A STUDY OF ELEVENTH-GRADE WRITING: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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Background

This study reports an analysis of 1892 essays written by eleventh graders as part of a district-wide assessment of their writing. The papers were scored for two primary traits: a writer's ability to use the conventions of standard written English and a writer's ability to support an argument. Significantly, the data reflect the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from 1969-1979: that seventeen-year-olds have trouble supporting an argument and that mechanical errors are not the primary cause of the deterioration in writing skills among young writers. Here we examine the data from our study and show their relevance to the teaching of writing.

Review of the NAEP Assessment

Data from one NAEP report (1980) suggested that the rhetorical skills of 17-years-olds on a persuasive writing task declined between 1974 to 1979. "Proportions writing minimally acceptable papers dropped from 78% to 73% and those writing successful papers declined from 21% to 15%"(1). Similarly, the NAEP (1981) found that when high school seniors were asked to write evaluative essays about things they had read, the majority of them simply listed vague assertions and observations and failed to include supporting statements. In 1979, only 22% of the 17-year-olds used evidence to support their interpretations and judgments. The 1981 report,

therefore, suggested that young writers be required to "explain and defend their opinions at some length" (4) and that we ask them to find "evidence for judgments" and "state and defend interpretation and opinions"(5).

A second finding of both the 1980 and 1981 reports was that mechanical errors were not the primary cause of this deterioration in writing skills among young writers. In its examination of mechanics (error counts) the NAEP (1980) found that little seemed to have changed over the 10-year period. The writing of the top 25% of the students was virtually error free. The top 50% of the papers were also largely error free, though they averaged about one awkward sentence, two misspelled words, and four punctuation errors. The bottom 25% of the papers contained far more errors, and the bottom 10% displayed severe writing problems. "Writing skills—at least in terms of error counts—do not seem to distribute themselves smoothly over a 'bell shaped' curve. Rather, they are distributed in heavily skewed shapes that suggest two very different populations of people. One of those populations—the majority—appears to have a general, though imperfect, grasp of written language. The other population appears to be virtually lost" (55).

The significant declines reported in the 1981 report were in the ability to analyze major and minor points, compare and contrast, draw inferences, evaluate data, and support an evaluation with full elaboration. In fact, the NAEP argued that a teacher's premature attention to spelling, awkward sentences, proofreading, and the control of syntax, diction, and usage could augment this deterioration in writing skills.

Method

Stimulus Item

The stimulus to which the eleventh graders responded asked them to take a position for or against limiting participation in extracurricular activities to students maintaining a *C* average. The intended audience was their high school principal, and the writing time, including pre-writing and rewriting, was limited to thirty minutes.

Rubrics

Rubrics were developed to measure two primary traits rather than the overall effectiveness of the student's writing (Cooper and Odell).

To assess each student's ability to support an argument, raters used a primary trait rubric based on Toulmin's system of argument in which a writer makes a claim, provides evidence to support that claim, and then provides warrants to demonstrate the relationship between the evidence and the claim (Schultz & Laine). A student earned a *four* rating by taking a position and providing exceptionally well-elaborated evidence. Better than adequate use of evidence and supporting warrants earned an essay a score of *three*; adequate evidence and warrants, a score of *two*; and inadequate evidence and warrants, a score of *one*.

To measure each student's use of mechanics, we chose a standard four-point scale. A student earned a *four* if his/her use of conventions created no interference for the reader; a *three* for conventions that caused minor interference for the reader; a *two* for moderate interference; and a score of *one* if the use of conventions created major interference for the reader.

Interrater Agreement

Interrater agreement was monitored throughout the two training sessions (one devoted to the primary trait of supporting an argument and one devoted to the primary trait of maintaining mechanical correctness) as well as during the actual scoring of the 1892 essays for both traits.

Results

During the training session devoted to the primary trait of mechanical correctness, the raters reached an acceptable level of agreement for the 10 training essays. During the actual scoring session for mechanics, a 92% level of agreement was reached among the raters. That is, only 8% of the ratings varied by more than one number.

During the training session devoted to the primary trait of supporting an argument, the raters reached an acceptable level of agreement for the 12 training essays. During the actual scoring of the essays for this trait, 87% agreement was maintained by the raters. Only 16% of the ratings varied by more than one number.

Main Body of Data

Table 1 displays the contrasting abilities of our students as measured by these two traits. Fifty-one percent of the juniors were

unable to take a position and support that position with evidence and warrants. These students received scores from two raters that were *one* or below on the numerical scale. Twenty-one percent of these juniors wrote essays that showed promise (rated *two*). Twenty-one percent of these essays were judged to be good (*three*). Seven percent of the essays were rated as *four* by both raters.

Table 1: Comparison of Abilities to Substantiate an Argument and Control Mechanics

Scale	Ability to Substantiate Argument	Mechanics
1 (low)	51%	10%
2	21%	27%
3	21%	36%
4 (high)	7%	27%

Only 10% of these juniors wrote essays that were so mechanically weak that they were essentially unreadable; these essays received scores of *one* by independent readers. Sixty-three percent of the students wrote essays without significant mechanical problems; they received ratings of *three* or *four* on mechanics. Twenty-seven percent of the essays lacked any mechanical problems and received ratings of *four* by both raters.

An Illustrative Example

The following "Dear Principal" letter is typical of those essays that raters judged ineffective in spite of their superficial correctness.

