The Parallel Universes of Theory and Practice: One Teacher’s Journey

by

BEVERLY PAESANO

In My Many Colored Days, Dr. Seuss writes:

Then comes a Mixed-Up Day.
And WHAM!
I don’t know
Who
or What
I am!

But it all turns out all right,
you see.
And I go back
To being ...
me

On the last day of the 1997 Rhode Island Summer Invitational Writing Consortium, I felt like the exuberant character in Dr. Seuss’ book. I had emerged from the “mixed-up,” seesaw days of traditional methodology and process learning confident that my future years as an educator would turn out “all right.” I knew that, in my classroom, learners would engage in an exciting process of discovery through reading ... and writing. I finally felt free from “the age of spectatorship,” the dreary classrooms of student isolation and direct instruction that I fell into in my early years as a teacher (Bruner, 1963, p. 80). The consortium had reinforced my goals as an educator: to provide the environment, the stimulation, the encouragement, and the invitation to explore and discover. I was recommitted to my classroom as a place where students come with the same enthusiasm with which they run outside to play — minds overflowing with ideas, eyes laughing with excitement.

Back in 1968, I would have expressed my thoughts quite differently. Creativity, passion, discovery, and celebration were not part of my teaching vocabulary, just as “writing,” though an integral part of literacy and learning, was hardly part of my first grade curriculum. Literacy filled a narrow space, one that was not very stimulating, not child-centered, and certainly not bursting with energy. It was a one-dimensional space, a void in which a child interacted with a reading textbook or a workbook in silence.

My classroom environment was very different from what it is today. For most of the day children were attached to their desks, which were evenly spaced in a tidy grid of rows and columns. “Subjects” were similarly ordered and unimposing, stored in neat columns on shelves. Social studies books were occasionally dusted as children read a chapter about “the community,” “important people,” or whatever was listed next in the table of contents. “Reading books,” basal readers, came off the shelf at “reading time,” when the children merged into homogeneous groups. Math books, colorfully illustrated, provided objects for counting and blank lines for inserting corresponding numbers. “Writing,” hardly a subject at all, was a tool for repeatedly copying spelling words, filling in a “blank,” or practicing letter formation. Subject followed subject, book followed book, sigh followed sigh. The classroom environment was isolating and very quiet.

When, toward the end of the year, I finally asked my first graders to compose sentences, usually to define a vocabulary word or answer a question about a story, I felt frustrated by their painful attempts at writing. Why was writing so difficult for children about to enter the second grade? Now I realize that these children could not explore written language when verbal expression was so sharply curtailed. Even thinking was critically limited by the “fill-in-the-blank” environment.
James Britton (1993) explains that we mentally store a “representation” of a classroom based upon our own experiences as students. I was modeling my classroom on the classroom I had known. In my school days, writing instruction was the traditional skill/drill approach. I completed workbook pages and worksheets, diagrammed sentences, learned the names of all the parts of speech, and practiced correct usage repetitively. Like the classrooms of my childhood, the classroom I constructed during my early years of teaching was a very rigid, subject-centered place which placed great emphasis on orderliness, memorization and perfection. Little thought was given to collaboration, discovery, and creativity.

But I remembered a high school English class I took that offered me a glimpse of the way things might be. The teacher assigned creative topics, and when students returned to class with their written pieces, several of us would hurry to read each other what we had written. Others would hover around to listen. We were sharing the clever ways we expressed ideas, competing with one another to be creative. The teacher usually busied herself near the windows or at her desk for about five minutes while this exchange continued, cleverly allowing us time for sharing. For those few minutes, we experienced the joy that comes when working in a community of writers. But in my early years as a teacher, I did not connect this way of learning with my classroom.

