

WHAT THE AUTHORITIES TELL US ABOUT TEACHING WRITING: A SURVEY

CAROLYN BOIARSKY

A large discrepancy appears to exist between methods, attitudes, and behaviors recommended by authorities in the field for instruction in written discourse and teachers' actual practice in the classroom. While recent literature has recommended that writing instruction should be based on a process approach and should consider a developmental model for learning to write, many teachers, according to such surveys as those by Applebee, Hoetker and Brossell, and Petty and Finn continue to use the traditional product-oriented, rule-bound approach which was in vogue prior to the turn of the century. The retention of such an approach is rather analogous to a gynecologist today recommending that a woman in her mid-thirties who is having difficulty conceiving take a vacation with her husband rather than undergo a laparoscopy: the first solution being based on myth, the latter on scientific knowledge.

Cooper in the Foreward to Applebee's report on the teaching of writing in the nation's secondary schools, describes American high school writing programs as follows:

Students [are rarely asked] to produce original texts of more than two or three sentences. . . . On the rare occasions that [they are asked] to compose extended written discourse . . . [they would be requested] to finish it on the spot. . . . Students would nearly always write transactional discourse. . . . Students would nearly always write to the teacher as examiner.

When [teachers] ask for extended written discourse, [they] limit directions to a brief topic statement usually stated quite generally. . . . [Teachers] limit . . . their responses to matters of usage, spelling and sentence structure. . . . On the few occasions, when [they ask] students to revise their writing, [they will] be satisfied with small corrections and additions. (xi-xii)

Why does a discrepancy exist between the methods which English educators expound and the methods which are actually practiced by the majority of the nation's teachers?

Several conclusions appear possible. First, the frequency with which teachers use various methods is sufficient for engaging students in writing effectively. However, the brouhaha by the Carnegie Foundation, the decline in SAT scores, and the complaints by business and industrial leaders over students' writing proficiency appears to indicate otherwise. Second, there is a discrepancy between educators' perceptions of the frequency with which teachers should use certain methods related to the process approach and teachers' perceptions of the frequency with which they should use these methods. Finally, teachers fall into Nelson's schizophrenic category. Nelson, who conducted an ethnographic study of the teaching practices of 23 teachers of writing, found that many teachers held a dual view of teaching composition. While many had incorporated some process-oriented behaviors into their teaching repertoire, they had not been willing to replace old methods. Rather they had only been willing to increase slightly or to add some methods to their repertoire.

All three of these reasons indicate a failure on the part of teachers to recognize how often to use the various process-oriented methods so that they can develop effective strategies for writing instruction. For example, teachers are unsure how papers should be graded. Some texts recommend papers be graded holistically (according to the overall impression) rather than designating certain points for grammar, certain points for content, and certain points for organization. However, other texts suggest evaluation procedures should include other forms of assessment in addition to holistic evaluation. They recommend such forms as primary trait analysis in which papers are graded on specific criteria relating to that particular writing task; for instance, a social letter might be graded for its adherence to the proper salutation and closing and for the use of the appropriate tone and content, or dis-

course analysis for the number of words per sentence, the types of phrases used, and techniques for achieving coherence.

Another dilemma facing teachers is what percentage of assignments students should be allowed to write for each other as audience and what percentage to write for the teacher as evaluator. Myers talks of integrating three models — processing, distancing, and modeling — which he discusses in his book, *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition*, but just how this integration is to occur he doesn't say.

In an effort to provide teachers with some sort of basis for determining when and how often to use certain methods, we decided to go back to the experts to try to pin them down. We wanted to know what exactly did they mean when they said students should be able to select their own topics. Did they mean all of the time or only once or twice? Would elementary students be given this opportunity as often as post secondary students or did they need more guidance?

PROCEDURES

A questionnaire based on a review of the literature was developed and validated by a panel of experts. The instrument — “An Inquiry Into Classroom Practices in the Teaching of Writing” — was then sent to 222 authorities, comprising two groups. The first group was defined as those who had published a work in the form of a book or monograph, either as an author or coauthor, editor or coeditor, under the auspices of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) since 1963. The second group was defined as those who held administrative positions in the various extensions of the National Writing Project (NWP). The inclusion of persons representing these combined categories appeared to provide a means of surveying persons who possessed both theoretical knowledge and field experience in the teaching of writing at several grade levels. Respondents were asked to determine how often they believed specific practices should be used at each of four grade levels — primary, middle, secondary, and post secondary.

