Because Writing Matters: A Book That Shares What We Know

For thirty years now, writing project teachers have been working to improve the teaching of writing. Many hundreds of writing project teacher demonstrations have helped teachers find new classroom strategies. But what is the bedrock from which these ideas spring? A new book, created by the National Writing Project, pulls together the concepts and theory that have generated the successful practice of NWP teachers and makes the case, before a general audience, for what needs to be done to advance the teaching of writing in American schools.

Compiled by Art Peterson

The goal of the National Writing Project’s newest book, Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools (Jossey-Bass 2003) is not a particularly modest one. The book’s purpose is to change the way that writing is taught in American schools.

NWP Executive Director Richard Sterling points out in the book’s preface that, through it teachers-teaching-teachers model, NWP has for three decades been disseminating the exemplary classroom practice of successful writing teachers to other teachers in all disciplines and at all grade levels. Many of the understandings and strategies that NWP teachers advance grow out of what Sterling calls, “the rich vein of research about writing—how it is learned, practiced, and assessed . . .”

But what researchers know, and what NWP teachers know, many others do not seem to know. As Sterling says, “Surprisingly little of these new data and understanding—some of which originated with the NWP—have reached the general public; nor do these findings inform much current debate about educational reform.” Because of these circumstances, NWP leaders decided they had a responsibility to inform a larger audience about the condition of writing in our nation’s schools and to make a case for what needs to be done if our students are to have the writing skills that will help them become successful citizens.

To accomplish this goal, the writing project commissioned Carl Nagin, a journalist and teacher of writing, to develop a book examining how the teaching of writing can be improved and what is known about effective writing programs and practices. The result of this initiative is Because Writing Matters, which the publisher Jossey-Bass—convinced that the book will have a substantial audience among policymakers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and all those concerned with education reform—has agreed to bring out as a trade hardcover.

In his introduction, Nagin makes clear how far we have to go: “Composition pedagogy remains a neglected area of study at most of the nation’s thirteen hundred schools of education where future public school teachers are trained. Nor is it a specific requirement in most state teacher certification programs.” Further, Nagin cites a report by the National Academy of Education’s Commission on Reading that supports the view that teachers not prepared to teach writing aren’t teaching it. According to the commission, “In one recent study in grades one, three, and five, only 15 percent of the school day was spent in any kind of writing activity. Two-thirds of the writing that did occur was
word-for-word copying in workbooks. Composition of a paragraph or more is infrequent even at the high school level.”

After depicting this depressing pedagogical landscape, Nagin then spells out the intention of Because Writing Matters. The book, he states, “examines what school administrators can do to meet the writing challenge in our nation’s schools. It explores research-based teaching strategies that can improve writing and presents case studies of how effective, schoolwide writing programs have been designed in a variety of school settings.”

What are some of the ideas that the NWP hopes administrators will come to understand and promote? Here is a sampling of these understandings supported by excerpts from the book.

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**From Because Writing Matters**

**Writing Is a Complex Activity**

(from chapter 1, pgs. 9-11)

Writing is complex, and so is the instruction that a school must provide if its students are to reach the high standards of learning expected of them. Even the most accomplished writers say that writing is challenging, most notably because there is so much uncertainty embedded in the process of doing it. Studies of how writers actually work show them shuffling through phases of planning, reflection, drafting, and revision, though rarely in a linear fashion. Each phase requires problem solving and critical thinking. More than adequacy of expression per se is required. Successful writers grasp the occasion, purpose, and audience for their work. They have learned how to juggle the expectations of diverse readers and the demands of distinct forms. Writing a letter or a persuasive editorial is not the same as fashioning a moving poem or a tightly reasoned legal brief.

If writing is challenging, teaching it is all the more so. How do we create a classroom or school where increasingly complex writing tasks can be learned by all students? Teacher and researcher James Moffett described the new consensus about effective composition pedagogy this way: “Writing has to be learned in school very much the same way that it is practiced out of school. This means that the writer has a reason to write, an intended audience, and control of subject and form. It also means that composing is staged across various phases of rumination, investigation, consultation with others, drafting, feedback, revision, and perfecting [Graves 1999].”

This understanding poses new challenges for educators as to how writing is presented and practiced in the classroom. Many of us can recall an English essay returned to us with marginal comments such as “This needs to be clearer” or “Weak opening” or “This paragraph is hard to follow.” Often, no instruction or roadmap accompanied the comment showing how to take the next step. As students, we were just expected to fix these things and get them right the next time, as if writing well required the same kind of knowledge as making a subject and verb agree or spelling a word correctly. But how do we make writing clear? Does everyone agree on what a strong opening looks like? What should we do to make our sentences flow in paragraphs that are easy to follow? If only these results could be drilled into us, then teaching writing would be easy.