I was unaware, however, that a body of knowledge was developing about alternative approaches to teaching writing. In the summer of 1966, as I began my second year as an undergraduate student majoring in elementary education, some fifty educators, psychologists and sociologists from the United States and Great Britain met at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Their purpose was to discuss the teaching of English in elementary and secondary schools. It was the general consensus among the participants at this seminar that there was no general consensus about practices in English education. These delegates met, therefore, to discuss the many issues related to language, learning, and literacy. According to the accounts of this seminar, an interesting division emerged. Though the delegates generally agreed that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are functions of English, they disagreed on instructional methodology.

Much discourse evolved around the identification and achievement of specific goals in the teaching of English. The British educators strongly opposed the use of the word “instruction” and its connotation of “subject matter,” “content,” and “mastery of details,” while the American educators persistently emphasized intellectual discipline, isolated subjects, correctness, and testing. Textbook learning that Geoffrey Summerfield referred to as “... disconnected, fragmentary, arbitrary, and abstract” describes a pedagogy that the British feared was detrimental to self-expression and student interest (Summerfield, 1968, p. 26).

Unfortunately, this stimulating debate was in its infancy when I was an undergraduate student majoring in elementary education. In fact, I don’t recall learning about teaching writing at all. Meanwhile, theorists were debating concepts that I and most teachers were to become aware of only years later: language as expression vs. language as grammar, English as response to literature vs. English as knowledge of literature, education as experience vs. education as instruc-
tion, growth as a natural process vs. growth as instructed progress. These debates continue to this day.

At about this time, British theorists James Britton and John Dixon and American theorist James Moffett, among others, began writing about learning as a natural, expressive process that begins in early childhood and continues in school. According to Moffett, for example, writing is a way of extracting knowledge, of discovering and ordering one's thoughts. He recognized writing in this process as "an instrument of investigation and discovery." If these perceptions of writing exist, Moffett persisted, then "Writing is hauling in a long line from the depths to find out what things are strung on it" (1981, p. 148).

But I graduated from college unfamiliar with Moffett's work. After several years of teaching, I began to question my use of traditional practices, but I didn't know of another way to teach writing. When I resorted to writing sentences on the board for children to copy, I sensed my students were not really learning. When I saw how hard they struggled alone, I wished I could help them. If I helped one child, the others still struggled. I had no concept of how to change all this.

Then in 1985 I met professionals who advocated a new practice they called "process writing." I went to a workshop to learn how to use the "Write-to-Read" computer program, a methodology that included writing as part of reading instruction. Here I heard about "invented spelling" for primary students. I listened as the presenter suggested that first graders, in particular, can be easily overwhelmed with all of the subtasks involved with writing. She claimed that first graders could better express themselves if they were less concerned with grammatical conventions and correct spelling ... at least initially.

Yet I was skeptical of this new approach. In fact, I thought writing would be even more troublesome than before. I wondered how children would ever learn to write "correctly" if I allowed them to write "incorrectly."

I tried various compromises. I made corrections with a green pen rather than a red one. For a while, I wrote a sentence correctly under a child's sentence. I thought if students saw the correct sentence, they would write better. I even tried correcting their sentences on the computer while they watched and listened. But I soon concluded that the green pen was no different from the red pen, writing the sentence correctly under their sentence brought no significant change in their work, and that all the grammatical changes were my corrections, not theirs.

Some of my students also clung to old habits. They wanted, for instance, to know how to spell every word in their stories before they wrote. Even when children "sounded it out," some still asked, "Is that right?" But given the level of spelling knowledge of the typical first grader, I could easily have become a walking dictionary, and students still would not write fluently.

But over time I discovered strategies that did help children write more fluently and look at writing, particularly their writing, more critically. I identified children's errors and highlighted needed skills in daily mini-lessons. By teaching and reteaching word families, short and long vowel sounds, word endings, base words, contractions, compound words, etc., I reinforced phonetic and grammatical concepts that I had previously taught using workbooks and worksheets. We also collaboratively developed a list of high frequency words, which we called "writer's words" (not "sight words"), and posted them in our classroom.

