore, and for the writing part of the course, I assigned sections of the *Harbrace Handbook*—without ever checking on whether the students had actually read or learned anything from them. The “academic discourse” mantra, so far as I’m concerned, most of the time anyway, is just another way of keeping the racket of composition as a requirement alive at the same time it sells students in composition courses down the river.

WOE: You don’t sound much more optimistic than you did way back in “The Circle of Unbelief” when you talked about composition texts as barriers. Are there any composition textbooks today you would say aren’t barriers to a student’s learning about writing?

COLES: Well, as Lincoln Steffens said, “It is possible to get an education at a university. It has been done.” I guess there must be some good textbooks out there somewhere, but I’m not read up enough on what gets galloped into print by the major publishers these days to be able to name one. To tell you the truth though, I think a good teacher can make something out of even a very bad textbook, by quarreling with its assumptions, taking issue with its pronouncements, talking about why the study questions and sample sequences really aren’t much good. Any teacher of writing who feels victimized by a bad textbook probably deserves to be. What the hell: I once had to work under a Director of Composition who referred to writing assignments as “prompts.”

WOE: I was interested to see you defending writing across the curriculum, because this is not the thing that someone who has been labeled an “expressivist” is supposed to do.

COLES: Which is the trouble with labeling, isn't it? The problem with dividing people in the profession on the basis of some kind of taxonomic tag is that you invite a sketchy or superficial reading of what it is they really do and stand for. It's what Procrustes did with his famous bed. All you need do to make someone seem to fit a category is to lop off what you don't want to acknowledge or stretch out something to make it mean what it never meant in context. An expressivist is it I am these days? I was once an epistemist—and for a while a neo-Platonist. I can't decide whether I'm going down or coming up in the world,

Why wouldn't I be interested in writing across the curriculum? In the early eighties, when the big push for it was being felt throughout the country, you may remember the Four Cs and the NCTE declaring, "The Teaching of Writing is not just an English department responsibility!" and people marching up and down with their banners saying writing had to play a substantive part in every course on campus. A number of administrations, bowing to pressure as always, simply required that their faculty comply. The panic, of course, was indescribable, and was a golden opportunity for me—in every sense of that phrase.

All those years I'd spent developing sequences of assignments of different kinds, finding new ways of working with student writing, training TAs, all these things suddenly were things that other teachers wanted to learn—teachers who for the most part were not English teachers and had little experience using writing with their students. I went to a lot of colleges and universities around the country to run workshops, and it was wonderful work to be involved with. Those attending were very receptive to suggestions and quick to pick up on the implications of my main writing across the curriculum idea: that the writing the students produce may be the least important benefit of having them do it.

I had a wonderful example of how this is true at a workshop I ran—it was one of my first—at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. I met with about thirty-five members of the faculty at 8:00 in the morning in January, which seemed the middle of arctic night to me, I can tell you. In response to my question about how their efforts were going, one guy, leaning up against the wall at the back of the room, said, "I can tell you about the time I worked out that this whole writing across the curriculum thing was a scam." Of course I had to let him tell his story. He was a sociologist who for his quizzes and exams and the like had half his class use writing while the other half he gave scantron forms. When he examined his class on their understanding of some sociological principle or other, he found that the papers graded by machine showed everybody doing fine. Then he looked at the writing the other half of the class had

submitted on the same principle. It was execrable, filled with mistakes and irrelevancies, and it was then, he said, that he made up his mind about the scam of writing across the curriculum. But when his class had a conversation about the principle, he saw that the students who had written about it, even though they hadn't written well, were much better able to engage in a conversation than those who had done only the scantron test. They could better explain how the principle was important in relation to other principles, see how it was more useful in certain situations than in others, and so on. That's certainly far from the whole argument about how and why writing can be an important aid to learning, but I told that story at every workshop I ran after that.

In working with various faculties around the country, I did pretty much what I'd done for years with graduate students learning to become writing teachers. I worked a lot with pairings, putting assignments that had worked well for the teachers who used them against assignments that had been a bust. After a while I got quite a collection of such good and bad examples. I also used examples of effective and ineffective explanations of how writing was going to be used and evaluated in political science courses, philosophy courses, even math classes. I did a lot of work on different ways of using writing, on how and why to use ten-minute writing assignments, for example. And of course I distributed many samples of student writing and explained various ways of handling it in class. After a while, I trusted myself enough to reserve time for teachers to refine, or sometimes redraft entirely, some of their own material on the basis of small group discussions so that everyone could leave the workshop with ideas for improving something having to do with writing in at least one of their courses.

