Healing Conceptual Blindness

This essay considers an essential act of seeing that is central to the composing process—a conceptual moment when the mind acquires a notional sense of what the accumulated evidence means. Yet this necessary conceptual thing cannot actually be seen in any ordinary sense of the word. Imaginal rather than pictorial, the conception is crucial to the effective teaching of writing. Without it there is no hint of idea, no basis for a coherent argument. Without it, student writers remain blinded by the evidence.

Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion.

—Aristotle, On Rhetoric

Conception: “Something originated in the mind: a design, plan; an original idea (as of a work of art, etc.); a mental product of the inventive faculty.”

—Oxford English Dictionary

Seeing is our subject. Teaching composition our professional business. Our focus in this essay will be on the inextricable relationship between seeing and writing, how the two work symbiotically—what they do for one another . . . and the writer.

Student writers, under our direction, come to see, finally, that they cannot see—literally cannot see—the thing most crucial to their writing. And yet unless they find what they are looking for in the evidence, they will have nothing to say. They will have no ideas, no conception of what their evidence means.
Reading and Induction

Let me suggest why this matter of ideas is so important. I direct a writing program in a private university that draws highly qualified students from across the nation (and around the world). The program serves four colleges within the university, so we are large—sixty-five lecturers, five directors, and 2,500–3,000 students a term. Three years ago, in the middle of the first semester, I noticed that my own students could not actually read the essays they had chosen to work with during a progression—a series of reading, writing, thinking, and imagining exercises that lead to an essay. The work in this particular progression asked students to select a single text (a complex familiar essay) as a primary source and to put that text in conversation with two or three other like-minded but different texts. That conversation, staged in the student’s mind and on the page, would yield an idea worthy of a serious essay, one in which the student writer would eventually use the generating group of texts as evidence.

I had always prided myself on having developed a pedagogy that would not require me to teach students how to read; the reading was bound in the pedagogy, in the day-to-day exercises of the progression. When that pedagogy worked—and it had worked well for years—I am left free to teach writing, not reading. But three years ago in 2006, the pedagogy began to fail me and the students in our program.

At the beginning of the next term, I took on the reading problem with the entire faculty. We discovered that the problem was pervasive. What surprised me during our discussions at the end of term was the precision with which the faculty described their students’ abilities. There was virtually no difference in judgment among the various focus groups within the program—directors, mentors, experienced teachers, new teachers.

This was our consensus about most first-year students in our classes:

- They skim texts or drown in them without interpreting; they recount parts of what they have read.
- They cling to the simplest thing in a text—a word, a theme—ignoring all else.
- They are both hesitant and obedient, always waiting for the instructor to tell them what to do. They like to make lists and categories. They do not like to make something new of what they have listed and classified.
- They pay attention primarily to correspondences and connections in the texts that are personal. They show little interest in the larger body of ideas.
- They seek models of writing that show them exactly what to do.
- They are impatient—they are not invested enough in their reading, thinking, writing work to stay with the task.
• They are initially resistant to anything new in a text, but that resistance is followed by a quick resolution of meaning that amounts to a form of escape.
• They rarely take skills from one progression to the next, from one group of texts to the next, from one course to the next. Every project amounts to a new beginning.
• They do not know what it looks like on the page or sounds like in the mind to think, interpret, and conceive.
• Addicted to topic sentences, they declare, offer a snippet or two of text in support, and repeat the declaration as they attempt to put together meaningful paragraphs. They resist having a thinking, reciprocal relationship with their evidence.
• They rarely see how the ends of paragraphs and the beginnings of paragraphs are related. They have digital rather than analog minds. Everything seems to them discreet rather than continuous. Wholeness is not their fascination.

When I asked my own students and others what they considered the most difficult thing they had to learn in the college writing classroom, their answer repeatedly came down to “a different kind of thinking.” Denise Scarfi, one of my advanced-course students put it this way:

I have struggled with inductive reasoning, with a form that starts with evidence and progresses to idea, rather than the other way around. High school did not prepare me for this kind of writing. I felt actual fright when I was first asked to make something of the three personal scenes I’d created [for my first essay]—I didn’t have in mind a connection or conclusion while I was writing them, and so I thought there could be none. But there was a connection, and I soon realized it was much more interesting and nuanced than anything I could have come up with before I wrote those scenes.

Instead of learning to reason from evidence—the scenes in this case—students had learned before coming to college to take shortcuts, to intuit a thesis, to intuit propositions to support it, and to find examples to illustrate the truth of the thesis, moving habitually from thesis to evidence.

