TEACHER CONCERNS ABOUT WRITING: Response from a Project Fellow

NOTE: For her position paper for the Pennsylvania Writing Project at West Chester University, Betty Ann Slesinger created a fictional “Writing Advocate” column. Believing that some of her answers may be useful to real teachers with similar questions, we have excerpted from her paper below. Portions of this piece were originally printed in the Pennsylvania Writing Project Newsletter. — Editor.

Q. After attending the fall session of the Delaware Valley Writing Council, I began using some aspects of the writing process, sporadically, in my classroom. At those times I had more student interest and involvement and a greater amount of writing than ever before. I would like to continue using the process and even expand my writing program next year. In order to justify my approach with my principal, colleagues, and parents, I would like some research and findings about the writing process that will validate what we’re doing in class.

A. For the past fifteen years, educational researchers have been trying to find some solutions to the writing dilemma. Some studies included interviews with, or monologues of, successful authors as they examined their own methods and behaviors while writing. The results were rather startling, and they set the stage for many changes in attitudes and practices about writing.

1. More than two-thirds of the writers did not make and use outlines.

2. There were almost as many ways to begin writing as there were interviewed authors. All writers spent an immense amount of time thinking and planning before drafting.

3. Real authors determined their own purposes for writing and had their own specific audiences in mind. They then proceeded to address these issues and people.

4. Many experienced writers could not parse sentences or identify parts of speech, yet they could write accurately and clearly.

5. Active writers are intent on communication. They don’t consciously plan to use a particular type of sentence or a specific kind of construction.

6. Even the most skilled writers needed to write multiple drafts and make extensive revisions. They read their work aloud to hear its voice.

7. Professional writers allow their writing to “gel” or set before reviewing it. They often find it productive to work on a variety of pieces at once to ensure perspective and to avoid “blocking.”

8. Authors seek out and rely on friends, colleagues, spouses, and editors to share and criticize their work. And they don’t wait until the piece is completed. They use these conferences to help them plan and revise.

9. Further, the studies concluded that authors carry on all these aspects of their writing process (i.e., the planning of the ideas and organizational strategies, the drafting and revising, and the sharing and editing) continually and simultaneously, until their work is published.

These findings showed a big discrepancy in the way real writers proceeded with their work and the way writing had been taught in schools. Enlightened by their discoveries, researchers like James Britton and Janet Emig visited classrooms. There the parallels between good student writers and authors were striking. Even when classrooms weren’t using the writing process, the good writers intuited their needs and developed a process approach. Students who wrote well and enjoyed writing had personal and impelling ideas, stories, and purposes to share, and could handle a variety of types of writing. Their first attempts concentrated on their messages. They made mistakes—many—but because they wanted their writing to be correct and interesting, they were attentive, if not eager, to learn skills and mechanics within the context of their work. These students were also willing to do revising and editing when they could share

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and/or publish in some way with a real audience. Interestingly, the best writers were frequently not the students who scored highest on language achievement tests. Also, students who did daily writing connected to a content subject improved their test scores in
Recognizing the dichotomy between writers’ methods and traditional instruction, the field of teaching writing began placing a new emphasis on “the writing process.” Two leaders who provided solid foundations for the process approach are colleagues, Donald Murray and Donald Graves. Murray, a professional writer, has carefully examined his own writing habits and strategies. Graves worked closely with hundreds of students and dozens of teachers, applying writers’ routines and attitudes to classroom writing with remarkable success. Graves, who values the experience story approach of British infant schools, believes good writing comes from an “impelling need to tell a story” (give an explanation, provide information, or create a drama, etc.). Currently, both men continue to validate their theories and learn more about writing through their experiences in classrooms.

Q. I am very discouraged about the lack of quality and quantity of our students’ writing. Although my department is hard-working and tries to keep current, they find only temporary involvement and limited success with activities like sentence combining, paragraph frames, and formula writing because students don’t apply them to their independent writing. Can you suggest an approach that gets students involved and makes them responsible for their own writing?