The notion of writing I push—maybe this is why I'm supposed to be an expressivist—is that all writing can be seen as the expression of a sensibility. Actually, a sensibility is being created in and with a piece of writing. That holds, I think, as much for writing in mathematics as it does for writing in literary studies. The question is always one of whether or not readers think a particular sensibility is knowing, or trustworthy, or interesting, or has authority—whatever terms a teacher is comfortable with.

WOE: When did you start using writing groups?

COLES: Not until I started doing the writing across the curriculum workshops, really—which was when I discovered that the best way to make them effective was to give participants a problem to work together on that each member of the group then reported on individu-

ally. The discreet application of pressure is necessary for anything of much moment to go on in small group work, I found. Apply pressure. Create tension. They're wonderful aids to promote the kind of effort that can result in learning. I tried to dramatize this with the fictional dialogues and sketches I wrote in *Seeing Through Writing*. I wanted them to be metaphors for the both best and worst I can imagine going on in small group work.

WOE: That's what I love about that book. All of the optimism it generates for a teacher, that students can and do actually learn from each other.

COLES: That's something I hoped the book would be seen as doing, but despite its positive reviews, it never sold and went out of print after just one printing. Maybe I made it too difficult a book for teachers to use. Certainly the notion that informed it—that story can be a mode for teaching and learning about writing—I continue to believe has profound possibilities.

WOE: The hottest topic at the four C's these days is creative nonfiction, and *The Plural I* is probably the earliest example of creative nonfiction in composition studies.

COLES: Maybe, but as the failure of *Seeing Through Writing* to catch on suggests, just because you're the first to do something doesn't necessarily make you an influence. What will we do with the first fellow to swallow four alligators?

WOE: In the last few years you have moved to writing novels about young people.

COLES: About and for. I write novels for young adults, and I count myself very lucky to be in the field. Like my work in writing across the curriculum, the novels I've done—three have been published so far, *Funnybone*, *Another Kind of Monday*, and *Compass in the Blood*, all by Atheneum/Simon and Schuster—draw heavily on things I've spent a lot of time learning about: like how to survive childhood and adolescence for starters. Whoever said that youth was wasted on the young I think was dead wrong. Young people need to draw on every bit of energy they have to find their ways in a world like the one we're living in. Can you imagine what it would be like to be eighteen again faced with the question of how to be a good man these days?

So generally, I guess you could say that my novels are about growing up—something I'm still at work on, just as I'm still at work on the question of how to become a good man these days.

WOE: Becoming an individual. Becoming one's self. Jung's term for this is individuation, and I can see the process at work in your novels.

COLES: I hope so. Because to find a way of living decently in one's own skin is surely the most heroic enterprise anyone can engage in. Vicky Hearne, who in her book on training animals, *Adam's Task*, writes better about teaching and learning than anyone I know, claims that human beings are born to the demands of the heroic, that we need to see ourselves as heroes in whatever work we do to avoid the death of the soul. I believe that. I've always written out of that assumption in both textbooks and novels I've done.

WOE: I think I can see in your work what you mean. In your essay "Looking Back on *The Plural I*," you mention that you see yourself as the hero/writer of the book but acknowledge that the students become heroic too—a feeling that seems to carry over to your young adult novels. The kids in your novels are not perfect kids, but there's something heroic about them too.

COLES: Yes. *The Plural I* became a book other teachers could learn from (rather than simply an exercise in self-celebration) when I began to imagine the classroom as a place that demanded not a hero, but heroes; not a place that pitted anyone against anyone else, no matter how much it might feel that way at times, but a place in which all of us were communally aligned against the same things: lazy imprecision, fear-inspired vagueness, self-reducing reliance on cheap clichés. And all of my novels involve choices and triumphs related to these things as well.

WOE: Are the novels more fun to write than your books on composition were?

