

Looking at Writing

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For the first time in years, serious attention is being given both to basic research and to curriculum development in writing. In the 1978 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Congress voted to include writing among the areas eligible to receive funds. The National Institute of Education has begun to fund projects to investigate writing instruction. The College Entrance Examination Board has restored a writing sample to its examinations. Even the International Reading Association now includes sessions on writing at its conferences and has published a book about the teaching of writing in the elementary school.

Which is not to say that writing has come of age. Teacher preparation still puts little stress on writing, and many experienced teachers feel uncomfortable with their level of expertise; schools are full of specialists who can help with reading but who know little about writing problems; there is little consensus about how to teach writing, at any instructional level; and funding for writing research, though greater than a few years ago, is a fraction of the funding for reading.

Trends in Research

A good starting point in considering trends in written composition is a now-classic summary of research published by the National Council of Teachers of English (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer, 1963). The typical study which this report examined focused directly on teaching issues:

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—Will writing improve more if teachers mark papers thoroughly and provide encouraging general suggestions, or if they do not mark or grade?

—Will writing improve more in classes with 30, 25, or 20 students?

—Will students write better after a unit on traditional formal grammar or after one emphasizing functional grammar?

Recent trends in the teaching of writing emphasize process more than product.

At first blush, such a direct focus on teaching seems practical and helpful. How nice it would be if the researcher could say to the teacher, "Change this and this, and the writing of your students will improve." Unfortunately, the answers provided were for the most part trivial or inconclusive, and often they were both.

These early studies made two assumptions that recent work suggests were unfounded. The first assumption was that we understand the characteristics of good writing, and can summarize them by talking about topic sentences, outlines, word choice, or (more recently) syntactic or grammatical complexity.

The second assumption, which follows from the first, is that we need only discover what is "missing" from students' writing compared to "good" writing, build a unit to teach the missing characteristics, and thereby improve writing instruction.

There are still some proponents of this view, and many teaching practices enshrined in composition texts unconsciously reflect it. But recently there has been a powerful shift away from a focus on the end *product* to a concern with the writing *process*.

This new emphasis came about in part because of the discovery that our descriptions of the product, "good" writing, were not accurate. In one study, when paragraphs drawn from professional journals and published letters-to-the-editor were compared with traditional methods of paragraph development described in composition texts, fewer than half of the paragraphs used any of the nine methods of development (Meade and Ellis, 1970). Although "Begin your paragraphs with a topic sentence" is a typical guideline, another study found that fewer than half of the expository paragraphs of contemporary professional writers had explicit topic sentences; 3 percent of the paragraphs ended with a topic sentence (Braddock, 1974). These findings suggested that something was wrong with our conventional wisdom about good writing.

Outlining, another technique enshrined in textbooks, has also been questioned. Recent studies of how successful writers go about writing show that very few make an outline, and that if they do, the "outline" is likely to consist of brief reminders of things to mention rather than organized headings and subheadings, carefully lettered and numbered.

In recent years, a number of re-

searchers have turned their attention away from the parts of the writing product toward the steps in the writing process. Typically, these studies have focused on a few writers intensively, and range from first grade through college. The studies have posed a variety of tasks, using a variety of observational techniques.

As you might guess, the findings are often highly detailed and there is a problem distinguishing the significant from the trivial. Two threads that are particularly helpful run through most of the studies, however.

When writing is studied as a process, it is quickly apparent that the process has a number of distinct stages. At the simplest level, these include prewriting, writing, and editing. *Prewriting* is the time during which information is gathered and ideas played with. It may include reading, talking, and simply thinking about a topic. Sometimes it includes an incubation period when initial thoughts are allowed to coalesce without conscious attention. In real life situations, it can extend for weeks or months.

The *writing* stage is when the topic is developed on paper. Getting started on the writing stage is often difficult and painful, producing many false starts and discarded openings. At this stage the concern needs to be focused on the ideas which the writer wants to express, laying out the argument and its implications, or the basic scenes and storyline in fiction.

This stage of the writing process involves a discovering of meaning rather than a transcription of meaning that is waiting full-blown in the writer's mind. Our language provides a panoply of devices that not only convey our meaning to others, but help us develop the meaning for ourselves. These devices include the *buts* and the *ands* and the *althoughs* that relate one set of information to another; they include the basic syntactic relationships of subjects and objects and predicates; and they include structural devices that underlie larger stretches of discourse, such things as time sequence in narrative or generalizations and supporting detail in exposition.

In our concern with language as a way to express an idea, we tend to overlook the extent to which these devices help us generate new ideas



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"at the point of utterance," whether in speech or writing. This may be why outlines are not very helpful in many writing situations. The outline constrains us, keeps us from following up on the insights that we gain as we use language.

The third stage of the writing process is *editing*, polishing what has been written. This is the stage for attention to mechanics: spelling, punctuation, usage, handwriting. It can also be a stage for fine-tuning for a particular audience or to achieve a particular tone.

