

Empowering Students Through Writing

JOEL GREENBERG AND
CHRISTINE RATH

I hate writing worse than
macaroni and cheese and
that sucks pretty bad,
because it f—ing tastes
rook. I wouldn't eat
macaroni and cheese if it
was the last thing in the
world. I would rather
eat leaves, root, and tree
bark. I hate writing
because it gives me
arthuritis. When I write
for a long time my hands
cramp up. Then I can't
do s—t with that hand.

When they write on topics with personal meaning and read one another's papers to see whether they are communicating, even hard-to-teach students recognize the power of language and their ability to use it.

Alarming deficiencies in reading and writing ability continue to plague secondary students. More alarming, perhaps, is the continued lack of skill and understanding demonstrated by both special education and regular classroom teachers in addressing the problem. Frequently, teachers work without a theory guiding their teaching practices and therefore do not create or even choose appropriate teaching methods. Secondary teachers commonly view reading and writing as separate areas and routinely rely on inadequate, unrelated, and inappropriately packaged materials.

We offer neither a cookbook of educational recipes nor a statistically supported research report. Instead we present a theoretical base and a direction and describe one instance of its use. Our approach treats reading and writing as interactive and fundamentally complementary communication skills and addresses the serious needs of secondary students, particularly those of angry adolescents who have failed to learn either reading or writing skills adequately and who see no use in doing so. Since this approach evolved from practice and observation in many settings, it needs to be tailored to each particular teaching situation. We maintain, however, that in all situations, the nature of the connection between reading and writing is the empowering of the students as active agents in their education and lives. This implication is political as well as pedagogical.

Joel Greenberg and Christine Rath are both Master Teachers at Project Second Start, an alternative high school in Concord, New Hampshire. In addition, they operate a teacher training program for teachers of emotionally handicapped students.

The Unfortunate Separation of Reading and Writing

Several mistaken assumptions have led to a persistent separation of reading and writing within the curriculum. Writing skills are commonly considered to be the last skills developed within the hierarchy of language acquisition. For this reason, educators assume that adolescents who still lack reading skills, or who cannot spell reliably, cannot "handle" writing, that writing is too difficult and frustrating a task. Reading and spelling then become learning tasks isolated from the context and purpose supplied by writing.

Another reason for the lack of emphasis on writing for these particular students is the importance many educators attach to standardized tests. Meaningful evaluation of writing—and more important, meaningful writing—does not lend itself to the standardized test format.

Equally dangerous is the assumption that students who lack reading skills do not *need* to learn to write as long as they can read menus and balance checkbooks in order to handle the demands of adult life. They are often limited to and suffocated by life skills workbooks, irrelevant and very basic reading selections, comprehension exercises, meaningless vocabulary lists, and spelling tests. If writing is included in the educational process, it is generally separated from reading, and a sharp distinction is made between expressive skills and interpretive skills, between encoding and decoding. Writing as personal expression is considered neither possible nor practical with these students.

There is, finally, a hidden but related and far more damaging assumption that is conveyed to students: if it's not worth our time to teach you how to express yourself, it follows that you must not have anything worthwhile to say.



Student Attitudes—The Real Crisis

As might be expected, students also fail to see a connection between reading and writing and between either of these activities and their own communication needs. They regard reading and writing as elaborate forms of punishment that have no relation to reality. Students react with anger and anti-social attitudes when apparently meaningless drudgery is imposed from above. They do not understand writing as communication directed toward another person, or reading as communication from another person.

Often, the entire notion of verbal communication, and in severe cases *any* kind of organized communication, has become mistrusted and not worth the effort. The loss here is enormous. Writing and reading are not all that suffer. Accurate and effective communication of any kind requires organization of thought. Students need organization skills not only to read and write, but to sort, evaluate, and analyze the possibilities inherent in different situations; to determine goals, values, and courses of action; and to define themselves.

Even students with limited reading and writing skills can learn to value these skills. They can learn to see a page of words as someone else's attempt to reach them. They can learn to view writing as an opportunity to clarify and tinker with their own ideas and perceptions and to reach other persons.