Undoubtedly, much of that intuitive work was based on some kind of evidence gleaned from reading or from experience, but the learned emphasis had been not on the rigorous analysis of evidence but on a fact-based, highly structured response: thesis, proposition, examples. Our own program’s learning paradigm
reversed the emphasis, setting in motion a progression from *evidence* to *idea* to *essay*. Evidence—in this progression the written texts they were reading—took on a new meaning for students, and they generally were unprepared for this analytical work. They had to learn that inductive reasoning does not lead to certainty, to a thesis that can be “proved”; it leads instead to discovery, to the rigorous combination and application of analysis and imagination, to ideas that must, like the evidence itself, be continually reassessed and reconceptualized to represent more accurately whatever truth the evidence suggests to them.

At the heart of this inductive process of discovery lies the complex business of reading complex texts, texts that do not reveal themselves to cursory examination. The form of such texts rarely follows the declarative paradigm of the five-paragraph arguments students are accustomed to constructing. Reading these more complex texts is similar to reading any body of evidence (essays, books, newspapers, movies, visual art, music). Central to such reading is the presumption that not all one needs to know to understand the material can either be found or expressed in a thesis statement or in topic sentences or even in the words themselves. There is something going on around the words and within the images; there is something to be discovered that cannot be grasped or expressed in a single declarative sentence by any critic, whether student or professional. To grapple with such discovery is to begin to understand the real meaning of thought. Such grappling leads eventually to clarification and the use of nuanced language, to a more complex form of expression than a formulaic set of declarations and a series of examples.

This inductive process is, of course, the same process that leads to discovery in science or in any other academic discipline. It provides the foundation for making sense of research, no matter what the subject matter. It lies at the heart of all reasoning and all reading. Even tightly reasoned deductive syllogisms depend on premises formulated through a process of induction. The reliability of those induced premises determines finally whether the syllogism itself is reliable—so convincing that one is willing to act on its conclusion. Its validity may depend on tightly structured reasoning, but the syllogism’s reliability depends, finally, on both its structured validity and the reliability of its premises. So this inductive process of reading—reading a given text, or reading a given body of evidence—is central to all academic work. It leads to ideas. Without it we are left partially blind, unable to see clearly.

**A Matter of Seeing**

My ophthalmologist has prescribed Xalatan for my own eye problems. The drops retard glaucoma and eventual loss of vision. But one drop a night in each
eye—$20 a month via Caremark—is a smaller price to pay than the perimetry test Dr. Chen administers to check for vision loss and macular degeneration. She seats me before an animated screen—my chin and forehead rigidly confined to one perspective, eyes focused on a center spot—and insists that I search for elusive, randomly appearing flashing dots on the periphery. As I spot one of these disappearing pinpricks of light, I feed my response to a program that plots what I have seen . . . and discloses too what I have not seen. At the end of this exhausting mental game, Dr. Chen shows me a printout of my “blind spots,” one for each eye. Her interest is nerve degeneration and new signs of vision loss. Mine is the metaphorical importance of blind spots and what is happening on the periphery. All of us have blind spots, but as natural as they are, each of us needs to understand how the brain compensates for them—and how, despite them, we can learn to see more comprehensively.

If you Google “blind spot,” follow one of the links, and perform the exercise, you can see, actually see, how your mind habitually and naturally compensates for what the eye cannot see. That compensation is both a blessing and a curse. That act of compensation is a vexing one for writing teachers—for any of us interested in helping students learn to acquire a more comprehensive perspective on a given subject. In Discourse VII of The Idea of a University, Cardinal Newman speaks of seeing “round an object” (114). He reminds us that “we know, not by a direct and simple vision, not at a glance, but, as it were, by piecemeal and accumulation, by going round an object.” As we seek to understand that object (book, essay, poem, painting, movie, personality), we may well consider many “partial notions” about it as we compare thoughts, combine them, and revise successive notions. Eventually, we come to know in a more comprehensive way. But knowing—coming to know—is complicated business. Newman warns us that as we seek to educate and develop our minds, “mere application” will not suffice, nor will attendance at all the classes, lectures, and laboratory sessions, nor will the reading of many books. “All this,” he tells us, “is short of enough.” We “may have done it all, yet be lingering in the vestibule of knowledge” (115).

Newman wants us to know that suspended in that space of not knowing, metaphorically blind, the consequences are grave. We may not, as he tells us,

see with [our] mental eye what confronts [us] . . . may have no grasp of things as they are; or at least . . . may have no power at all of advancing one step forward of [ourselves] . . . of arranging things according to their real value, and, if I may use the phrase, of building up ideas. (115)

Newman is speaking of nothing less than the fruits of a liberal education, an education that prepares the mind to see more clearly as it seeks truth, seeks to know.
That power to see, to build up ideas, to arrange things according to their value, he
tells us,

is the result of a scientific formation of mind; it is an acquired faculty
of judgment, of clear sightedness, of sagacity, of wisdom, of philo-
sophical reach of mind, and of intellectual self possession and
repose,—qualities which do not come of mere acquirement. The
bodily eye, the organ for apprehending material objects, is provided
by nature; the eye of the mind, of which the object is truth, is the
work of discipline and habit. (115)

That eye of the mind concerns us now as we attempt to understand its centrality in
the composing process. We will consider along the way what the eye does, what
helps it develop, what part it plays day-to-day in our writing classes. Our inquiry
must necessarily go round about.