**Writing Instruction Needs to Begin Early**

(from chapter 2, pgs. 29-30)

Historically, early literacy development in schools was premised on the idea that reading should be taught before writing, a view that persisted well into the 1960s. The educator, says P. David Pearson, an early-reading specialist and dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, assumed that “presenting young children with two tasks would be too much.” But writing, Pearson argues, can play a central role in early reading development. His views are supported by the National Research Council’s report Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. What Pearson calls the “synergistic relationship” between learning to read and learning to write makes it crucial to teach writing from kindergarten on. Other reasons for teaching it in the early grades are suggested from observation of how young children use their beginning writing. Anne Haas Dyson’s studies of early literacy development have shown how children use “print to represent their ideas and to interact with other people [Dyson 4]” when they scribble; draw and label pictures; and create, act out, or retell stories. Children can express ideas in writing even “before they have mastered
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all the mechanics of standard orthography, sentence and paragraph structure. Educators and researchers working from this view also explain that writing instruction begins in preschool and includes generating content for purposes of discovery, self expression, and communication [Freedman 2001]."

Students Need Time to Write
(from chapter 1, pgs. 12-13)
Learning to write requires frequent, supportive practice. Evidence shows that writing performance improves when a student writes often and across content areas. Writing also impacts reading comprehension. According to a 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Report Card, students in grades four, eight, and twelve who said they wrote long answers on a weekly basis scored higher than those who said they never or hardly ever did so [White 10].

Yet many American schools are not giving students much time to write. National studies and assessments of writing over the past three decades have repeatedly shown that students spend too little time writing in and out of school. When a school focuses on improving writing, it often starts with a realistic assessment of how much and what kind of writing students are actually asked to do.

Evolving Writers Make Mistakes
(from chapter 1, pg. 14)
"Few people," wrote Mina Shaughnessy, working with so-called basic writers at the City College of New York, "even among the most accomplished of writers, can comfortably say they have finished learning to write. . . . Writing is something writers are always learning to do."
Shaughnessy was one of the first educators to draw attention to the logic of student writing errors and conflicting expectations about them in relation to mastering "school language." She observed that as student writers develop and are challenged with ever more difficult writing tasks, the number of mechanical errors and defects in their writing often increases. Spelling errors may give way to blunders in word choice, syntax, and rhetorical strategy. But errors of this kind can be misconstrued as regression rather than a sign of growth. Teachers, writes Mike Rose, should analyze rather than simply criticize them. Error marks the place where education begins. Writing is never learned once and for all, and the effective writing teacher offers students the kind of response that supports their growth as writers.

Common Expectations Are a Characteristic of Strong Writing Programs
(from chapter 1, pg. 15)
If teachers within the same school have distinct or unexamined expectations for good writing, it can be confusing to students and a source of misunderstanding among faculty. Principals frequently cite teachers’ varied assumptions about writing proficiency as a stumbling block for faculty in creating any schoolwide writing program. In the primary grades, where one teacher teaches all subjects, it may seem less of a hurdle, but the task of defining proficiency and making explicit expectations for good writing has to be addressed across all grade levels, content areas, and genres. As Crystal England, a former middle school principal, notes: "Only writing teachers are expected to teach writing across all subject areas. The science teachers may expect a well-researched, grammatically correct paper from new students, not realizing that for the six years before they got a particular child, she never learned how to do that. So their whole perception of the child's writing and ability changes when they get those first works, and they blame the writing teachers, who, in turn, blame the earlier teachers. Every teacher who interacts with children has a responsibility for the student's development in writing as it applies to their subject area."

Educators Need Multiple Strategies for Teaching Writing
(from chapter 1, pg. 16)
Because writing often involves complex thinking and problem solving, teachers need more than a set of fixed textbook procedures to teach it well and address the diverse needs of student writers. Historically, there has been tension between two distinct emphases in teaching composition: one that focuses on formal and external aspects of writing such as grammar, usage, sentence structure, and style; and another that focuses on meaning, ideas, expression, and writing processes. In most classrooms today, teachers draw from both approaches [Applebee 92].

Effective writing teachers address more than content only and more than just skills. In the classroom, the challenge comes in understanding when to focus on which aspect of writing. Although research-proven strategies for effective teaching exist . . . they are most successfully applied by a teacher who can recognize and analyze a variety of student writing difficulties. Teaching writing well involves multiple teaching strategies that address both process and product, both form and content [Hillocks 1995, 99-110, 219-223].