Figure 1
Joe's Essay

Dear Principal,

The new grade policy that you are proposing for the student body is one that I think should have been put into action a long time ago. There are too many students who are being deprived of a good education because of extra-cirricular activities. These activities are for after school yet they are interfering with the students learning. Many of our athletes have grades that are below a C marking. I feel that the students think that their sport is more important than their learning. The point that these students are missing is that of when they are done with playing football, baseball, tennis, etc. . . . they have a life to live and if you don't know anything because you didn't

maintain a "C" average in school you'll find it hard to get through life. Your proposal is a great one in that it will not only help the student now but it will help him/her even more in the future. So what you are actually doing is helping these people with their lives.

Two independent raters judged that Joe's use of conventions creates only minor interference for the reader. They noted that while he fails to use a comma after an adverb clause and before a coordinating conjunction and while he does not use an apostrophe to show plural possession, his essay contains no major sentence problems (no fragments, no comma splices, no run-ons) and no agreement problems. The raters further noted that Joe successfully distinguishes between "there" and "their," uses "too" appropriately, demonstrates few spelling problems, and uses tenses consistently. In short, Joe's writing contains few errors in superficial correctness; in a scale of four (*four* being the highest score), Joe earned a score of *three* from each of two raters.

The raters, however, who read Joe's paper for his ability to support argument gave Joe a score of *one* on a scale of four. While he makes a claim and offers some evidence, the evidence is repetitious and insufficient. In other words, he is not able to persuade the reader of his claim.

In the beginning of his letter, for example, he claims that the new policy "should have been put into action a long time ago." In support of that claim, his evidence includes several assertions about extra-curricular activities, several about athletes and several about how grades influence a student's future. About extra-curricular activities, he generalizes that "too many students are being deprived of a good education because of extra-curricular activities," and "these activities interfere with the students learning." About athletes, he generalizes that their "sport is more important than their learning" and "many of our athletes have grades that are below a C marking." About how a grading policy influences life after graduation, he asserts that when athletes get done playing sports, "they have a life to live" and if they don't maintain a *C* average, they'll "find it hard to get through life."

Even a cursory analysis of these statements points to their redundancy. Instead of building an argument, Joe strings together many assertions, often simply restating in other words the same piece of evidence. Nowhere in his essay does Joe offer warrrants to tie this evidence to his original claim: never, for example, does he show

how, when, or why certain after-school activities are interfering with learning. Never does he demonstrate that many athletes have below a *C* average and never does he show how or why low grades will make it hard to get through life. He fails to point out, for example, that those who cannot make a career of professional sports must seek employment in other fields. And, he overlooks the necessity of maintaining a high grade-point average to obtain a good job or enter college. Not only does Joe fail to support his own argument, he also fails to anticipate possible counter-arguments: that after-school activities could, in fact, provide the necessary relaxation to help a student better concentrate on school work, or that many colleges and employers value a student's involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Successful as Joe is in using standard conventions, he fails to develop a persuasive argument. He advances an opinion on the proposed policy and even amasses a string of data, but he never explains why his evidence—little more than unsupported generalizations—justifies his position.

Discussion & Summary

The data in this study clearly reflect the NAEP findings. While most of the 1892 juniors in our sample had difficulty making a claim, supporting that claim with sufficient evidence, and providing adequate warrants for that evidence, a much smaller number of students had such poor control of mechanics that their essays were unreadable.

The contrast of these data, corresponding to national findings from NAEP, suggests to high school teachers that their students can possess greater strength in the mechanics of writing than in the ability to substantiate an argument with evidence and warrants. While mechanics can not be disregarded, other more fundamental issues of writing also need to be addressed. Joe, for example, merits praise for his successful use of conventions, but he needs instruction in pre-writing to help him generate the evidence and warrants to support his claim.

In his essay, "Mechanical Correctness in Composition Instruction," Robert Connors (1985) uncovers the cultural and pedagogical causes for the preoccupation with superficial correctness that has characterized writing classes since the 19th century. Connors cites Barriss Mills, author of the frequently cited "Writing as Process" essay, as one of the first to speak out against this preoccupation.

"Nothing is more blighting," Mills writes, "to natural and functional written communication than an excessive zeal for purity of usage of mechanics" (Connors 65). James Berlin points to this same phenomenon in his *History of Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*, arguing that to emphasize style—at the same time deemphasizing invention and arrangement—is to write outside of a rhetorical context and thus to distort reality.

As early as 1963, research supported the theory that the formal teaching of grammar has a "negligible" even "harmful" effect on writing improvement (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer). Sherwin concluded a study by saying that "instruction in formal grammar is an ineffective way to help students achieve proficiency in writing." And surveys by Bamberg in 1978 and 1981 support the findings of Stotsky, Van de Veghe, Haynes, Holbrook, and Whiteman that active language manipulation, not time in formal grammar instruction, is what helps students learn to write (Hartwell).

The results of this study of the writing of the 1892 juniors in a large urban school district thus provide further evidence of what twenty-five years of research have demonstrated: that it is inappropriate—even mistaken—to suggest to young writers that superficial correctness in and of itself guarantees that their writing will be effective.

Implications for the Teaching of Writing

A number of specific suggestions emerge to help address the needs documented by more than a decade of NAEP assessment and more recently demonstrated by this study: (1) that we help students develop strong and effective arguments, encouraging them to pay equal attention to all three parts of the composing process—invention, arrangement, and style—and not give undue and acontextual emphasis to style; (2) that we help students to think in terms of usage that is "appropriate" or "inappropriate," rather than right or wrong; and (3) that we help students learn the conventions of standard English not through isolated "grammar lessons" but by seeing the appropriateness of conventions to a designated rhetorical context.

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