Even given the variability in the type of writing involved, the age and ability of the writer, and the familiarity of the material being written about, recognition of these distinct stages of the writing process provides a useful perspective in examining classroom practice.

Do we short-circuit the brainstorming and reflection needed in prewriting, insisting that students "get to work"? Do we demand neat and tidy first drafts, allowing little room for students to discover new ideas which, if they are to be developed, usually require that earlier parts of an essay be discarded or reworked?

Another important thread that runs through the studies of the writing process is the recognition that errors are a natural part of learning and often indicate progress rather than mistakes. Concern with understanding error has become an integral part of the process approach, as distinct from the product approach.

Figure 1 contrasts the approaches to error implicit in the focus on product or process. The differences affect not only the questions researchers ask but also the strategies teachers adopt. Two very different philosophies are involved: in one the student is treated as a passive recipient of the accepted wisdom (in this case, the standard language); in the other case the student is given a constructive role, as a learner who actively makes hypotheses about the nature of language and tests these hypotheses through use.

Evaluating Writing

Ask educated adults to correct algebra problems, a science test, or a vocabulary quiz, and the marks that result will be virtually identical. Give the same adults samples of student writing, and the grades will scatter

Figure 1. Approaches to Error*

Issue	Product Approach	Process Approach
Why study errors?	To produce a taxonomy of what errors learners make.	To produce an explanation of why a learner makes an error.
What is the attitude toward error?	Errors are "bad." (Interesting only to the theorist.)	Errors are "good." (Interesting both to the theorist and to the teacher, and useful to the learner as active tests of hypotheses.)
What should we do about errors?	Attack the individual errors and eliminate them through drill to produce over-learning.	Understand the source of errors: the rule-based system that produces nonstandard forms; provide data for new rule formation.
What can we discover from errors?	The source of failure: those items on which the learner or the program failed.	The strategies which led the learner into the error.
How can we account for error?	Error is a failure to learn the correct form.	Errors are a natural part of learning a language; they arise from learners' active strategies: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete rule application, hypothesizing false concepts.
What are the goals of instruction?	Eliminate all errors by establishing correct, automatic habits; mastery of the target language.	Assist the learner in approximating the target language, support active learning strategies, and recognize that not all errors will disappear.

* Adapted from Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer. "The Development of Error Analysis and Its Implications for the Teaching of Composition." Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kansas City, Missouri, March 1977. ED 145 482.

widely. Studies of what adults do when evaluating writing suggest that several factors influence their judgment:

1. The ideas expressed (richness, soundness, clarity, relevance)
2. Mechanics (usage, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling)
3. Organization and analysis
4. Wording and phrasing (vocabulary maturity and breadth)
5. Flavor or style (sincerity, forcefulness, dogmatism, sentimentality, pretentiousness)
6. Handwriting

What makes people score writing differently is the relative importance of each factor to them. My handwriting is illegible enough that only my closest friends attempt to decipher it; I therefore give little weight to handwriting in judging the quality of writing. For some people (legend has it particularly for English teachers) mechanics are central; misspellings and run-on sentences doom many papers.

For anyone concerned with stan-

dardized assessment of student achievement, these differences are a nightmare. Three solutions to this problem encompass a wide variety of specific alternatives: standardized objective tests, analytic scoring, and holistic scoring.

In general, standardized tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and English usage correlate highly with writing ability, though they are not direct measures of it. And because of the ease with which they can be administered and scored, there is a strong temptation to substitute them for direct measures of writing.

There are two problems with such tests. First, they do not measure the "higher" skills, those involved in developing an idea and organizing and structuring an extended piece of writing. And second, if usage tests evaluate "writing," teachers will do better to concentrate on usage exercises than on having students write essays.

Data from the first two rounds of the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggest that is what happened in American classrooms.

In 1974, the second round found little problem with mechanics (in spite of the fact that public criticism of writing usually focuses on that level), but higher level writing skills had deteriorated, as reflected in such things as the use of appropriate transitions.

The analytic approach to scoring essays was popular for a long time. This involved specifying relatively objective features of a piece of writing and then counting them for each essay. You might count spelling errors, for example, or measure breadth of vocabulary used, or rate a paragraph as having or not having an appropriate topic sentence. Such analytic approaches are highly reliable, but are also tedious and time consuming. And the values problem is implicit; is accuracy in mechanics an adequate definition of "good" writing?

Holistic scoring provides an alternative and has been developed in greatest detail by the Educational Testing Service. Holistic scoring relies on an experienced reader's intuitive sense of the adequacy and effectiveness of a piece of writing. This is the synthesis that we make automatically of all of the elements in a writing sample, from mechanics and handwriting to ideas and organization.

ETS carefully trains groups of readers who discuss the reasons for their reactions and work toward a consensus. Essentially, this method is a process of socialization, coming to agreement on a group understanding of "good" writing. ETS studies show the process to be reliable and quick, but far more expensive than objective testing, while not as expensive as analytic scoring. If two samples of writing are gathered from each student, and each is scored twice, it is easy to get reliabilities in the .80s.