Theoretical Notions, Pragmatic Solutions

At the outset in first-year writing classes, students seem not to realize that a
provable thesis is an unfit subject for essays. And they do not, as a general rule-of-
mind, question. They tend toward proclamation and certainty because they know,
perhaps, too little about creativity and a free play of mind, too little about the
pleasures of uncertainty. And if, when they come to our college classrooms, these
students hear only our own demands for thesis and clarity, they may continue as
undergraduates to pursue certainty and the limited clarity that goes along with it.
Attempting to break their ingrained habits of mind, our insistence on both the
wholeness and flexibility of their arguments can take second place to clarity, pre-
cision, and the production of drafts that are neither messy nor riddled with promising
errors of thought—errors that temporarily lead to complementary errors of gram-
mar and syntax. It takes time and revision to get wholeness and flexibility along
with clarity of expression. That kind of student performance depends first and
foremost on the mind’s eye, on how well it has been developed, how much prac-
tice it has had interpreting and conceiving. It depends too on our own clear sense
as teachers of how to go about developing those minds to do the kind of work we
expect.

Reading, as I have suggested, lies at the heart of their developmental pro-
cess, and central to that process is the work of the mind’s eye—that instrument of
the psyche that is different from but related to the bodily eye. When the mind’s
eye sees, it does not necessarily see a pictorial thing. Carl Jung, the psychologist,
suggests that we know everything we know by way of images, and that images
are closely akin, if not the same as, ideas: “Every psychic process is an image and
an ‘imagining’, otherwise no consciousness could exist” (The Collected Works
11, par. 889). Ideas are conceptions, expressions of meaning. They tend to be
complex, subject more to analysis and amplification than to proof, and always, as
one of my best students reminded me, subject to further analysis. Say something
rich and interpretive to a listener and she is likely to respond, “Tell me more
about that. What do you mean?” Or she might tell herself a story that aligns her
mind with what she has just heard. A thesis, as we have come to know it, rarely
elicits such a response. But ideas do. There is something both clarifying and
evocative about an idea, something unfinished, so what the mind’s eye is seeing
as it conceives an idea is not likely to present itself to the mind as a clear, picto-
rial image, or even as a finished thought. We are likely to see instead what Newman
calls a “partial notion.”

James Hillman, the archetypal psychologist, argues that an image need not
be perceived only “as a picture [that] can tend to become optical and intellectual
and distanced.” If we think of image as “context, mood, scene,” we can begin to
understand Hillman’s claim that “images hold us; we can be in the grasp of an
image” (159). Or an idea. But even this extended notion of the quality of these
images strikes me as insufficient for our purposes. When the mind is actually at
work, looking at evidence, trying to figure out what the evidence means, the
metaphorical act of seeing rewards us with momentary insight that we then have to
translate into language. What we see in such moments is a conceptual image of
thought, a notion of what the evidence means. Without it, we have nowhere to go
intellectually; we have no sense of meaning, no trace of an idea. The evidence
remains inert. But the image is full of energy, full of life. Meaning is there for the
taking, but the taking requires more work.

It is relatively easy to recall an image of our own experience—our memory
of something powerful that happened to us—just as it is easy to recall how the
images of a particular movie or television show captivated us. But this other kind
of nonpictorial image that I am emphasizing also constitutes part of the mind’s
imaginal language, and it can be just as powerful as those remembered pictorial
images of experience, whether personal or the gift of films, photographs, or
paintings. These nonpictorial images are part and parcel of the conceptual work
of the mind as it figures out meaning—as it begins to make sense of either the
most ordinary things or the most complex. These imaginal conceptions are wedded
to our own creativity; they do not come to us from out there; they come instead
from within our own brain. No teacher can give such an image to a student; the
student must conceive the image through acts of mind.

As Susanne Langer develops her theory of art, she focuses on the difference
between an object in the world outside the mind and the image that the mind
creates in the object's stead. That inner image (which eventually manifests itself as a work of art) Langer refers to as a "semblance" or an "illusion." She tells us that "an image in this sense, something that exists only for perception, abstracted from the physical and causal order, is the artist's creation." She calls such an image "the bearer of an idea" (47). What comes from that image or idea, need not, of course, be representational of something real. What eventually comes from such an image will be a manifestation of a conception; the manifestation may or may not be pictorial or optical. Langer's idea of image complements Hillman's, and I believe that we are on safe ground to consider such images akin to those that appear in the mind when we consider a body of evidence. The mind creates, through active imagination, a semblance of what has been considered. In our initial notes and drafts, we begin to write out the early traces of that conception. Successful drafts clarify and amplify what the mind has conceived.