In another attempt to strengthen writing skills, I developed a revision activity. After copying a child's sentence on the board, reproducing the identical grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization ... even letter formation, I facilitated a contextual discussion in which all children analyzed and shared their ideas about this piece of writing. We discussed primarily grammatical conventions, and we made revisions together. These strategies became frequent activities in my classroom.

The children began to think about their errors as "... the place where education begins" (Rose, 1989, p. 189). They realized that we would think about all the grammatical details later ... together. As they gained confidence in their ability to express their ideas, they began to write more fluently than I could have imagined. When they occasionally asked me how to spell a word, I reminded them, "Just sound it out." Through writing, revising, peer editing and rewriting we became a true community of learners.

I experienced such success with the Write-to-Read program that I became open to examining other aspects of my curriculum. I learned that children's school day does not have to be strictly segmented into sub-
bjects, but that thematic instruction can connect subjects like math, social studies, science and reading. Neighborhood libraries, with the technology to tap into other libraries, became my most valuable resource in integrated learning.

The first anthology in our particular reading series consisted of stories, poems, and songs about the farm. The children and I started by discussing their farm experiences and related topics. Sometimes we filled the blackboard with the names of farm animals; other times we discussed and wrote interesting ideas about the farm. We drew pictures of farm animals, we read books about the farm, we thought about other kinds of farms, we took a trip to a farm (snapping pictures and later writing captions), we made books in the shape of a farm, we wrote a class BIG book about the farm, we carved pumpkins, we made pumpkin bread, we sang songs. The farm and all of its related concepts evolved into a first grade curriculum of reading, writing, language, grammar, literature, spelling, math, art, music, and health. The children came to school each day ready to engage in meaningful integrated learning. We even traveled to the computer lab, farm activities in hand, to continue our learning on computers and at listening and activity centers.

Theme followed theme, each one opening new opportunities for learning. The children began to share their ideas spontaneously and to work grouped as teams, not in rows. We posted "writer's words," we learned to collaborate, we made our own library books and learned to "borrow," we took home bedtime stories to read to our families, and we called ourselves authors and illustrators. We learned to be friendly, considerate, polite, and, yes, responsible.

My classroom was no longer silent. My students and I sat together in a circle or on a rug to share our ideas, collaborate, and talk about sounds, words, and sentences. They read their stories aloud and shared their illustrations. I wrote some of their sentences on the board so we could talk about them together ... and change them. They talked to their friends about their work ... while they worked. I listen to children now. They show me where they need to start and I encourage them to start there and move forward.

As for writing, my students now wrote much more than mere sentences. My first graders composed stories, autobiographies and family albums and even wrote and illustrated books on some of our theme studies, such as Ireland, presidents, and insects.

As I watched the children become young authors and illustrators, I realized that teaching writing, once my biggest frustration, had become the most rewarding part of teaching first grade.

Sometimes I questioned my new classroom environment and learning procedures. I even questioned whether learning should be fun. I remember vividly one particular episode that caused me to critically examine my methods. It happened when our classroom inquiries and experiences led us to explore letter writing. Carelessly, I assumed that any other teacher would be pleasantly surprised to receive an invitation to write letters, especially to the eager young writers that I had prepared for this endeavor. Having discussed the concept of "pen pals" and the logical contents of a letter of introduction, I printed, on very large chart paper, a letter which the children dictated. We all signed our names and drew self-portraits to send to our new friends. Then we created a large envelope out of construction paper, addressed, self-addressed, and "stamped" it. As soon as we sent the envelope to another school, we anxiously awaited our reply. Within a couple of days, the envelope returned, along with our letter and self-portraits. Enclosed was a handwritten note from the teacher. She had listed all the subjects she had to teach in the course of the school day, then added, "I don’t have time for this!"

