
JACK MCGARVEY

"I don't believe in correcting my children's writing. It'll hamper their creativity."

"My major responsibility in teaching writing is to correct my kids' grammatical and mechanical errors."

"I won't let my students use dialog until I give them a couple of lessons on how to punctuate it."

"I'll let my kids do anything. I can always teach them punctuation along the way."

"They do too much creative writing in the junior high school. We have to work hard to wean the students away from it and into the third-person expository essay."

"I don't care what you high school teachers want us to do. It's normal for kids in junior high to write in first person, and that's the kind of writing experience that produces good writing."

Such statements can be heard at almost any meeting when teachers of the language arts and English get together to talk about their craft. They reveal one of the most charming characteristics of teachers in general—holding firm, even passionate, opinions about what should be valued in teaching.

The above statements are, however, more than opinions. They are theory. And there is an irony here, for most teachers have an aversion to theory. Perhaps it's that we've all been bored silly with methods courses and graduate courses taught by folks who wouldn't last seven minutes in a real classroom. That dismal experience of having been exposed to theory unconnected to actual experience is enough to provoke outrage

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TEACHER CENTER AS AGITATOR



Any inservice that gets teachers riled up can't be all bad.



or ennui. Usually it's the latter, for as a group, we're polite, another one of our charming characteristics.

But I'd like to stick with teachers' aversion to things theoretical. It's an unfortunate aversion, for *as we think, so we do*. Teachers who say they don't believe in correcting children's writing hold as theory that a major part of their job is to nurture creativity. And because of that theory, they look for activities to do with their youngsters that will develop their vision of what teaching is. The same holds for teachers whose vision is that of the corrector.

The problem here, of course, is that such divergency of theory can hurt. It can hurt the child who passes in consecutive years from Ms. Creativity to Ms. Corrector. It's unlikely that the hurt will be permanent; children are, thank God, adaptable creatures. But something will have been lost. The child will not have had exposure to a consistent theory and, thus, consistent practice. Someone should sit down with Ms. Creativity and Ms. Corrector and raise questions about, in this case, what the teaching of writing is. Chances are the exchange of ideas would result in their changing their theories a little. Each of them, after all, is expressing part of a decent, well-thought-out theory of instruction.

The trick is to find a systematic way of opening the dialog. Enter what former U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe called "thoughtful and constructive agitators." What he meant was men and women who would raise questions about all facets of what we do with children. And what better place for thoughtful and constructive agitators than the local teacher center?

Teacher centers have been viewed as places where workshops are held. The more practical the workshop is, the better. Teachers, conventional wisdom goes, want something practical, something they can take back to the classroom and use the very next day. In fact, the most damning comment a teacher can make about a workshop is, "It was too theoretical."

Certainly, sponsoring practical workshops is a major role of a teacher center. But there is a need for raising questions about *why* we do what we do. There is a need to clarify what we mean by writing program, for example. There is a need to dig into the research, to see what it suggests, to look at good practice, and to put it all into statements that will raise questions. There is a need to deal directly with ideas, even to the point of shaking up teachers a little.

Teacher Center as Change Agent

Recently, we've been agitating a little here in Westport. We've developed a model for curriculum reform that has become a focus of the teacher center's work. Because of shrinking enrollment, differences in theory and practice have become more noticeable. The need is for more consistency. That doesn't mean lock-step conformity. Not at all. It does mean that we know things about the teaching of writing that will lead to consistent practice. If we know, for example, that the teaching of formal grammar apart from the teaching of writing is usually wasted time and effort, then we should say so and look for ways to connect grammar with writing. If we know that prewriting is an integral part of a writing program, then we should say so and look for prewriting experiences that work. If we know that revision is at the heart of learning how to write, we should say so, and look for ways to practice it.

So, last summer a group of four met at the teacher center to write a couple of dozen concise statements patterned after the NCTE's Commission on Writing Standards. We wrote a position paper called "On Writing—A Discussion Document." We deliberately made it a paper that would be difficult to ignore. We said saucy, eyebrow-raising things. And, at first glance, they appeared to be opinion. But they are not; they are theory supported by research and what we know of good practice. "Do not use red ink when correcting student writing," goes one of the statements. "There is no dichotomy between creative and expository writing. All writing is a creative act; all writing has expository elements in it," goes another.

The position paper is to serve as the first step in a process that will lead to the publication of guidelines for the Westport Public Schools Writing Program. We wanted to produce a paper that would not be shuffled into a file somewhere and ignored. We wanted to agitate.

The paper certainly raised not only eyebrows but also voices—of praise and protest. After presenting it to the administration and getting its backing, we submitted it to the faculties of the elementary, junior high, and high schools. The response was emotional and immediate. Schools where the resource teachers have been working with teachers in developing a writing program liked it, not surprisingly. Schools where we've only begun to offer resources in writing were less enthusiastic. In fact, the reaction tilted toward the negative. But once

emotion died down, dialog began.

The experience I had with the high school English faculty represents a kind of model of dialog that can occur with teacher center as agitator. With strong and happy support from the high school's assistant headmaster for English, I met with the teachers to discuss the paper. They are a strong-willed group of highly competent people, full of passionate opinions.

The first statement we discussed was the one about the red ink. Some teachers thought it was a frivolous remark. Some were a bit defensive. Others mulled it over and thought it had some merit. But what evolved was a discussion on power and audience. "A student who writes to avoid my red marks is writing only for me," one teacher remarked. "And that's not enough. I've got to find ways to define and broaden the audience." Another teacher, unconvinced, left the room, got a box full of red pens, and merrily offered them to his colleagues as the meeting ended.

The statement about there being no dichotomy between creative and expository writing also provoked a thoughtful discussion. Some of the high school faculty felt there was too much emphasis on creative writing in the junior high

schools. Not so, said I. "We've had little success with the third-person expository essay. We estimate that only about 20 percent of our ninth-graders can handle it. They have trouble being objective. Thus, we use first-person writing because it is most natural for these youngsters." The tone of the discussion was one of sharing mutual interest. And it cleared the way for further definition. *What is expository writing, anyway?*

The process went on. The second step was the formation of a districtwide committee of teachers from all levels that met to further refine the guidelines. We had in mind a final document of brief statements defining what writing is. We wanted to keep it short and concise. We expected compromise to occur along the way, but we wanted it to. We believe compromise reflects the best of what is known. Our goal was more consistent practice throughout the district.

In retrospect, we could have waited a couple of years until our missionaries, the resource teachers, had had a chance to start work on a writing program in all the schools. But change entails some risk-taking. And changing ideas is the greatest challenge of all, one that cannot be accomplished without some agitation. ■

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