Tradition and the Indiana Writing Project

When we first came to Indiana, we had to get used to our new role as horsemen of the Apocalypse. We had come to Ball State to be part of a new program in composition and rhetoric, yet we found that simply by believing in writing as a process we threatened our colleagues. The grapevine told us that we didn't uphold standards. We didn't teach from the handbook, we didn't mark errors the Harbrace way. Worst of all, we didn't ask students to write in-class papers on impromptu topics. We didn't fit the tradition, nor did our Indiana Writing Project.

This tradition of teaching writing is well entrenched in Indiana's schools. We have traced its roots to a document called the "Joint Statement on Freshman English in College and High School Preparation," which the Departments of English in the four Indiana colleges prepared during the early 1960's. This document enunciates a series of "required abilities in English for students entering college," which still, in some places, guides the preparation of high school and college students. Each of these abilities, while framed in terms of active verbs with the student as subject, is actually defined in terms of the written product, as follows:

We expect an entering student to write well enough to present his ideas in logical and clearly constructed sentences and paragraphs; to develop these into an organized unit; to be free from fear that mechanical errors may distort or cloud his meaning; to be confident that his ideas will be understood and respected.

To evaluate a student's writing ability using these guidelines, an English teacher judges whether the student has presented, developed, been free from fear, and been confident and respected by reading the paper and verifying whether it is logical, organized, free of mechanical errors, and understandable. All disagreements between the student and the teacher can be resolved by appeal to the text of the paper.

After defining these expectations, the "Joint Statement" goes on to define how they translate into grading criteria, namely "content, organization, sentence structure, diction, and mechanics (grammar, spelling, and punctuation)." It then provides a tabular summary of how various levels of performance on the criteria can be mapped into a grade for the paper. To assist teachers in making decisions, sample marked papers are provided that help define each grade level. None of the markings or comments offered as examples incorporates concepts like revision, persona, or tone. They focus only on verifiable structures such as topic sentences, or errors in the papers such as agreement errors.

Rhetorical Criteria

The Indiana tradition has been further defined by one particular implementation of the "Joint Statement" at Ball State Teachers College (now Ball State University, our home institution), a grading procedure known as the "limiter system." The English Department at Ball State is labeled as "particularly important" three rhetorical criteria: adequate restriction of the topic and focus; logical organization of the essay; unified, coherent, developed paragraphs.

They further labeled the following errors in grammar and mechanics as "very serious," as "several of them severely limit the quality and, consequently, the grade of the essay": inappropriate sentence fragment; inappropriate fused sentence; inappropriate comma splice; subject-verb disagreement; pronoun-antecedent agreement; errors in verb forms and usage; several different misspelled words.

In order to grade a paper, teachers counted the number of these limiting errors, either of the rhetorical or grammatical/mechanical type, with the special dispensation that three misspellings constituted one countable error. Teachers assigned grades to papers according to the number of errors counted, one A, two a C, three a D, and four or more an F.

Even though the "Joint Statement" has been out of date for at least ten years, even though the limiter system has not been used officially for at least ten years, and even though many teachers have adopted different attitudes toward teaching writing, a great number of practicing teachers in Indiana were trained under these rubrics. As a result, the mainstream tradition of teaching writing in the state has been product oriented and has as a strong subcomponent the eradication of limiting error by the teaching of grammar. Included in this tradition is the attitude inherited from Swift and the Eighteenth Century Rationalists that the language must be defended from the corruption represented by everyday errors. In an interesting synthesis of means and ends, many practicing
teachers view any change in teaching methods as the abandonment of the standards they were meant to protect.

Our Study

In order to understand whether the Indiana Writing Project might modify this position, we gave attitude surveys based on the CCC evaluation system (1982) to the fourteen Teacher Consultants participating in our first Summer Institute in 1986. Our goal was to determine whether attitudes toward standards changed as attitudes toward instructional methods changed.

