Closing the Gap

English Educators Address
the Tensions Between Teacher Preparation
and Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools

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Edited by

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EDITORS’ NOTES

The Competing Rites and Methodological Rights of Teaching Writing

While speech is the medium of home and the neighborhood interaction, writing is largely or completely the medium of the school, and the child whose school writing is stultified has little else to draw on. . . . A sense of the social system of writing has so inhibited and overawed many teachers that they have never given a pupil the feeling that what he writes is his own.

—John Dixon

Despite decades of theorizing, experimenting, and research in writing pedagogy, high school English teachers are more vulnerable than ever to the public’s displeasure about the failure to teach students how to use language to communicate effectively. Parents, and taxpayers in general, seem most concerned that students fail to learn about how to spell or use punctuation correctly (mechanics)—which are typically measured on standardized tests and thus lionized as key indicators of writing proficiency. On the other hand, university composition faculty continue to criticize high school teachers for what LaBrant first called the “large gap between natural expression and the stilted performance which passes as school composition” (1934). Even though English educators from five countries proposed a new writing curriculum which featured a process-oriented method at the seminal 1965 Dartmouth Conference, researchers still find that high school teachers continue to focus composition instruction on discrete grammar exercises unrelated to student writing and on the minute correc-
tion of surface errors in writing products as the way to teach writing and prepare students for standardized end-of-course writing tests.

Yet, the National Assessment of Education Progress report card on writing (2002) states that a mere 23% of the nation’s fourth graders and only 31% of its eighth graders were rated “proficient” in writing (National Center for Educational Statistics). Additionally, the most recent report from the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) clearly recommends that institutions require teacher education programs to improve writing across all disciplines, since elementary and secondary schools are giving short shrift to writing. It reveals that few states require specific coursework in writing pedagogy to earn licensure and that literacy education is focused on reading instruction, to the detriment of writing. Why? Because there is little correlation between writing and reading competencies. Even though research supports some integration of writing and reading—indeed, even common sense tells us they are opposite sides of the same coin—we can only conclude that the focus on reading has meant that research on writing and writing pedagogy has not been sufficiently shared with pre-service teachers.

Sociocognitive theorists (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) have successfully argued the point that we teach what we know, that the twelve years of educational experience preservice teachers bring with them to their teacher-preparation programs have already predisposed them to value certain ways of teaching and learning. Therefore, if their beliefs remain unexamined or unchallenged by new learning, they will continue the cycle of inadequate writing instruction which currently characterizes our schools—a spiralling cycle of inadequacy which could arguably be described as educational malpractice. To put our national writing crisis in terms of the global economy, China will soon become the country with the fifth largest English-speaking population in the world. India already has a sizeable English speaking population. Together, the top twenty percent of IQs among students in their countries accounts for more students than the total population of students in the United States. In educational terms, that means they have more honors students than we have students altogether. If Chinese and Indian students can communicate in English (particularly in writing) better than our students can, what is to keep high paying jobs—many of which require advanced communication skills—here in the United States?

Yet, can English teachers be blamed? Writing theorists and researchers during the decades since the Dartmouth Conference have argued for the process model, the writing workshop, and portfolio assessment as preferred approaches for teaching writing, all of which assume producing authentic and thoughtful writing requiring protracted work. A short list of seminal compositionists, their key constructs/works, and their interrelationships
demonstrates the rich legacy from which current teachers can work as they design curriculum and teach writing:

**Foundational Theories about Writing and Key Theorists**

(a) James Britton (British Schools Council Project, 1975), borrowed from Vygotsky and Piaget:

*Concepts*

Three categories about how language functions:
- transactional (language used to get things done)
- expressive (language used to think aloud on paper)
- poetic (language used to create literary patterns)

User, audience, and purpose are interrelated differently in each category; Participants vs. Spectators

*Recommendation*

Teachers should provide frequent opportunities for expressive writing in English classrooms.

