APPROACHING ENGLISH COMPOSITION
AS A PEER-GROUP LEARNING
EXPERIENCE: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: With frequent voicing of concern by the popular press that Johnny can neither read nor write, the present article describes a successful experiment in the teaching and learning of expository writing. Based on the peer learning model, the experiment, originally conducted over a four-year period at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has been used with apparent success at both the secondary and graduate levels as well as in regular college composition courses. The chief aspects of the approach include (1) mastery learning, (2) a consciously informal atmosphere, (3) a product orientation, whereby the class as a whole produces a final written work, where possible of some social usefulness, and (4) the careful development of the willingness and ability to learn and work cooperatively rather than as individual competitors.

The official course description specified "the writing of essays from logical and rhetorical principles ... to assist students in the writing of lucid and logical exposition which is interesting and original..." Having taught the course once the standard way, I felt dissatisfied with the results. The good students had written well, the poor students poorly, and the outcome, after much ink spilling—both red and black—seemed questionable. One thing, however, was clear. All of us had thoroughly exhausted ourselves. We were sick of writing and of each other. We were chiefly glad that the term was over.

That was 1967. Over the intervening years I have taught expository writing at least a dozen times. With each new course I would discard or revamp some technique or other. But the peer-group approach, born of my initial discouragement, prevailed throughout. What I shall describe here is what I now consider the most successful experiment,
namely, a 6-week course given during the University of Hawaii at Manoa's first summer session, 1971.

Class met a total of 28 times, for 75 minutes each, during the 6-week session. The one-page dittoed syllabus concluded with this statement on grading: "F = completion of no written work; C = completion of some, but not all, of the required papers, rewrites, and quizzes; B = completion of all required exercises; A = high-quality completion of all required exercises, faithful class attendance, regular verbal participation, and conscientious correction of class papers." The only text required was the latest edition of the *Harbrace College Handbook*.

Meetings 1 and 2 were listed as Introduction/Games and More Games, respectively. As a pre-World War II baby, I had had my doubts about the efficacy, or even harmlessness, of so-called sensitivity exercises. However, my subsequent experience with the awareness approach had convinced me that these techniques, if used carefully, selectively and, above all, without reference to the words "sensitivity," "awareness," or "encounter" (though the term "yoga" seemed acceptable) could help lighten the atmosphere and prepare the way for the cooperative industry essential to our venture. So, we began Meeting 1 with a yoga asana called "the Lion." I demonstrated to laughter as follows: "The purpose of this exercise is to get us relaxed—loosened up. So—first you stand up, with your hindlegs spread apart and your forelegs and paws stretched out in front of you. Stretch your claws also as far apart as you can. (I'd better take my glasses off, since lions don't wear glasses.) Okay, I'm going to bug my eyes out, try to touch my nose with my tongue, and roar with all my might." Then the rest of the class joined me for a second round. After this brief exercise, the general first-meeting tension would be gone, and we could proceed to the next game.

This time, I informed the class, we would play a game so simple it was hard—a game requiring coordination, skill, and, above all, the ability to snap the fingers of both hands. This game, in short, was the Name Game. With that, I explained that my name was Reynold as in Reynolds Wrap (or as one wag put it, "Reynold's Rap") and that only my mother referred to me as Doctor (as in "my son, the...”). I then asked us to go round the room (the 22 of us were seated around a super-seminar table built up of four rectangular dining-size tables placed together) with each person stating his or her name and offering some device to help remember it. Finally, we got to the game itself, which called for slapping our knees twice in unison, then snapping the fingers of the right hand followed by the left hand. As we snapped, the "it" person said his first name on the right-hand snap and anyone else's