Writing and the teaching of writing constitute the logical "guts" of an academic program for all adolescents. In writing, students direct communication toward others and create the possibility for reaction and response. In developing and revising text, writers must choose what they want to say, when and how to say it, and what response they hope to produce in another person. After considering audience reactions, authors must evaluate their writing and make important judgments about its quality and power to communicate.

The writing process enables the writer, perhaps for the first time, to sense the power of his or her language to affect another. Through using, selecting and rejecting, arranging and rearranging language, the student comes to understand how language is used. Writers and students discover that written language is not something fixed and unassailable, but rather the result of human choice (Newkirk, 1982).

The writer has an insider's point of view of written language. As an insider, as a maker of language, the writer is less likely to be intimidated by written language (p.113).

Reading also involves more than the application of a set of discrete skills. Readers play an active role in the communication process by interpreting another person's written message and meaning in terms of their own attitudes, experiences, and expectations. The view of reading as communication underlies the beliefs that reading and writing are intimately related, and that communication skills are fundamentally connected to our ability to change the surrounding world.

In The Classroom

The approach we have used integrates writing, subsequent improvement in reading skill and comprehension, and change in the student. It is particularly important and appropriate for students who have failed under a number of labels (disaffected, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, behaviorally disordered).

For most students, the first step is finding a topic with personal meaning. Some published lists and veteran teacher ideas can be used, but the most successful initial topics are those

that exploit anger and frustration. Some typical offerings include: a letter to the superintendent or police to get the teacher fired; a description of the vice principal on LSD; a letter to the governor to get yourself out of prison; and an obituary for yourself or the teacher. Students who find these topics threatening can be offered less emotionally charged but still "unbalanced" ideas; for instance, *A Day in the Life of a Flea in Your Teacher's Armpit*; or *The Autobiography of a French Fry*. (The slightly raunchy element in these topics helps to counteract the students' healthy mistrust of "cute" methods, but is not absolutely necessary. However, topics must force enough of a change in perspective so that students are compelled to examine their own points of view.)

Although these two kinds of topics differ in their capacity to emotionally involve students, both require students to "create" a world, and both convey the idea that writing involves choice and the power to create. In general, students should be given a fair amount of leeway in terms of topics and language, even though different teachers have different tolerances for obscene language. Students will test the idea that these are really *their* papers by making them unpalatable to the teacher: "You *said* I was supposed to write it the way I imagined it." Usually, the line between palatable and unpalatable may be drawn successfully on a personal basis: "Yes, but I want to see your idea (world) without being grossed out. It's hard for me to believe that this really is your world when it seems as if you're just arranging things to make me uncomfortable." At this point, it is important to handle such issues as relevant matters of concern between people who are communicating. An invocation of rules only verifies a student's long-held belief that writing is just junk that has to be done, not an avenue between brains.

Two additional and crucial activities must take place before the teacher's famous red pencil comes out and before the work, however creative, begins on grammar, spelling, and syntax. First, students need to read what they have written, preferably orally, not to check for mistakes but to see if their papers say what they want them to say.

Often, they don't. "I didn't mean that." "I forgot to put that part in." "What's *that* word?" "No, *that* guy—not *that* guy. Can't you understand anything?" Many teachers would be surprised at just how novel an idea this is for their students.

The second activity, which occurs after the student is satisfied with the work, involves having someone else read it, usually the teacher. As soon as possible, the reader audience should be expanded to include other writers in the group. (Every person in our school writes, including teachers.) Initial difficulties in the review process include tendencies to dwell on "safe" issues like punctuation and spelling or to say, "It's fine." Here a teacher has to probe to find out just what it is that's "fine." What do the others understand? Did the writer mean this? The readers now experience the reverse side of the responsibility carried by the author. They must explain when and how they are confused in order for the writer to understand what needs to be revised. At this point, students often gain a significant insight after expressing some initial anger: "The stupid jerk, he doesn't even know what I mean." For the first time, many students realize that other people can care enough about what they mean to communicate to ask for clarification.

