

English

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Righting School Writing

The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) movement that followed on the heels of Reading-Across-the-Curriculum programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s has taken hold so tenaciously that, regardless of what non-English teachers think about it, they cannot wish it away. School administrators at all levels are called upon to deal with it, because throwing the whole problem into the laps of English departments usually doesn't work. But when administrators suggest that writing is the responsibility of everyone in a school, they often encounter resistance.

Much of the emphasis on WAC was generated by Janet Emig (1971), who came upon the work of Lev Vygotsky (1962) during her studies of the writing process. Vygotsky, a noted linguist and philosopher of language, became a central figure among WAC proponents when he drew the relationship between thought and language that is fundamental to most WAC rationales: "The relation between thought and word is a living process; thought is born through words. . . . A word devoid of thought is a dead thing." Vygotsky could legitimately have gone on to say that most of what teachers teach and students learn is conveyed through language, some sensory learning notwithstanding. But this statement helped to propel the teaching of language outside the English classroom and into a much broader curricular arena.

Vygotsky (1978) pressed his case further when he wrote that educators have "paid little attention to the question of written language as such, that is, a particular system of symbols and signs whose mastery heralds a critical turning point in the entire cultural development of the child." Because each subject area has its own system of symbols, as Vygotsky implied, WAC

advocates suspected initially and later demonstrated empirically that an effective way for students to make connections within discrete subject areas is to write regularly in them.

The administrative problem with making writing the responsibility of everyone in the school is this: not all teachers write well. Not all teachers—even those who write passably—feel confident about their writing. Many teachers equate a curricular emphasis on writing with an emphasis on grammatical instruction, although this is not what WAC people advocate.

Administrators must find ways to convey to their faculties that learning is enhanced when writing becomes an integral part of the learning process in every classroom. They should emphasize that much of this writing need not be read, certainly not graded. It does not have to be "transactional writing," James Britton's (1970) label for writing that informs, persuades, or instructs others. Much of the writing people do outside the classroom is *not* transactional. Once teachers in all fields become aware of the ways in which people actually use writing in their daily lives, they may begin to appreciate how they can use writing to enhance their own classes. School administrators, either directly or through teacher workshops offered by writing specialists, can propose a list of writing activities that can occur regularly in every classroom to enhance learning. Teachers who employ these nonthreatening tactics will soon begin to realize that their classes become more interesting and productive and that their students learn more and perform better on tests than they used to.

Although every list should be tailored to local conditions, an initial list of five suggestions for all teachers might include the following:

1. Begin every class by having students spend five minutes writing a

summary of the last class or of their reading assignment.

2. End every class by having students spend five minutes writing a summary of that class (Use 1 or 2, not 1 and 2!).

3. Before in-class discussion, allow students five minutes to jot down their thoughts about the topic under discussion.

4. After the presentation in class of any particularly complex material, give students a couple of minutes to write down questions they have about it, then collect the questions and address some of them.

5. When students work in groups, have each member of the group write a brief evaluative summary of the group activity.

Deborah Swanson-Owens (1986), in her research on sources of resistance to innovation, found that "underlying conditions that influence instructional practice" have a major effect on curricular change in schools. By advocating the use of the above list of suggestions, administrators can smooth the way for WAC's inclusion in each subject across the curriculum. □

References

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