(b) James Moffett (*Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, 1968; *Active Voice*, 1992):

*Concepts and Recommendations*

Instruction should progress from conceptualization to oral language to written language and from egocentric communication to public discourse.

**Developmental Tasks Theories and Key Theorists**

(a) Piaget (not a writing theorist per se, but his observations help teachers understand how the developing mind structures knowledge)

*Original Concept*

There are four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete logical, and formal operations.

*Recommendations Derived from Piaget’s Stages*

Writing instruction should be built on talking and listening, both grounded in thinking. Writing has developmental stages which parallel cognitive development. More complex/abstract writing tasks/stages should follow those that are more concrete.

The Developmental Stages of Writing and Their Implications (Moffett’s Theory of Communication):
- Teachers should understand the current level of writing competence/comfort of students and then challenge them to move to higher stages.
• The sequence of writing has five stages which should be followed in long-range planning of instruction.
• The stages are episodic (nonsequential, not used in elementary school only): narrative, descriptive, explanatory, analytical, artistic.
• Each stage requires progressively increasing cognitive complexity and writing competence, preceding stages can be revisited, and growth within stages is ongoing (9–12).
• The National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP) supports the Developmental writing sequence by designating three major genres of writing: narrative, informative, and persuasive.

Process Model Theories and Key Theorists

(a) Atwell, Calkins, Graves, Murray

Assumptions
The writer is a self-starter with a need to communicate (“Everyone has a story to tell”; “no more writer’s welfare”).
Writing is an extended process.
All modes of writing are equally respected.
Students are expected to write often and to take responsibility for shaping their own writing.
Conferencing is a basic feature of instruction.
Student writers need many readers to respond to their work.
Ownership of writing begins with selecting the topic and extends to giving the writing a public performance.
Writing is a whole process whose parts are recursive.
Comparing product, process, and post-process teaching approaches provides insights helpful to writing teachers.

(b) Murray

Concepts
The teacher’s role is responding to student writing through mini-lessons, whole-class meetings, and conferences.
The emotional tone of the encounters is encouraging, facilitating, guiding.
The student acts, the teacher reacts, i.e., only responds to the student’s response to his/her own writing (non-directive).

(c) Atwell

Concepts
The teacher’s role is a “knowing expert” to the student’s role as “apprentice.”
The teacher establishes direction for writing assignments and intervenes in writing at key points to tell writers what works and what doesn’t work.
The variables of the teacher’s role in the process writing model are as follows:

- Everyone is motivated to make meaning.
- All students have potential to write something worthwhile.
- Teachers should teach the process of discovering meaning in experience that students can apply anywhere.
- Teachers should not force deadlines on writing.
- Teaching the craft of writing needs to allow for discovery, trial and error, even some failing.
- There is no specific content to teach before students start writing.
- Teachers serve as coaches to help each writer discover his/her own voice.
- The student teaches the teacher to teach writing through conferences in which the teacher listens to what the student thinks about his/her own writing and then helps the student hear what he/she said.
- The teacher serves as a mirror to help students see their own potential.
- A teacher is a success when students can teach themselves, making the teacher unnecessary.

Writing Workshop

Note: It grew out of the middle-school movement which sought to make these schools less subject driven than high schools and more like the homelike environment of elementary classrooms.

Middle schools are characterized by less content to cover, a slower pace, and non-traditional classroom arrangements. Writing Workshop, like Atwell’s and Calkins’ classrooms, operate more like newsrooms and artists studios than traditional classrooms with rows of seats and lectures.

Portfolio Work and Key Theorists

(a) Elbow

Concepts
Students should be in charge of their writing.
He invites students to show their best work “so we can see what you know and can do rather than what you don’t know and can’t do.”
Portfolios in writing classrooms cause students to collect (gather samples of their literacies, select (decide on the best representatives),
reflect (write about their decisions), and project (set writing goals and work to meet them).