Sometimes as we consider evidence—written texts, artistic images, experiences, the fruits of research—the conception (or interpretation) comes to us in a flash. We seem to see suddenly. At other times meaning resists us when we are concentrating and working most intently. Sometimes we awake from sleep, hours after we have stopped working, to reach a new understanding. We see finally what we could not see before. The conceptions themselves, those moments of insight, are most often fleeting and ephemeral. Sometimes startling. Almost always worth recording.

Jung considers the creative process "a living thing implanted in the human psyche," an autonomous complex that "leads a life of its own outside the hierarchy of consciousness" (The Collected Works 15, par. 115). A good writer learns both to struggle consciously for understanding and to let go. Surprises come from struggle and surrender, and it is virtually impossible to tell which will yield that moment of insight, that special circumstance when the evidence begins to come clear to us in a way that, perhaps, no one else could imagine. But we can surmise that the mind's eye—properly developed—can learn to yield secrets, a notion, a partial idea, and, eventually, rich clarification.

In his essay "Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty," Ben Belitt, a distinguished poet and critic, argues that the process of creating a poem, like the process of reading one, depends on seeing through the eye rather than with the eye (198). He seems to be speaking here of what Newman calls the bodily eye. The distinction between seeing with and seeing through points to a journey the mind takes to see more comprehensively—to see not according to established standards and practices, but to see anew. Such seeing calls on us to be caught up in the mind's journey of discovery as it attempts to grasp the object under consideration without being unnecessarily limited by cultural assumptions or even education. Call it seeing through the blind spots. Seeing through the eye, Belitt demonstrates,
amounts to a penetration, a looking *through* the bodily eye into the very nature of the thing being considered, freed from preconceived notions but nevertheless burdened with an obligation to involve the idiosyncratic self in such seeing (199).

Belitt, calling on Coleridge, argues that a reader, or a seer (what he calls a "right reader") should not be carried into the act of understanding "merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity" (186). Belitt explains:

> Mechanical impulses of curiosity, presumably, belong to the syllogistic process of argumentative persuasion: that chain reaction of "Socratic" discourse where right answers to hypothetical questions are obligatory and irreversible to men of good will: that is, if thus and so are granted as acceptable premises, *mustn't* thus and so mechanically and rationally follow, as in a table of algorithmic magnitudes? (186)

The answer to Belitt's hypothetical question is *yes* for the mechanically curious and a clear *no* for those interested in seeing and thinking in a different way. Belitt reminds us,

> For Coleridge, as for Keats, the imaginative way is never conclusive-ness, finality, arrival, the questioner's domination of his question, but the constant enhancement of the unforeseeable, the augmentation of cognitive power, the excitement of displacements yet to come. . . . The right reader is always concerned with the potential, rather than the terminal, stance—with "the pleasurable activity of the mind . . . excited by the attractions of the journey itself." (186)

This mind, this right reader who could be poet or essayist or researcher, is searching for things only it can see; it is seeking to penetrate the object with its own sensibility. That act of penetrative seeing is both pleasurable and exciting, presumably because of the journey, of the process and act of seeing—and of the thing seen.

That thing seen is likely to be, Belitt tells us, a third thing, something different from the "union of the reader and the text" (186). It requires a frame of mind akin to but different from that which seeks a conclusive synthesis when one engages in classical modes of dialectical thinking. The central driving question for the "right reader" is how do I prepare myself for the "rhetoric of *contradistinction*? 'How do you know *but* that something wholly *Other*, something unthought of by the generalist and the amenable man in the street, is actually the truth: that all others have been 'led to believe in a lie' and rest on the platitudes" of those who
see only with the eye instead of through it (201). One must "assert for oneself," according to both Blake and Belitt (206).