A. Many investigators, notably James Moffett, Stephen and Susan Judy, Janet Emig, and Donald Graves, substantiate the idea that expressive writing that evolves from the author’s own experiences and knowledge is the best source for good student writing. As Robert Weiss (Director of the Pennsylvania Writing Project) has shown with his analysis of the features of all writing, when a person has a story to tell (information), a reason to tell it (purpose and occasion), and an audience to share it with, it is impelled writing. Authors have a stake in that kind of writing. Publishing it in some way creates a reason and need to be interesting, accurate, and clear.

In a classroom where the writing process is taught, a student is inner-directed. The teacher gradually learns what is within students and finds ways to bring it out. In this way, students find a natural writing voice. Writing makes students see their world and their places in it, and it also nurtures their maturation. As they build writing quality, they feel their success. They know when they’ve improved, so they gain confidence. Sharing with peers and teachers gives writers an important audience and builds an atmosphere of responsibility, support, and trust. A writing process classroom gives students back their part in the responsibility of learning.

Q. I need help. I’m an English teacher who is already “dragging” my students through weekly compositions. I have to motivate them, give them props so they can get started, provide outlines and suggestions to keep them going, and be a spelling dictionary. Then I spend all day Sunday red-inking one hundred twenty-five papers that are usually left crumpled in desks or slipped unexamined into notebooks or wastecans. But worse than all that effort is seeing so little improvement in students’ skills and writing. They’re still making many of the same grammatical, usage, and mechanical errors that we have diligently drilled on. For the students’ sakes, and mine, what can I do to be more effective?

A. Many teachers have felt that being competent and dedicated has meant grading every piece of written work and correcting it thoroughly. Teachers have become writing critics, editors, and evaluators, rather than writing instructors. But, as you may have inferred from the preceding entries, there is hope for writing. By basing instruction on the steps in the writing process, teachers of composition can eliminate much of what has been “the English teacher’s burden.” Research has shown that quantities of grammar, mechanics, and outlining exercises do not produce increased accuracy. According to Mina Shaughnessy, student errors can be analyzed and categorized. Some errors are really skill regressions, and appear when new skills are introduced and are competing. Students learn skills most efficiently when one or two types or clusters of errors or weaknesses are highlighted within the context of their own writing.

Incorporating the writing process into your classroom will give you

1. more frequent writing and regularly scheduled writing without more home grading or more ditto preparation
2. a variety of types of writing opportunities—personal, informative, and imaginative—that build fluency and maturity
3. student initiated topics developed from a given purpose and prewriting activities, instead of you taking over the responsibility
4. multiple drafts from which a completely developed product evolves, and only this one is graded
5. classmates and teachers used in a variety of roles as collaborators, questioners, etc., so that a support group develops

(Continued on page 18)
6. student ownership of writing—criticizing, selecting, seeking an audience and their own writing voice
7. correcting and grading only selected written work, for example, no grades on drafts, journals, responses
8. comments and corrections directed to one or two types of errors per paper since complete correction is overwhelming and not internalized
9. good transfer value because the same general writing process can be used at all levels, in all classes.

Q. My district is planning to force a new language trend, the writing process, on the whole faculty. We’ve received numerous handouts in our mail boxes and we’ve already had one general introductory inservice on writing. Most of us are afraid that this may just be one more “fad” or

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the district’s desperate attempt to raise language scores. Why is the whole faculty, not just the English Department, being subjected to this training? What will content teachers get out of it?

A. As you gain more of a sense of the workings of the writing process, you may begin to realize how basic and integral it is to every subject and all levels. When purposes and activities are varied, the process has infinite applications.

Try working from your own texts and units, but instead of simply questioning, discussing, or reading, ask students to write down quotes, facts, opinions, impressions, or answers in the form of clusters, lists, notes, paragraphs, journal entries, newspaper articles, letters, essays, etc. When you begin, develop, or follow up a lesson with writing, you have helped students to remember, to unlock confusing topics, to comprehend difficult reading, and to develop their own ideas. Use of such content writing has been called “learning centered writing.” Since thinking skills both precede and follow reading and writing skills, using the process approach helps students develop all three skills. Inherent in the writing process approach, where students respond and produce, is their active involvement in their own learning. Your content becomes real to them.