The problem with holistic scoring is that it finesses the issue of standards; good writing becomes what a group of experienced readers agree is good. The scores that result allow comparison of performance over time, or between students at a given point in time, but don't tell anything about the characteristics of that performance. The information has no diagnostic significance; it is not usefully anchored as a measure of "competency"; and it does not help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of a particular instructional program.

A promising alternative to the ETS procedure was developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The first round of writing assessment, in 1969, relied heavily on a holistic measure, and was criticized for the lack of useful information that it yielded. The alternative developed for the second round is still holistic in application, but with a tint of the analytic mixed in. What NAEP did was recognize that if the purpose of a piece of writing is sharply defined, then there are a limited number of strategies that a writer can adopt in completing the task. The examiners labeled these characteristics "primary traits," and developed scoring guides that reflected how students dealt with each aspect of the writing task.

In an essay discussing the statement "A Woman's Place is in the Home," for example, one of the primary traits is the types of evidence students use. The scoring guide contains a list of six categories of evidence: conventional wisdom, personal experience, authority, analogy, history, and legal rights. Each of these is illustrated with examples from student work. The essays are then scored as containing or not containing each of the types of evidence, as well as for the overall organization and for the purpose of the appeal (in the sense of supporting a side of the argument).

Primary trait scoring recognizes more than one way to approach any given writing task. The difficulty is that new scoring guides must be developed each time the essay topic is changed. For the National Assessment exercises, the developers estimate it took 60 to 80 hours of professional time for each question, not including the time involved in administering and scoring pilot versions of each test item. National Assessment does release its exercises and scoring guides for public use, however, and is willing to help states and large districts adapt them.

Evaluation, of necessity, focuses on product rather than process. Yet it is interesting to note that primary trait scoring is closely aligned with a process approach to understanding the product. The first priority is not to label one writing sample better than another; rather it is to understand the different strategies that students use in approaching a writing task. One strategy may be more successful than an-

other for a particular task, but a strategy inappropriate for one task may be ideal for another. The description of what the student seems to be doing is separated from the judgment of whether that strategy is best or not.

Inservice Education

If we are concerned about the teaching of writing and want improvements in the schools, how do we go about it?

Here again in recent years we have shifted from product to process. During the 1960s, tremendous energies were devoted to curriculum reform. District and state curriculum committees produced 1,000-page guides to the English program; national curriculum study centers funded by USOE developed K-12 programs for the language arts. Teacher involvement was stressed, both in developing the new curricula and in testing and modifying the materials. The structure of the curriculum, however, came from the subject area rather than from the needs of students, from analysis of the knowledge to be gained rather than from analysis of processes involved in gaining that knowledge.

Once the development work was over, only a handful of the materials became available nationally. And those materials were neither much better nor much worse than those developed independently by the major educational publishers.

The real impact of the efforts at curriculum development was on the individuals involved in it. They benefited from sharing opinions—and disagreeing—and they went on to change and improve their teaching as a result of the process they had been through.

Today a number of writing programs similarly involve teachers in direct consideration of alternatives in teaching writing. Perhaps the most successful is the Bay Area Writing Project sponsored by the University of California at Berkeley, with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Carnegie Corporation, and the California state legislature. This project now has a series of satellite projects at other sites. One of the new names is the National Writing Project.

The underlying instructional model is relatively simple. Each summer, some 25 successful teachers are in-

vited to participate in a six-week program of writing and discussion about writing. The most successful of these teachers become teacher consultants and help run inservice programs in other schools and districts.

Though the organization is simple, there are some relatively radical innovations inherent in it:

—It assumes that experienced, practicing teachers have legitimate knowledge about the teaching of writing and can usefully share it with other teachers. The teachers come to the summer sessions as university fellows, not as students, and there is no "curriculum" and no one telling them "this is the way to teach writing."

—It assumes that one of the best ways to learn about the writing process is to be immersed in it and then to talk about the experience. Teachers are involved extensively in expository and narrative writing, which they polish and discuss in small working groups.

—It assumes that teachers who have become excited about the teaching of writing and who have been forced both to defend their own approaches and to seriously examine other approaches will continue to de-

velop after the summer session is over. Therefore, there is no Bay Area Writing Curriculum and no interest in building one.

The project stimulates the change process, provides teachers with the resources and breadth of experience to initiate sensible change, and trusts their professionalism and interest to carry the process through to an effective conclusion.

The history of educational reform suggests that effective change requires recognition that education itself is a complex process, dependent on the understanding and expertise of the individual teacher faced with the individual student rather than on the sequence of materials presented in a book. The Bay Area Writing Project offers one model that recognizes and accepts this complexity; the challenge for us is to use this model or to develop better alternatives to bring about change in our schools. ■

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