We administered a pre-instruction survey at the initial luncheon before the Institute began, and a post-instruction survey on the last day of the Institute. The surveys measured attitudes toward 37 different values and standards for writing. [This was done on a semantic differential scale which varied from 1 to 5. Pre/post attitude changes were measured using t-tests for paired samples, with p<.05 set as the criterion for determining significance.]

Results

The most important result was that none of the values toward the following twenty-one values and standards, which by and large reflect the values and standards upheld by the "Joint Statement," changed:

1. The need to support main ideas
2. The need to use appropriate details
3. The need to organize
4. The need to select appropriate words
5. The need to plan papers before writing
6. The need to revise papers
7. The need to revise the organization of papers
8. The need to revise sentences
9. The need to revise ideas
10. The need to correct mistakes in punctuation and grammar
11. The ability to use a dictionary when needed
12. The ability to adjust writing styles according to the purpose of the writing
13. The ability to adjust writing styles according to the needs of the readers
14. The ability to learn new words
15. The ability to take essay tests
16. The ability to ask questions about problems faced in writing
17. Using class discussion of student writing as a teaching method
18. Using class discussion of writing as a teaching method
19. Using exercises in manipulating sentences as a teaching method
20. Writing essays in class
21. Using lectures on composing theory as a method of teaching

IWP Teacher Consultants did not cease to expect papers to present a central idea, to expect papers to develop that idea with support or details, or to expect papers to be developed appropriately and organized well (items 1-4, 10-12, and 19). They also continued to expect papers to be revised and free of error (items 6-10). In addition, they continued to uphold some very traditional methods (items 15 and 18-21), although they probably would alter the proportion of time devoted to these methods in light of the changed attitudes discussed below.

In contrast, the attitudes which showed significant changes referred primarily to the teaching methods which would achieve the above standards. Formal grammar teaching shifted from an activity that would be often done to an activity that would be seldom done, indicating that the Teacher Consultants learned that there were more effective approaches for reducing error than grammar instruction within a writing curriculum. Attitudes toward the following fourteen values or standards shifted from not important to important or from seldom done to often done, except item 3, which suffered a slight shift from important to somewhat important:

1. The need to define an issue to write about
2. The need to come up with ideas for use in writing
3. The need to state a main idea
4. The need to be able to locate sources of details
5. The ability to recognize different tones in writing
6. The ability to judge their own writing
7. The ability to judge other students' writing
8. The ability to use other people's comments to improve their own writing
9. The ability to extend the principles learned in class to writing in other classes
10. Using individual conferences or tutorials as a method to teach writing
11. Using prewriting exercises as a method of teaching
12. Using small group activities as a method to teach writing
13. Practicing revising as a method of teaching
14. Learning from nonprint media

As a result of the Summer Institute's instruction, therefore, the Teacher Consultants focused more on such cooperative learning strategies as peer grouping and such inquiry-oriented classroom methods as prewriting activities, those found through research to be the most effective for teaching writing. (See Hillocks, 1986, for instance.) This shift in focus is evidenced by items 10-13 above. Teacher Consultants also focused on the need to develop the students' judgments about both their own writing and others' writing (evidenced by items 5-8), as well as the need to develop the students' abilities to define a writing task (items 1-4). The teachers did not, however, expect to adopt such methods and new priorities at the expense of standards for judging writing quality, as evidenced by the unchanged attitudes discussed above.

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Some Final Thoughts

It appears that training according to the NWP model can enable teachers to learn more effective teaching strategies while maintaining the standards that are traditional within even a conservative cultural context like the one in Indiana. Process instruction in writing need not raise the specter of illiteracy that some place upon it. Nor does the NWP model need raise that specter. And that means that IWP can help to uphold tradition for Indiana teachers, and that maybe we can finally dismount our valiant steeds.

Works Cited


A note on this source is appropriate. First despite the date, the limiter system is not a formal feature of this program description. The language in these booklets relating to important errors has not changed, however, since 1970. To our knowledge no official archive contains copies of all these booklets. As a result, we have chosen to use the available edition while verifying the language against booklets saved by an instructor in the program.


Forrest Houlette and Paul Ranieri teach in the English Department at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. They are Co-Directors of the Indiana Writing Project.