Teachers need to understand both the underlying theory and the developmental process of this approach to teaching writing and communication skills. Student authors need consistent direction from the teacher in order to care whether or not their writing clearly communicates their thoughts and feelings to others. Without that direction, many teachers and students fail. Overcoming the fear of writing and correcting is a beginning, but it is not enough for the teacher to encourage students to produce work that is personally pleasing yet incomprehensible to others. Our broader concept of teaching writing integrates the ideas that form, punctuation, and style have purpose and that the purpose of writing is communication. Groups can be organized around topics and interests, friendships and power alliances, ability levels, compensating skills, joint authorship, and letters to outsiders such as political figures. The only requirement is that the topic be meaningful to

the student and that the instructional process underscore the idea that the purpose of writing is for other people to read, understand, and respond to what is in the student's head.

Concurrent with this process, each student generates a list of heavily used words and mechanical problems that have interfered with the proper understanding of the student's writing by others. Words are added in small increments and only when they are recognized as frequent problems (for instance, "spozta" = supposed to; to, two, too.) These sheets, although different for each student, are fairly similar. Most contain between 10 and 40 words by the end of the year. Initial treatment of punctuation refers almost entirely to recognition of pauses through oral reading and to distinction between phrases and sentences. Formal rules are rarely invoked. In fact, most rules in our language can be properly explained and derived from our need to read and understand written text properly. Commas do not follow supporting clauses because of

an edict from Heaven; they tell the reader to change voice and indicate a shift in meaning. They are cues to aid understanding. Writing is understanding. And understanding is the power to change.

Conclusion

Writing and reading are interrelated and inseparable communication skills. Through them, students attempt to organize and communicate their perceptions of the world in a way that is both personally meaningful and understandable to others. When students have the chance to write in their own words on topics that are important to them and to test whether their writing can communicate to their peers, writing and reading become powerful tools. With these tools, students can make sense of the surrounding world and, ultimately, have an effect on it. □

References

Birnbaum, J. C. "The Reading and Composing Behavior of Selected 4th and 8th

Grade Students." *Research in Teaching of English* 16 (October 1982): 241.

Chall, J. *Stages of Reading Development*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1983.

Freire, P. *Education for a Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1982.

Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1973.

Graves, D. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982.

Newkirk, T. "Young Writers as Critical Readers." In *Understanding Writing*, pp. 106-113. Edited by T. Newkirk and N. Atwell. Chelmsford, Mass.: The Northeast Regional Exchange, 1982.

Shanahan, T. "The Impact of Writing on Learning to Read." *Reading World* 19, 4 (1980): 357-368.

Smith, F. *Understanding Reading*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982.

Stauffer, R. *The Language Experience Approach to the Teaching of Reading*, 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.

Trosky, D. S., and Wood, C. "Using a Writing Model to Teach Reading." *Journal of Reading* 26 (October 1982): 34.

Vygotsky, L. S. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962.

NCSI

National Curriculum Study Institutes

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

ASCD's National Curriculum Study Institutes keep educational leaders informed about the newest developments in the rapidly changing fields of curriculum, instruction, and supervision. Program features include expert scholars and practitioners, exploration of new developments, and take-home materials. For professional growth and renewal, register for an NCSI:

Quality Circles in Education
February 13-14, 1985 · Dallas

Managing Effective Learning: Discipline and Motivation
February 20-21, 1985 · Charleston

Curriculum Evaluation
February 25-26, 1985 · St. Petersburg

Communication Throughout the Curriculum
February 28-March 1, 1985
Washington, D.C.

TESA Coordinator Training Seminar
March 20-22, 1985 · Evanston

Increasing Teaching Effectiveness
Planning for Curriculum Improvement in Schools

Women's Leadership
Teaching Thinking Skills
Implementing and Improving Middle Schools
Effective Teaching for Higher Achievement
Differentiated Supervision
March 21-22, 1985 · Chicago

Registration Fees:

ASCD members: \$120
Nonmembers: \$155
\$15 late or on-site fee.

For additional information, call or write:



Institute Registrar
225 N. Washington St.
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.