We are talking here of an inward action, an imaginative act of a self that has been educated and trained not to rely on syllogistic certainties or received opinion, not to rely exclusively on dichotomous thinking, but to understand more deeply what Coleridge meant when he wrote of a synthesis in which the "opposite energies are retained" (qtd. in Belitt 190). Yet there is more. Belitt enlarges Coleridge's notion about that synthesis by borrowing from quantum physics what he calls the Contrariety Principle. Belitt has in mind the "coexistence of interacting polarities, or oppositions, or contradictions, which, as they move from the polar extremities of their spectra to a center of interpenetration, or collision, no longer cancel each other out as incompatibilities, but reinforce one another in what Niels Bohr liked to call a physics of 'complementarity'" (189). Said more simply, when we readers and researchers find the inevitable tension between apparent opposites, we should entertain in our minds the possibilities of interaction, reinforcement, in a word, complementarity. Belitt reminds us that "according to Bohr, quantum mechanics has not touched the quick of its function until it has felt the gravitational pull of its looming contradictions on their way to theoretical resolution in a concept" (189). And it is just such a concept that our students, our right readers, are pursuing as they are caught up in, fascinated by, the "looming contradictions" out of which their minds will create a concept that embraces the contradictions and sheds new light on their interaction. What the writer manages to translate into language will be no less than the vision of what the mind's eye has "seen," what Walter Pater called "truth," the perfect expression of one's inner vision ("Style" 6). What Langer calls "semblance" (48, 68).

Thus far we have concerned ourselves primarily with matters of seeing, acts of mind, processes of thinking. But these acts of mind have been freed somewhat of the traditional restraints of syllogistic reasoning, of dialectical and sometimes dichotomous thinking, of the received opinion. Such restraints, applied too early, put the thinker at risk of not taking risks, of not moving beyond learned boundaries into new territories of thought. Such thinking requires practice and the freedom to wobble toward more compelling ideas. In the preliminary stages of such thinking, precision yields to risk-taking, intellectual play, inquiry, and discovery. All of this mental activity requires, if not an entirely new mindset, at least a more pliable mind. It requires that we teachers reward risk-taking both in the mind and on the page.

If indeed a student manages to penetrate the object, manages to escape even his or her own acquired limitations, that effort, that leap beyond the known, must be recognized as legitimate and promising. I am not talking here of giving up form, or order, or clarity in the expression of these new-found notions about the
evidence. But the discovery of new ideas, the requirement to use evidence in different ways to express those ideas, and the struggle that attends such newness, should lead eventually to essays that reveal the writer’s mind making meaning; the work on the page will likely retain some of the excitement of discovery while also revealing the idiosyncratic logic of that discovering mind. Our aim is not to limit that mind but to give it more freedom. The form of expression necessarily has to adapt itself to the nuances of thought. The bet we make with ourselves as teachers is this: that as the students, excited by discovery, get closer and closer to an understanding (through thinking, imagining, and writing) of their ideas, there will be a discernible improvement in the quality of expression. That improvement follows naturally on the heels of meaningful discovery and personal investment in the ideas themselves. But it does not come all at once, and it does not come without teachers guiding and attending the process.

Acts of Design and Translation

What the mind’s eye sees during conception has a limited but crucial value until it passes into words. We know by experience that the act of translating thought into written language leads routinely to clarification—to a greater understanding for the writer and the reader of what has been discovered about the evidence. But we know too that the essential act of clarification comes gradually through successive revisions as students consider and reconsider various pieces of evidence, as they read and connect and conceive and write and revise.

In this essay we have been thinking together about investigative and interpretive acts of reading, about the importance of writing as a way of learning, about working with both a single piece of evidence and a body of evidence. Central to such reading, whether of a single text or multiple texts, is the act of conception—the moment when the mind’s eye sees, when the evidence begins to make sense, to shape sense.

If we design work that requires students to practice conceiving day by day, students will learn over time how to read a single text, how then to consider that source text alongside other texts, and eventually how to develop an idea in an essay that represents the complexity of their discoveries. The various exercises that enhance and facilitate this work must be practical and challenging, designed to prepare and condition the mind to make discoveries. These well-designed exercises not only provide opportunities for discovery and collaboration, they also create necessities—work that students must do in preparation for conceiving ideas and writing essays. That necessary work stimulates the brain and equips it for various conceptual moments that occur repeatedly during both reading and writing.
There is not space in this essay for a detailed analysis of progressions and their design, but a brief consideration will provide context for understanding the student work that I will cite to illustrate the nature and importance of these conceptual moments. The cited work comes from a progression—a well-designed series of reading, writing, thinking, and imagining exercises—that requires students to deepen their readers' understanding of an idea they have discovered and borrowed from a written text. That act of borrowing from a source text is the most fundamental of academic practices; it constitutes the initial step in all research. But the act of deepening goes beyond summary and citation; it requires that students eventually develop their own ideas about what they have borrowed. Deepening calls for analysis and rumination—a thorough consideration of the borrowed ideas in light of other related essays, the student's experiences, and any other evidence he or she may be able to bring to the table for consideration.

The first two exercises in this deepening progression asked students to read and study their chosen text, paying attention not only to what the text says but also to how it works, how it creates meaning. Writing their own essay would necessarily come later, after the work with the chosen text and then other texts. The initial writing exercises simply helped them better understand the chosen essay before they began in earnest to write their own essay.