One hundred one persons responded, with 31 being NCTE authorities and 70 NWP administrators. The data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Two types of experimental design were used to analyze the data inferentially. A subjects-by-treatment analysis of variance was used to study

the differences between each of the four grade levels while a split-plot analysis of variance design was used to study differences between the two types of authorities. No significance was found for the latter. However, significant differences were noted between the elementary and post secondary levels for 27 of 39 practices studied.

Tentative norms for teaching writing emerge for 19 of the 39 practices studies. For the purposes of this study, 68% (the percent of responses which fall within one standard deviation from the mean) of the respondents must agree within a one-point spread on the rating scale to establish a tentative norm for an item. For example, at least 68% of the respondents need to circle a rating of either a four or a five in order for a mean of 4.7 to be considered to represent a tentative norm for that item. The Appendix provides a list of those items which meet the criteria for a tentative norm.

THE RESULTS

The responses indicate that authorities favor a predominantly process approach to teaching writing which is congruent with children's development as indicated by different ratings at the various grade levels. The results indicate that throughout the school year teachers should engage students in all three stages of the composing process. Students at all levels should almost always be engaged in rehearsal experiences. Furthermore, when drafting, students at all grade levels should be permitted to explore what they have to say and to erase, cross out, insert, and cut and paste as they do so. Formal outlines should not be required more than once or twice at the upper levels and never at the lower levels. Students should be encouraged to revise their work in additional drafts with such revisions, when necessary, extending beyond mere proofreading to include such major changes as voice, tone, and organization. At the lower levels students should be encouraged to engage in such revisions more than half the time while at the upper levels students should be encouraged to engage in such revision almost always. To support this process, teacher and/or peer conferences should be conducted between and during drafts at all grade levels. Peer groups should be used to provide students with feedback on the compositions slightly more than half the time with the other half being devoted to teacher-student conferences.

In an effort to help students develop fluency, teachers of beginning writers at the primary level should allow children to

dictate their discourse to someone about half the time. Writing activities, such as free writing and brief writing exercises of about five or ten minutes, should be provided slightly more than half the time, regardless of grade levels. In addition, at all levels one of the specific activities for developing fluency — keeping a journal for at least a six-or eight-week period — should almost always be required.

Students' fluency as well as their ability to write an effective composition depends heavily on their motivation which is often affected by their interest in the topic and their knowledge of the topic. For slightly more than half their compositions, students at all grade levels should be given the opportunity to select their own topics. However, many authorities recommend that the teacher retain some control over the selection. One method for doing so is by determining the umbrella topic and then permitting the students to determine their own subtopic under it. At the primary and middle levels students should also almost always be able to write from their own experiences, with that opportunity decreasing to slightly more than half the time by the secondary level and to only about half the time at the post secondary level. Furthermore, students should be able to write out their ideas without regard to length or a specific syntactic structure, such as a sentence or a paragraph. They should have this freedom almost always at the primary level but only slightly more than half at the other levels. At the primary level students should also spend almost half their time developing a composition as part of a group activity. However, by the secondary and post secondary levels group writing should occur only about once or twice.

Finally, because the end goal of all writing for communication is for the writing to be read by an audience, students should be able to read their compositions aloud to their class or to a small group of peers and have their work published or displayed. This should occur slightly more than half the time at the lower levels and about half the time at the upper levels. In addition, teachers of all grade levels should share their own writing with their students for a little more than half the assignments.

The context for students' writing should involve a variety of audiences and modes. At the primary level students should spend about half their time writing in the expressive mode (using personal experience as the basis of their discourse). Another third of their time should be spent writing in the poetic mode, which includes poetry, fiction, and other literary

forms such as biography and belles-lettres. Students should spend only about 10% of their time writing in each of the two transactional modes. The transactional/functional mode includes all forms of business and technical writing including business letters, proposals, and final reports. The transactional/expressive includes essays and analytical writing forms such as editorials. As grade level increases, students should spend less time writing in the expressive and poetic modes and more time writing in the two transactional modes. In the middle grades they should be spending only one-third of their time writing in the expressive mode and only a quarter of their time writing in the poetic mode, but they should be spending about 20% of their time writing in each of the transactional modes. In the secondary level the amount of time spent writing in the expressive mode should have declined to 25%, and the amount of time in the poetic mode should have declined to 20%, while the amount of time spent in the two transactional modes should have increased to about 25% for each. Finally, at the post secondary level the amount of time spent in the expressive mode should have dropped to less than 20% and in the poetic mode to only slightly more than 10%, while the amount of time spent in the two transactional modes should have increased to one-third of the time for each.

