

**Foreword to *Uptaught* by Ken Macrorie  
Boynton-Cook/Heinemann, Innovators in Education series, 1996**

I can't read *Uptaught* for very long without wanting to put it down and write something, which is, to me, a sure-fire sign of a good book about writing. Ken Macrorie's passionate crusade against "Engfish" – "the bloated, pretentious language" that he saw everywhere in student papers and in the writing of his colleagues – and his devotion to strong, clear, natural writing always inspire me. The excerpts from student writing that he quotes are so vivid and so thick with the texture of daily life and feelings that they make me want to go write stories of my own.

What's most striking about Ken Macrorie, though, is that he is a professor who is willing to open up his classroom to all of us. Courageously – for it does take courage to do this – he lets us see his own mistakes, even failures, and his struggle to break out of the old mold into something newer, freer, better. Few teachers speak so honestly, and few are as willing as Macrorie was to challenge what they have previously believed about students and about teaching. Yet I cannot think of anything more crucial to educational reform. What will be the catalyst for change if not teachers like Macrorie, willing to question the orthodoxy and *find out*, through their own trial and error, what might work better?

*Uptaught* is about a teacher daring to look at what is going on around him. It is also about a teacher daring to look inside himself. "I had devoted my career to teaching Freshman Composition because I wanted every college student to write with clarity and 'pezazz,'" he writes. "Sometimes attending my class, students became worse writers, their sentences infected with more and more phoniness, and eventually stiffening into *rigor mortis*." Macrorie makes this kind of observation straightforwardly, without bitterness. But he doesn't stop there. He doesn't accept excuses from himself, from the students, or from the institution. He pushes through to something bigger, better, and this is where his book becomes about much more than English teaching. *Uptaught* is about not settling for less, either on paper or in the act of carrying out one's chosen work.

In many ways, the original edition of *Uptaught* was the precursor of a shift in attitude about writing and teaching that is reflected in many of the books Heinemann-Boynton/Cook publishes today. But we still need *Uptaught*. I was a student years after Macrorie's and I can report that Engfish has not yet died. Nor is it gone today from either universities or high schools. And this matters. It matters not just because strong, moving, living language is better prose than Engfish is but because students deserve to feel their own power as writers. The poet Denise Levertov wrote of "the secret writers share," and she was referring to the *joy* of writing. For too long teachers have kept this secret well hidden from students, perhaps because they themselves never knew it. So they teach only rules, and leave students feeling that the world is divided by a huge wall, with all the real writers on one side and students on the other. As a sixteen-year-old friend wrote to me:

My teacher told me that only professional writers have this freedom with language. Consciously, I still didn't believe it, but unconsciously it inhibited my writing. I didn't feel that my writing was real. I felt that I should write a *real* story. I can see that to better my writing, I have to unlearn much of what school taught me.

*Uptaught* is about this journey of unlearning, in the students, in the professor, and in all of us who read it and take it to heart.

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