I want to take you to a central moment in this deepening progression when students move from their consideration of the chosen text to their consideration of the relationship between that text and another text. Bringing two texts together creates the necessity for a conceptual moment when the mind's eye must practice seeing; that act of seeing is accompanied by a requirement to express in writing what the student has discerned about the relationship between these two texts. I eventually ask students to put the texts together in a single, unified paragraph that expresses some important aspect of the idea they have discovered.

The representative student whose work we will consider selected Annie Dillard's essay "Transfiguration" as her initial, chosen text. Her first order of business was to develop a thorough understanding of the essay; my initial exercises were designed to facilitate that task. The exercises were built on the presumption that the chosen text is richly layered, that it requires interpretation, and that it does not announce in a facile and obvious way all that it actually conveys. Although there are countless ways to approach such a text, I used two in this progression that have been highly effective for students who need to learn more about rigorous, investigative reading.

The first of these reading exercises requires students to look in their chosen text for two key words or images that recur in the text. I want them, as they read, to trace and highlight these words or images across the essay and to eventually record on a page divided into columns what they discover. The columns will be
headed by the chosen words or images, and the students will type into the columns appropriate textual evidence that corresponds to the key terms or images. I want them to learn through this process to see hidden patterns and to learn to speculate reasonably about what the patterns suggest about the chosen text's wholeness and its meaning.

"Transfiguration" is a particularly rich essay that explicitly challenges readers to recognize how powerful the experience of writing can be. Dillard uses religious allusions as she tells the story of a moth being drawn into and consumed by a flame. That early image leads to a consideration of surrender and sacrifice, and, finally, to a story about Dillard's own students who seem oblivious to the ecstasy that can accompany both passionate commitment and self-sacrifice. In the first reading exercise, Irene Kau labeled her columns "the physical aspect of death" and "fire and light."

After students had completed this exercise, I asked them to begin to figure out in their minds the relationship between the two chosen concepts and to begin to speculate in their writing journals about what they thought their evidence suggested about Dillard's own ideas in "Transfiguration." That requirement to put the evidence from the two columns in relationship—to see what is perhaps the dialectical tension inherent in the selected terms or images—necessitates each student's trying to see something new. It obligates them to practice conception.

At this early stage in the progression, I do not want to press students for a final interpretation of ideas. Instead, I ask them to go back into the essay yet again and look for what Matthew Goulsh, a performance artist and writer, calls "moments of exhilaration." He tells us that we may "look at the totality of the work in light of [such a] moment—whether it be a moment of humor or sadness, an overarching structural element, a mood, a personal association, a distraction, an honest error, anything at all that speaks to us." Approaching a work of art this way, Goulsh argues, allows viewers or critics to see it as a "window into another world." This is a subjective way to generate interest and to divert students from looking for "faults and shortcomings" as they identify moments in the text that speak to them (43). I ask students to find two of these moments, no matter where they might occur in the text, and to explain their relationship. As they write, they must, of course, find a way to represent and incorporate the found moments in their own written response to the exercise. Incorporation (or representation) requires explanation.

In her explanation Irene called her discovery a moment of "morbid fascination"; it is the moment in the essay when Dillard watches the moth burn to death. Irene was fascinated with Dillard's descriptions and with the intensity of her observation. This focus on Dillard's morbid fascination, Irene reveals, allowed her to see how "Dillard connects the idea of death and fire with beauty. In this one flash, the
moth, which is normally regarded of lesser aesthetic appeal than her relative, the butterfly, has her moment of glory and attention. Her body is only considered beautiful during death, as she burns continuously and ‘glow[s] within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint,’ Dillard tells us (399).

These two preliminary reading exercises deepened the students’ understanding of the chosen text and prepared them for the more complex work that follows in this progressive sequence of assignments. All of this preliminary work comes before I ask students to summarize the chosen text—delaying such work until the student has thoroughly investigated the text. This preliminary work readies them for the more complicated work that follows, just as it invests them in their own evolving interpretations.

We come now to a more complex moment of conception. Remember that the early exercises involved conceptual, interpretive work designed to put each student’s mind on the trail of an idea. But the final decision about Dillard’s idea and their own idea about Dillard’s idea is held in abeyance as they work out various partial notions in the exercises. That final decision about ideas will not be made until later, perhaps as late as a second essay draft. Yet all the while students are refining both their thinking and their expression of what they have seen in their mind’s eye—the “inner vision” that only their mind can see until they translate it into language.

During the preliminary work, students generally have little trouble making connections within texts, but they have considerable difficulty articulating what the connections actually suggest to them. So when I introduce a more complicated exercise involving two texts, I anticipate continuing difficulty with their articulation of ideas.