The audiences students write for should also be varied. At the primary level, students should write for themselves and their peers about the half the time, with another third of the time split between writing for a known outside audience and for the teacher in a role other than evaluator. The remaining 15% of the time should be split between writing for an unknown outside audience and for the teacher as an evaluator. By the post secondary level students should be writing for themselves only about 10% of the time. The amount of time they spend writing for their peers should also have decreased, but only to about 20%. The amount of time students spend writing for an unknown outside audience and for the teacher as evaluator should have increased to about 20% for each, while the amount of time students spend writing for the teacher in a role other than evaluator and for a known outside audience should remain fairly constant across grade levels.

Writing also needs to be connected to units of study in the content areas and in the language arts. This relationship should be explicitly established about half the time, regardless of grade level. However, literary models should be used

only once or twice at the primary level and no more than half the time at the secondary level.

Special attention needs to be paid to developing a valid relationship between the study of language, as one aspect of the language arts, and writing. Lessons in sentence combining, slotting, and embedding, designed to help develop students' syntactic maturity and fluency, should be provided slightly less than half the time at the lower grade levels and should decline to once or twice at the post secondary level. As the basis for instruction in punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, and usage, teachers should use students' own compositions about three-quarters of the time and exercises in textbooks the remaining time.

Assessment of student writing should be congruent with the type of instruction outlined by these responses. To reflect the three stages of the composing process, teachers should always wait to grade papers until after students have had an opportunity to revise at least one draft. Various types of assessments should be conducted, depending on the teacher's purposes. However, an error count should almost never be used. At the primary level, holistic scoring should be used about half the time, primary trait analysis should be used for another quarter of the time, and the remaining percentage of evaluated assignments should be equally divided between discourse analysis and analytic scoring in which such aspects as content, organization, language, and mechanics are each rated and then totaled for a grade.

The percent of papers to be scored by three of the forms of assessment — holistic, analytic, and discourse — changes at the secondary and post secondary levels. On these upper levels, teachers should be using holistic scoring only about one-third of the time but should be increasing their use of analytic scoring to about 20% of the time and their use of discourse analysis to 15%.

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides only tentative, not definitive, norms for the frequency with which various methods should be used in the teaching of writing. The norms which these results suggest need to be tested in the field to determine if the proposed frequencies for the various methods studied are effective in helping students develop and improve their writing proficiency.

Perhaps the greatest need which this study indicates is

for teachers, especially at the lower levels, to become researchers themselves, to test out and evaluate the results of their use of the various practices. There has often been a split between teachers in the field and university faculty, with teachers claiming university members sit in their ivory towers, spouting theories, unaware of the circumstances under which they themselves are expected to teach and unable to relate their theories to the actual classroom situation. At the same time, university members wring their hands, bemoaning the teachers' failure to apply the methods which their theories, their research, and their observations indicate are effective. Over the past two decades, university educators have increasingly moved into the field to observe, to conduct research, and to work with student teachers in actual classroom situations. They are no longer simply spouting theories from research; they have begun to merge the two worlds of theory and practice and need to continue to do so. However, only a few teachers, at the encouragement of the National Writing Project, have expanded their role to include that of the researcher and have become capable of objectively evaluating the results of their own experiences in terms of student performance. An increasing number will need to do so, becoming authorities themselves, if surveys such as this one are to truly reflect how various methods can be used effectively in the classrooms of varying levels.

It seems apparent that teachers need to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to use the practices discussed in this study. Teachers should be urged to adopt in their teaching those practices for which tentative norms have been derived as often as the study suggests. In addition, they should be urged to use the other practices at least half the time.

Perhaps the greatest concern among educators is how to train teachers to utilize these practices so that they are sufficiently competent to engage in them as often as this study indicates they should. Gagné points out that teachers are apt to fall back on their old attitudes if they appear to be as good as any new ones. Thus, if teachers are to use the new practices as often as suggested, staff development sessions are needed to help teachers adopt new attitudes toward these practices as well as new skills and knowledge for implementing them.

It is hoped that the results of this survey will provide tentative norms which can be used to develop a model for com-

position instruction. In addition, while these norms are based on ideal conditions, teachers should attempt to achieve the recommended frequency rates as much as possible. For example, while the results indicate that secondary students should have an opportunity to write in the expressive mode about a quarter of the time, teachers may not always be able to provide this opportunity. However, because of their knowledge of what an ideal frequency should be, teachers should attempt to provide students with such assignments as close to 25% of the time as possible, rather than only once or twice or as often as half the time.

