

Teaching Writing: A Response to the Tibbettses

John C. Maxwell

If progress in teaching writing has bogged down, the reason is not too much theorizing but a lack of teacher involvement in effective inservice programs.

The Tibbettses allege that the publications and conferences of NCTE do not appear to have touched teachers interviewed on an 18,000 mile trip. Well, that is a little disturbing. But we're not totally surprised. A 1977 study by Candida Gillis reported in *English Journal*¹ made about the same observation—that all things considered, the English classroom had not changed a lot over the past ten years. That's no reason, of course, to stop trying for useful change.

This is probably not the place to consider the methodological flaws in research design in the study from which the Tibbettses draw their conclusions. That work has already been done by Julie Held, Purdue University, in an article titled "Incredible Ignorance Makes This Book Potentially Dangerous."² (The reference is to the book by the Tibbettses upon which their article is partly based.) On the other hand, there were methodological problems with the Gillis study, in that it depended on voluntary responses from 600 readers (out of a readership of at least 40,000).

Yet, both studies give us glimpses into what's happening in classrooms and among teachers. The information, even if technically flawed, does help all of us in perceiving what's out there to which we must respond as creatively as we can.

While we're on the subject of studies, however, readers of *Educational Leadership* might want to read Arthur N. Applebee's *A Survey of Teaching Conditions in English, 1977*.³ Using sophisticated techniques and employing a closely controlled sample, Applebee found much more change in curriculum and instruction than the Tibbettses say has occurred.

But, for the sake of argument, let's assume that what the Tibbettses found in their odyssey is a true picture of conditions. It's hard to follow their logic that the unchanging habits of teachers have somehow caused a decline in the teaching and learning of composition. If the teachers haven't changed, something else must have caused the decline. The Tibbettses argue that the natterings of theorists in the pages and programs of NCTE have led teachers astray, yet in

another breath they say these teachers have not been affected by anything.

Unperturbed by problems with logic, the authors plunge on to posit certain solutions to the problem. Theirs is a surprisingly incomplete list. Within the article, they talk at length about the difficulty of teaching composition under current conditions. But they do not apparently see workload and class size as sufficient problems to warrant mention in their prescription. Since about the time of the Dusel study in 1955,⁴ the National Council of Teachers of English has maintained that composition cannot be effectively taught in secondary school classes larger than 25 or with a total student load per teacher of 100. I agree completely with the Tibbettses that teaching 150 or more students in five to six classes a day makes any improvement in written composition difficult if not unlikely. But their prescription for what to do makes no mention of class size and workload.

An All-School Responsibility

A second glaring omission from their prescription is any kind of admonition to administrators that teaching writing is an all-school responsibility. The authors must certainly be aware that English teachers

¹ Candida Gillis, "The English Classroom 1977: A Report on the EJ Readership Survey," *English Journal* 66 (September 1977): 20-26.

² Julie A. Held, review of *What's Happening to American English?*, by Arn and Charlene Tibbetts, in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 61 (October 1979): 138-139.

³ Arthur N. Applebee, *A Survey of Teaching Conditions in English, 1977* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English and ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communications Skills, 1977).

⁴ William J. Dusel reported in *Illinois English Bulletin* (43: 1, October 1955) that teachers of English, devoting less than ten minutes per student per week marking composition papers, had to spend 21 hours on this activity alone, in addition to 25 hours per week in the classroom, seven hours checking revisions of compositions, and additional hours doing lesson planning and preparing otherwise for teaching. The work week of the thoroughgoing high school English teacher can easily exceed 60 hours.

cannot develop writing skill in one period if it is ignored the rest of the day. If the English class is the only place where writing is regularly called for, it is extremely difficult for youngsters to perceive that it matters to anyone. No one is asking the teachers of other subjects to *teach* writing; that is the English teacher's responsibility. But we do ask that all teachers require writing, that they read and respond to it, and that they convey to students the idea that writing is important.

As to what the Tibbettses did say in their prescription for improving the teaching of writing, there isn't much that's new. Some of it implies but doesn't quite say there ought to be lots of effective inservice work (and not just for English teachers) on the teaching of writing. That assertion and most of the rest of their list is familiar stuff, repeatedly found in exhortations by and among the English teaching profession.

I have to comment, though, on the proposal that teachers start a state association for practical composition. On the surface, it is an appealing idea, but one that runs the risk of damaging the range of things covered under the term *English*. It strongly suggests that the only thing that matters in the subject is the teaching of writing. It suggests, for example, that the Illinois Association of Teachers of English should abandon its interests in reading, speech, language study, vocabulary development, literature, curriculum development, and supervision of English programs—to name only a few of IATE's concerns, and ours. The teaching of writing is a high priority in the work of not only IATE but all of our 130 affiliate groups in all 50 states, but writing isn't all of it. In their enthusi-



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asm for their own type of inservice programming (the "association" they refer to), the authors come close to saying that written composition, with a touch of practical grammar, is all we need be concerned about. I'm sure they don't mean that.

I rather prefer the suggestion in their book that teachers "Join the NCTE and get involved in your state affiliate."⁵ Beyond my job responsibility to urge membership and activity in NCTE and the affiliates, I happen to believe—because I have seen it—that teachers can become transformed into serious students of their art, brought to acquaintance with new ideas, and emboldened to try something new for the benefit of their students. The cause of static conditions in the teaching of English is not the tainting by theoreticians, which seems to bother the Tibbettses excessively, but the lack of involvement of teachers in the rich kinds of inservice work these councils provide. *EL*

⁵ Arn and Charlene Tibbetts, *What's Happening to American English?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), p. 164.

Arn and Charlene Tibbetts reply:

Julie Held's review of our book in *Phi Delta Kappan* is a comedy of errors; our response to it appears in their January issue.

Maxwell remarks that it is hard to follow our "logic" when we say theorists have led teachers astray, but then we say that "teachers have not been affected by anything, leastwise not the theorists." We did not make the statement in italics in our article; the teachers did. See our fourth and fifth paragraphs.

Maxwell may have missed the point of our article. Writing *can* be taught better—but not by perusing theoretical linguistic studies or by sending out questionnaires to teachers from NCTE headquarters. We must refuse to be distracted by irrelevancies. Better teaching involves, most of all, will power and hard concentration on the thing before us: the student paragraph; the nature and quality of the effective sentence; the questions of "best usage"; the diligent

practice of writing and revising. We saw some excellent composition programs in our trip around the United States. Some of them are described in our book, *What's Happening to American English?* We also recommend the work of the Bay Area Writing Project.

Marva Collins teaches writing successfully to black children in Chicago's West Garfield Park section. Some of her students are "slow learners." If she can succeed, why can't the rest of us? "There is no secret, really," says Collins, "except hard work. You asked me if this could be done in the public schools. Well, yes it can."¹ *EL*

¹ Marva Collins and her Westside Prep School appeared on "Sixty Minutes" in late Fall, 1979. See also the reports on her school by syndicated columnist Bill Raspberry in *Chicago Tribune*, December 6 and 11, 1979.

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