Irene’s choice of Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” for her second text pleased me because King was not on the syllabus and represented a surprising leap to an unexpected connection:

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses the inequalities for his race and portrays himself as a modern-day prophet, “compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond [his] home town,” yet another religious representation (611). Religion allows people to behave in ways they could not have before, simply because they feel more confident or stronger with a higher being supporting their actions. King’s eagerness to take a risk to better the living and working conditions of his people helps us to understand why Annie Dillard is so adamant in her decision to give up her life to her writing. If King had only been fighting for himself, he would not
response to that calling, our obedience to it, if we are writers, demands of us a commitment that amounts to self-sacrifice. Such sacrifice is not without its own reward; we begin to glow from within, “kindled” by our work (399). Dillard does not speak of the power that can come to us from such commitment, but we can glimpse what she might be getting at if we consider Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” As King addresses the inequalities of his race, he portrays himself as a modern-day prophet who is “compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond [his] hometown” (611). Compelled by the Bible, King feels the justice of his cause, feels the power and confidence of a man working close to God. We know little of the nature of King's own private transfiguration, but we can see the clear effects of that transfiguration in all that he did for African-Americans. He gave his life for others and finally lost that life just as his dreams were being most fully realized. We can only guess about his satisfaction, yet we can hear in his voice, in those rhythmic, biblical sentences of his about his dream, that he, like Dillard, was also “kindled,” that self-sacrifice in the interest of his people somehow yielded its own reward. And we can surmise too that had King only been fighting for himself, out of self interest, he would most likely have been less forceful, less charismatic. By putting the well being of his people above his own, he acquired a kind of sainthood and the power that goes with it. Writing, Dillard reminds us, can create similar effects.

During thirty-five years of teaching, I have tried hundreds of variations of exercises designed to get students to become clearer and more coherent at moments when they are actually seeing something new, something that is their very own. But this additional move on my part to translate a single paragraph of their work while trying to remain true to their own-found idea turned out to be the most effective of all. I think that was true for two reasons. They responded to the respect I showed for their own ideas, and they learned something about rhetorical possibilities from my own syntax and rhythm. They learned because I translated their writing. I got inside their head and their writing, taking both seriously. As a result, they could see what they had not been able to see about clearer and more complex expression.

Although I was confident that my translations held true to their paragraphs and to the work that led to them, I told students, nevertheless, that the translation could be wrong-headed, that I could be misreading them, and that if they decided to make use of my translation at all, they should do so with complete freedom to
have been so forceful, but since he was defending people and an idea he cared about, he put their well being over his own. Dillard feels strongly about her dream of inspiring future writers, just as King is passionate about his dream of whites and blacks coming together, just as Gautama was determined to help those he cared about reach a state of enlightenment. Their dedication creates a willingness to volunteer for others and in the case of King, potentially sacrifice his own safety, eventually leading to his death. Often when we see unfair circumstances, we will attempt to find a sense of equilibrium. We cannot all give back to our communities in such magnitude as Gautama and Martin Luther King, Jr., but we can still help out in smaller ways. As trivial as our efforts may seem, we are making a difference while at the same time learning more about ourselves and the world at large.

The writing here is quite good, the sentences clear and shapely, but the paragraph itself is not yet coherent or fully developed. What Irene means by “give up her life to her writing” would not be clear to readers who had not read Dillard’s essay. Neither is Irene’s idea about Dillard’s “dream of inspiring future writers” clear. We can see that inspiration and sacrifice and dedication are important to Irene, but we cannot yet see just how King—or even Gautama who seems a gratuitous third party—clarifies Dillard’s own thinking for Irene.

Because this lack of clarity and coherence was a common problem for the majority of students, I decided to translate into more precise language what I thought each student was trying to express. I became their copy editor and translator. What I wanted to let them see was what more coherent thinking and expression might actually look like on the page. I wanted to do this because I knew they could not adequately visualize the possibilities. I held myself as close as I could to my sense of what they were trying to say instead of veering off with my own ideas. This was an experiment I had never tried.

Here is my translation of Irene’s paragraph:

Dillard’s essay allows me to see that the act of transfiguration has far-reaching applications. I am most intrigued by the spiritual qualities that seem so important to her. While her beliefs about writing have to do with its transformative power, she chooses to associate that power with something decidedly spiritual—as if the writing life is akin to the lives of saints, who in their own quiet ways go about doing God’s business. Dillard does not suggest that writers are spreading gospel messages; rather she associates writing with a kind of spiritual sacrifice, a giving of oneself to a higher calling. Our
enables her to show the transformation of a moth first by her imagination and then later by the visible change of burning. The burning moth thus serves as a metaphor for Dillard’s own transfiguration, for the fire she feels deep within her as she creates, as she reads and writes.

Dillard “glow[s] within” while writing, and composes this specific essay to convince others of the rewards they will receive if they become writers as well. (399) She promises that they will be transfigured too, and feel moments of quick ecstasy.