Unprepared for this response, and still somewhat fragile in my newly adopted methodology, I considered my options. I decided to send the envelope to another teacher. This time, the reply was an enthusiastic acceptance of our invitation to "write." We soon became quite creative with our responses... Valentine’s Day cards, Easter messages, even an invitation to visit. The children eventually wrote their own letters on computers, sent each other pictures, and even traveled by school bus to meet their pen pals for a picnic lunch, songs, and sharing. The “pen pal” activity encompassed all areas of learning and proved to be a highlight of our school year.

However, I sometimes thought about the rejected envelope and the comment that accompanied it. Though I persisted in my pursuit of meaningful learning experiences, I often wondered what it was that the other teacher thought she didn’t have time for. More
importantly, I wondered how it was that I had time. Sometimes I wondered if we were spending too much time collaborating, reading our stories, and engaging in our work. I wondered if the children were learning enough rules and facts and if they would be ready for the demands of the next grade. I wondered if they would adjust to silence, independent work and decontextualized learning in some other year. I wondered if I was setting them up for disappointment later. I wondered and I wondered ... until I saw the enthusiasm and felt the excitement. I listened to the parents who told me their children wanted to come to school, even when they were sick. I heard the children ask at the end of day, “Is it already time to go home?” I looked at the pictures children drew of themselves, of their classmates, and of their teacher, and I saw the smiles on all the faces and the energy in every body. I wondered — for a moment — then I listened to the children’s voices, I saw the enthusiasm in their eyes, and I continued to celebrate their accomplishments!

My conflict is not unique. Many teachers have faced the same dilemmas. In many classrooms, teachers read the manuals of the new reading programs and closed them in frustration. The old readers offered teachers security; the new program empowered learners. The old teacher’s editions stated specifically what was to be taught, what examples to use, and what responses to elicit; the new manuals were vague. The old procedures pointed at correctness and details; the new methods valued expression and invented spelling. Confusion was compounded by the glaring contrasts between the different philosophies. The conflict was enormous. Some teachers tried to sort out the differences between the “old” and the “new” with the hope of resolution, while others, finding no solutions, remained “old school.”

Perhaps because of these personal and professional conflicts, writing process methodologies put forth over thirty years ago are still not established in schools. While today many new teachers have been made aware of the claims of writing project advocates for social interaction, writing workshops, expressive language, whole language, invented spelling, and writing across the content areas, these remain controversial concepts. Many communities continue to order textbooks, and students persevere in isolation in many classrooms, writing only on occasion.

Why, so many years after Dartmouth, is the classroom not a studio for writers? In 1977, English teacher Mina Shaughnessy attributed the resistance of writing process pedagogy to, among other conditions, the historical perception of writing as formal, expository prose. These attitudes in colleges and universities influence writing instruction in the lower grades. This limited view has not allowed us to imagine writing as a way to nurture the natural development of the child. If we can expand our view of writing to include expressive writing, recreational writing, writing to learn, and even writing as a tool for communication and connection, we then become open to process methodologies that can result in more writing, more creative thinking, and more integrated and meaningful learning.

I no longer doubt the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic benefits of writing process approaches, although I continue to look for ways to improve my program. If outcome can be measured by progress, then children of all ability levels show significant growth. Process methods also encourage lifelong learning, since children take responsibility for their work.

continued on page 29
Parallel Universes

continued from page 24

Some of my students try to fill the computer screen with their writing, and when they realize that the end of the page is not far ahead, they try to write to that point, too. As a few students lead the way, other children soon adopt similar goals. And as they improve their writing, they learn to listen to and respect one another and the community atmosphere that we share.

At the Rhode Island Summer Institute of the Writing Consortium, I was happy to meet other teachers who had undergone a similar transformation. I wonder, however, how much earlier we would have reached our current level of growth if the work of Britton, Moffett, and others had not been confined to a parallel but separate universe.

References


Beverly Paesano teaches first grade at Centredale School in North Providence, Rhode Island. She is a doctoral student at Rhode Island College/University of Rhode Island and a member of the Rhode Island Writing Consortium.