Portfolios transfer responsibility, relieving teachers of the burden of reading every piece and giving students some responsibility for the quality and appraisal of their work.

(b) Bromley (1998)

Concepts

Argues for variety in portfolios (e.g., skills checklists, self-assessment pieces, creative writing, letters, reports, and work from a variety of modes).

**Authentic Assessment and Key Theorists**

**General Assumptions**

Teachers must establish a clear connection between what is taught and what is being assessed, through clear rubrics which judge student outcomes.

Authentic assessment ensures that writing tasks which are graded are those which actually have been taught.

(a) Resnick; Applebee (New Standards Project)

Concepts

Argues for “direct writing assessment,” clearly delineated criteria arrayed along a numbered scale.

Holistic evaluation scores are a grade which expresses a rater’s/teacher’s assessment of “the extent to which features in a piece of writing appear to be under the control of the writer.”

*Note 1:* There are various rubrics among the states; e.g., the State of Virginia’s multidomain rubric and Pennsylvania’s assessment rubric.

*Note 2:* North Carolina is a leader in authentic assessment (led by former Governor Hunt).

Two features make NC assessment unique:

- standardized writing tests use prompts similar to what people encounter in the workplace/real world.
- levels of performance are defined by rubrics designed to be clear to both students and teachers.

Despite the research-based recommendations made by these proven practitioners—during the same decades they worked—politicians, test-making corporations, and administrators unschooled in relevant writing research have fueled the public demand for teacher accountability and reduced the score card for this accountability largely to high-stakes, end-of-course standardized tests. Since school funding allocations and teacher pay
are tied to test scores, is it any wonder that teachers often choose to “teach to the test” rather than teach to the research-based theories that promote real learning about how to write?

As university teachers of composition, teachers of English methods courses, and university supervisors of student teachers, we are acutely aware of the cognitive dissonance our teacher candidates face as they try to implement what they learn at the university about research-based teaching practices like the process model in school systems which do not accommodate these practices because of time constraints, curricular demands of teaching additional subject matter like literature, the political and financial bias toward standardized test scores, and the prevailing tradition of teaching composition by means of discrete grammar exercises and multiple-choice testing about language and writing rather than by means of actual writing. Even the best evidence-based recommendations will not be utilized and sustained in practice unless careful thought is given to identifying the conditions that will increase the probability of their successful implementation.

This book invited essays which acknowledge the dilemma of secondary school English teachers and which make practical recommendations about how these teachers can practice research-based writing pedagogy while taking into account the barriers to change in public school policy and practice: the demands of test score accountability, the difficulty of change in school environments, and the often competing demands of stakeholders (parents, testing agencies, university faculty, tax payers in general, school administrators). Contributors to this book have considered the following five interlocking writing constructs, which constitute best teaching practices, as they make recommendations for appropriate classroom practices and activities: (1) the developmental tasks (cognitive tools) required to accomplish successively more difficult tasks; (2) the necessary steps in the writing process; (3) the environment in which different writing tasks can be undertaken and completed (workshop); (4) the roles of teacher and students in determining writing topics and other responsibilities in the classroom (portfolios); and (5) how assignments and evaluation prepare students to meet the needs of everyday writing (authentic assessment).

They have also addressed issues that the Dartmouth Conference did not address, but which we have learned through research in the past few decades are essential to teaching excellence, e.g., culturally relevant pedagogy and teacher advocacy on behalf of students (Delpit; Schmidt; Troutman; Villanueva).

It is hoped that the collection of essays in this book serves as a strong voice in support of best practices for teaching writing which accommodate realities and yet advocate for needed changes that will support the overall effectiveness of the instructional delivery system for writing. As profession-
als, we are tasked to do no less. Not to succeed is to deny our students and the candidates we teach and help license the dignity of finding their own voice and the joy of shaping and expressing their own ideas compellingly.

—Karen Keaton Jackson and Sandra Vavra

WORKS REFERENCED


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