As teachers begin to use these tentative norms for determining the frequency with which to use the various methods in their classroom, they should be able to perceive improvements in student writing proficiency and an expansion of students' capability in writing in a variety of contexts in various modes and genres. The teachers, themselves, should experience an increase in their own enjoyment in teaching composition. Finally, if teachers have become researchers themselves, they should begin to recognize which of these norms are appropriate and which need to be modified to reflect actual effective classroom practice.

Carolyn Boiarsky is the former coordinator of the Georgia State University/Southeast Center for the Teaching of Writing. She is presently a consultant in teaching writing for the DeKalb County, Georgia, Board of Education and a member of the faculty at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

APPENDIX

Tentative Norms Derived from Inquiry into Classroom Practices for Teaching Writing

Primary Level

1. Teachers should always engage students in rehearsal experiences.
2. Teachers should never require students to write a formal outline.
3. Teachers should always encourage students to write from their own experiences.
4. Teachers should not assign writing which uses literary works for students to read, analyze, and imitate more than once or twice in each course.
5. Teachers should allow students to write out ideas without regard for length all but once or twice a course.
6. Teachers should always encourage students to erase, cross out, and cut and paste all but their final drafts.
7. Teachers should assign students to keep a journal for a six- to eight-week period for all but one or two courses.
8. Teachers should publish or display students' work all but once or twice a course.
9. Teachers should not assess student writing using an error count or

discourse analysis more than 25% of the time.

10. Teachers should assign writing in the transactional mode about 20% of the time.

Middle Level

1. Teachers should always engage students in rehearsal activities.

2. Teachers should not require students to write a formal outline more than once or twice.

3. Teachers should require students to keep a journal for a six- to eight-week period for all but one or two courses.

4. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to write a composition as a group activity about half the time.

5. Teachers should provide beginning writers with opportunities to dictate their discourse slightly less than half the time.

6. Students should be encouraged to write from their own experiences all but once or twice each course.

7. Teachers should assign writing which uses literary works for students to read, analyze, and imitate slightly less than half the time.

8. Teachers should always encourage students to erase, cross out, and cut and paste all but their final drafts.

9. Teachers should encourage students to write more than one draft of a composition in which successive drafts include, when necessary, major revisions for all but one or two assignments.

10. Teachers should not assess compositions using an error count or discourse analysis more than 25% of the time.

Secondary Level

1. Teachers should engage students in rehearsal experiences all but once or twice.

2. Teachers should not require students to write a formal outline more than once or twice.

3. Teachers should require students to keep a journal for a six- to eight-week period for all but one or two courses.

4. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to write a composition as a group activity slightly less than half the time.

5. Teachers should provide beginning writers with opportunities to dictate their discourse once or twice each course.

6. Teachers should always encourage students to erase, cross out, and cut and paste all but their final drafts.

7. Teachers should encourage students to write more than one draft in which successive drafts include, when necessary, major revisions for all but one or two assignments.

8. Teachers should not use analytic or discourse analysis to assess student compositions more than 35% of the time.

9. Teachers should allow students to write for themselves about 15% of the time.

10. Teachers should not assume the role of evaluator more than 10% of the time.

Post Secondary Level

1. Teachers should engage students in rehearsal experiences all but once or twice.

2. Teachers should not require students to write a formal outline more than once or twice.

3. Teachers should require students to keep a journal for a six- to eight-week period for all but one or two courses.
4. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to write a composition as a group activity slightly less than half the time.
5. Teachers should provide beginning writers with opportunities to dictate their discourse once or twice each course.
6. Teachers should always encourage students to erase, cross out, and cut and paste all but their final drafts.
7. Teachers should always encourage students to write more than one draft of a composition in which successive drafts include, when necessary, major revisions.
8. Teachers should assign lessons in sentence combining, slotting, etc., once or twice a course.
9. Teachers should not assess compositions using analytic or a discourse analysis more than 35% of the time.

WORKS CITED

- Applebee, A. *Writing in the Secondary School*. Urbana: NCTE, 1981.
- Gagne, R. *The Conditions of Learning*. New York: Holt, and Winston, 1977.
- Hoetker, J., and G. Brossell. "An *EJ* Readership Survey." *English Journal* 68 (1979): 19-25.
- Meyers, M., and J. Gray. *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition: Processing, Distancing, and Modeling*. Urbana: NCTE, 1983.
- Nelson, M. W. "Professional Schizophrenia: Conflict in the Writer Who Teaches." Paper presented at the Conference on English Education. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1981.
- Petty, W., and P. Finn. "Classroom Teachers Report on Teaching Writing." In *Perspectives on Writing in Grades 1-8*. Ed. Shirley Haley-James. Urbana: NCTE, 1981, 19-34.