1 Author interview with Crystal England, August 14, 2001.
Writing Is Thinking
(from chapter 2, pgs. 22-23)
Researchers have found that writing can develop higher-order thinking skills: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting [Emig 1983]. The very difficulty of writing is its virtue; it requires that students move beyond rote learning and simply reproducing information, facts, dates, and formulae. Students must also learn how to question their own assumptions and reflect critically on an alternative or an opposing viewpoint. From an instructional standpoint, argues George Hillocks Jr., writing should be a form of inquiry. Compared with other pedagogic approaches, a writing curriculum that incorporates inquiry strategies (collecting and evaluating evidence, comparing and contrasting cases to infer similarities and differences, explaining how evidence supports or does not support a claim, creating a hypothetical example to clarify an idea, imagining a situation from a perspective other than one’s own, and so on) has the most substantive and powerful impact on student performance . . . [Hillocks 2002, 200].

(from chapter 3, pgs. 54-55)
Hillocks argues that teachers must do more with writing than simply teach its forms and model its processes. They need to help students develop the basic inquiry strategies common to most disciplines and incorporate them in their writing activity. Such strategies lie at the core of the critical thinking that students must do in academia, in a profession, and as adult citizens in the real world beyond school. They include examining assumptions and prior knowledge, posing questions, making inferences and interpreting, establishing working hypotheses and testing interpretations, and, finally, imagining—which is perhaps the most powerful gateway of all, the foundation for original discovery and insight.

Assessment of Writing
Needs to Be Aligned with the Expectations and Standards That Drive the Writing Curriculum
(from chapter 1, pg. 15)
Student performance and growth in writing are difficult to measure not only because standards vary but also because a single-test assessment can not show the range of a student’s work or his development as a writer. Assessment of this kind may serve as a useful indicator of how well a school or district is doing with writing, but it is a limited instrument for diagnosing or evaluating a student’s overall ability . . . Standards may promise a rich curriculum, but if assessments are only loosely tied to the learning objectives of standards and frameworks, they may undermine or weaken effective teaching practices.

(from chapter 5, pgs. 75-76)
How closely are state writing assessments aligned with standards, and how do they affect the teaching of writing? A recent study by Hillocks, who received an NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] award for distinguished research, looked at writing assessments in five states: Illinois, Kentucky, New York, Oregon, and Texas . . . [Hillocks 2002].

Much of his study focuses on the disparity between assessment rubrics or criteria and the standards they are meant to reflect. Hillocks argues that in certain states the rubrics are vague and the kind of instruction they promote is of low quality and little use to students. He cites as examples instruction that relies on formulaic writing (the five-paragraph essay) and assessment prompts that ask students to write quickly on random topics without offering data or information. Such practices “engage vacuous writing,” set low standards for teaching writing, and eliminate “the need for critical thought. It [the five-paragraph theme] teaches students that any reasons they propose in support of a proposition need not be examined for consistency, evidentiary force, or even relevance [Hillocks 2002, 114, 136].”

An Effective Writing Program Requires a Schoolwide Commitment
(from chapter 6, pg. 94)
There is no single, absolutely correct leadership scenario for building a successful writing program. In some schools and districts, it begins with dialogue about writing guided by a curriculum coordinator, department chair, building principal, or language arts specialist. In others, a new curriculum is collectively spawned by a group of teachers. Linda Darling-Hammond and Donald H. Graves, among others, have studied how “blueprints for creating successful schools” and effective writing programs were devised and implemented [Darling-Hammond 1997, Graves 2001]. Both argue that change cannot be achieved by top-down directives and that there are no overnight success stories. The rationale is clear: schoolwide improvement of writing requires collective buy-in—the willingness of teachers, administrators, and the community to comprehend and support the rationale for change. It evolves over time from shared commitment and understanding. Also required is a cadre of committed teachers with classroom experience in teaching writing who can share their knowledge of effective strategies. Finding experienced teachers who volunteer for the task, who
write themselves, and who know the research in teaching writing is crucial to success.

Because Writing Matters, Teachers Need Intense Preparation to Teach It Successfully
(from chapter 4, pg. 59)

Teachers’ knowledge of the subjects they teach and access to the latest research and materials related to it are essential to achieving a high level of student performance, according to a recent set of standards published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP 2001]. A 1996 National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future report makes the case more directly: teacher expertise is the most significant factor in student success. It cites studies showing that teacher qualifications account for 40 percent of the difference in overall student performance and that teacher quality is more powerful than a student’s socioeconomic background in student learning [Daniels 2001].

Those findings raise a core question that touches on the teaching of writing and its role in improving student literacy. According to Sandra Gibbs of the National Council of Teachers of English, very few states require specific coursework in the teaching of writing for certification. A survey of state requirements conducted for this publication supports her view: Missouri, Delaware, and Idaho are the only states that specifically require such coursework for teacher licensing.

Conclusion

As Nagin states, “Writing is not a ‘subject’ that can be learned in a semester or a year, or even a decade, of a student’s educational life, because the writing tasks students are asked to do change and expand in difficulty as they move through academia” (60). If more American students are to move along this challenging, exciting route that will allow them to claim “I am a writer,” educators and the nation at large will need to come to share the National Writing Project’s insistence that writing matters.

References


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