We can see from these paragraphs how Irene will extend and deepen Dillard’s ideas about sacrifice and illumination by placing them in a larger context. The ending paragraphs of her essay reveal her emphasis on passionate commitment and the rewards that follow from such commitment. Self-sacrifice is implicit in what she says, but her experience of writing the essay has led her to see just how such sacrifice is connected to passion and reward—reward not primarily for the self but for others.

The following paragraph from her ending affords a glimpse of what she did with my translation of her earlier work about King, and the final paragraph emphasizes the rewards of commitment that border on religious experience:

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses the inequalities for his race and portrays himself as a modern-day prophet, “compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond [his] home town,” yet another religious representation. King is fueled by the spiritual support he feels which causes him to feel ready for “direct action [such as] sit-ins, marches, and so forth.” He writes to tell the clergymen that he feels the African Americans are being treated unfairly and that they are not afraid of tension if it will bring about change. King is well aware of the fact that his letter will offend many of the racists in the clergy but is willing to take that risk if there is a chance of bettering the living and working conditions for his people. He is passionate about his dream of whites and blacks coming together, and this dedication incites him to volunteer himself for his race and potentially sacrifice his own safety, eventually leading to his death. Dillard also volunteers herself for writers all over the world, in hopes of inspiring more people to become passionate about writing.

Our passions incite us to action and allow us to focus on one portion of our lives for a certain period of time. Often we find ourselves wanting to share our passions with others in hopes of making a
refashion my version of their work so that it more perfectly represented their own inner vision and their style. But I made clear that whatever they did, the deeper challenge was to achieve the kind of clarity and coherence represented in my translation. They took that challenge to heart when drafting their essays.

I can only hint at the extent of their improvement by revealing how Irene sets up the larger scope of her essay using ideas borrowed from Dillard and closes it with the help of King, demonstrating just how much deepening she has done of her borrowed ideas. Within her longer essay, she also cites the poet Mark Doty’s “Souls on Ice” and Nancy Wilson Ross’s “An Introduction to Zen”; she includes as well a section on her own experiences with Cambodian refugees. These are her opening paragraphs:

“No pain, no gain.” This well-known cliché is used to describe the willingness we should have of relinquishing things if we want to achieve our goals. For those athletes who practice several hours a day, their sore limbs are worth the eventual payoff of excelling at their chosen sport. For those students who fall asleep at their computers studying and pushing themselves to the brink of exhaustion, their newfound knowledge and success at life will reward them in the end. For those people who have ever been passionate about something, they understand the feeling of being willing to forfeit anything to accomplish their deepest desires.

For Annie Dillard, the small pain of writing, rereading, correcting, and rewriting is insignificant compared to her resulting product. Her essay “Transfiguration” describes the transformation she undergoes when she writes. In it, she compares her personal change while she writes to the burning of a moth caught in a candle. She expresses how the moth’s wings “ignited like tissue paper” and her “heaving mouth parts crackled like pistol fire.” The specific description creates such a vivid picture that I reread it again to pick up parts I had not caught the first time around. The next time, I noticed how Dillard depicted the burning moth as a “circle of light” that manages to create images “out of the darkness.” By the moth’s burning body, Dillard is able to see items she was previously unable to perceive, as do other people when they read her words. She is shown dropping to her knees as if in prayer in order to examine the dead moths more closely. Later, the moth in the flame is “robbed to the ground [just] like any immolating monk.” These two images are intertwined in the religious aspect and the emotion of becoming so astonished and obsessed with something that you must lower yourself physically and mentally to submit to it. Her dedication
Without conceiving, without continual practice in the art of conception, students writers can have little of value to say; they will have no way of knowing or expressing what they know. But our work with them in the classroom can confer the gift of excitement that accompanies the process of coming to know and of expressing one's own new-found ideas. Our well-designed exercises can lead students to more astute readings of evidence and to a clearer and clearer expression of what they have understood. That clear expression will not, of course, come to them all at once, will not come at all unless we teachers insist on a kind of penetrative seeing while at the same time stepping out of their way so that their own minds can conceive in fruitful, idiosyncratic ways as they also begin to see how really smart they can be. We teachers design the pathways for success, insist on the students' playfulness as they meander along them, and encourage them to take the risks of conception necessary for their success and ours.

Note

1All references in the student essay are to the anthology Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay, ed. DiYanni and Hoy.

Works Cited


Pat C. Hoy II, director of the Expository Writing Program and Professor of English at New York University, has also held appointments at the U. S. Military Academy and Harvard. Professor Hoy is the author of numerous textbooks and essays related to the study of composition, including his two most recent books, Frames of Mind and Occasions for Writing (both with Robert DiYanni). His