COLES: I think both for me involve the same kind of imagining. It can be just as rewarding to work out why assignment twelve in a given sequence ought to be twelve and not eight, and not eighteen, as it is to plot a novel, or decide to give a particular character particular characteristics. And with both sequences and novels, I spend a lot of time wondering if I'm being solemn or preachy or pretentious, and thinking about how I can complicate easy assumptions people might be settling for about where things are going at this point in this story or in this course. I'm also delighted in exactly the same way when someone enjoys a move in a sequence or a detail in one of my novels. I did a workshop for a group of eighth graders a couple of weeks ago, all of whom had read my Pittsburgh-based novel, *Another Kind of Monday*. Eighth grade seemed to me maybe a bit young for the concerns I raise in the book, but at the end of the session, a young man sauntered up to

me, hands in his pockets, smiling slyly. He had braces on his teeth and was maybe four and a half feet tall. Did I remember, he asked me, the scene in the novel where the heroine, after jogging around the reservoir, takes off her sweatband and squeezes the moisture from it onto the pavement—to the barely contained excitement of my hero? I did. Well, the boy said, he just wanted me to know that he thought sweaty women were sexy too. There we were, just a couple of fellas talking it over. That was a wonderful moment for me.

WOE: There's a very real way in which Pittsburgh, the city, becomes a place of wonder for the characters in your young adults novels. Is this deliberate?

COLES: It's quite deliberate. One of the things that's so wonderful about the city for me is its incredible variousness, how you don't have to travel for more than five minutes in any direction to find yourself in a different community, each with a different relation to the past and living life in a different rhythm. It's as though gigantic forces are at work in and under the city, forces of decay as well as of generation, of creation and destruction both, sometimes harmonizing with one another, other times tearing one another to pieces. In its history, its social structures, its architecture, even its geography, Pittsburgh contains all the greatness of America, its feisty adaptability, its smashing strength, its unkillable energy. It contains all the shame of America as well, its brutal grinding down of options and potential, its intolerance of difference, its waste and destructiveness. Of course any place looked at hard has similar contradictions implicit in it—and similar possibilities that may be made of them. That's what I want my novels to offer young people finally: a sense of possibility. I'm less interested in seeing Pittsburgh as a place of wonder, than in having my readers see what's possible when wonder becomes a way of looking at the world. In this sense I'd like to be thought of as writing patriotic books.

WOE: Are there people teaching writing in the profession now who use sequences of writing assignments?

COLES: Oh, sure. I taught a number of graduate students who continue to use them. I did five NEH summer seminars for college teachers in which each of the twelve participants developed an ur-sequence; some of these I know for a fact were refined and are still being used. Carl Klaus at the University of Iowa ran several year-long NEH seminars in the teaching of writing—this was for about fifty participants or so altogether—and each participant developed a full sequence which the universities they came from then supported as regular college courses.

These sets of assignments were later published as a book by Boynton/Cook called *Courses for Change in Writing*. I'd be surprised if a number of those courses, with modifications of course, weren't still being offered.

I need to add, though, that some courses offered as sequenced writing courses can be the very opposite of courses promoting free and open inquiry. Instead of miming the activity of a mind seriously engaged in serious inquiry—and encouraging students to develop their own views and voices—these courses seek to indoctrinate by marching students syllogistically to some predetermined, usually politically correct, conclusion. Students in such courses learn the latest phrasing of why things like civil rights are Very Important. They learn how to write elaborateslogans. But I don't think they learn very much about writing.

WOE: What do you see as the signs a good composition course?

COLES: Everything begins with what the teacher's energy, courage, and literary imagination can make possible for a community of writers—which is to say that I think a composition course is valuable in direct proportion to the kind of centrality that *writing*, more particularly the writing of the students, has to its assignments, procedures, and conversation. Generally, teachers of such courses have found a way of getting rid of most of the apparatus that composition teachers have become so accustomed to peering at the students' writing from behind, or through, or under—the style manual, the anthology, the standard plays and novels, the various collections of short stories and essays—in order to focus on all those choices in writing that can so easily be dismissed as picky or irrelevant. What the members of such classes find good enough—as well as something to become good enough for—are the writing assignments and class exercises, the students' papers, and each other.



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