Beating the "Writing Systems" on Our Own Ground

by

MARY K. HEALY

In this article from 1987, Mary K. Healy warned us about Generic Writing Systems sold as "like the Writing Project." This piece inspired a Fred Hechinger column in The New York Times extensively quoting Healy and alerting readers to the dangers of mass-produced writing systems. Healy is director of the English Credential Program at U.C. Berkeley and associate director for research and training for the Puente Project, sponsored by the U.C. Office of the President.

Four years ago when I was still planning the inservice component of the Bay Area Writing Project, I wouldn't have written what is to follow. Arguing against the central premises of commercial writing systems' inservice programs would have seemed beside the point then, a teaching away of emphasis from the central task confronting the Writing Project — that of encouraging as many teachers as possible to examine their own writing processes and to share with each other their successful strategies for encouraging students to develop as thoughtful writers in a variety of situations.

But now in late 1986 I feel we can no longer ignore the pernicious effects that simplistic approaches to the teaching of writing, packaged as systems and implemented by schools and districts through a series of "training sessions," have had on the profession as a whole and on the work of teachers in the Writing Project in particular.

These simplistic approaches to teaching writing go by many different names; for efficiency I'll refer to them as Generic Writing Systems. Some of these systems are found nationwide; others are the creations of local entrepreneurs. All share a particularly dangerous characteristic: a total focus on training teachers to teach the construction of particular forms of texts, with careful attention to prescribed and unvarying steps in the creation of such texts, regardless of the classroom context.

In this article I will discuss the characteristics of these Writing Systems as they relate to classroom instruction, evaluation of teachers, and school and district writing assessment. I will then compare the work of Writing Projects with that of "Writing Systems." Finally, I will suggest a method for "beating the systems" which builds on the work already being done around the country by teachers in classroom-based research.

"Writing Systems": The Situation in the Schools

Part of the unsung daily battle of thoughtful writing teachers is dodging the proffered systems for teaching writing which district officials, nervous in the face of growing demands for accountability for literacy, seem intent on bestowing, many times unasked, on writing teachers at all levels. These systems are created with widely varying degrees of thoughtfulness, then packaged and marketed with widely varying degrees of hype, ranging from pitches so lurid as to make a T.V. used car salesman blanch to understated academic appeals which hint at Ivy League acceptances for those students who, by zealously mastering the system, can develop their writing abilities on a heroic scale. It is important to note that support and justifica-

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trators and teachers, yet are not at all interested in offering their particular system for professional scrutiny, debate and verification. Instead, these entrepreneurs are acutely responsive to the general public’s cry for instruction in standard English at any cost and for increased amounts of skill-through-drill methodology and use this generalized clamor as the basic rationale for their system.

Once this professionally unverified system is named and packaged, then the system-monger begins door to door work. In the case of schools, the entrepreneur’s first choice of door is not that of a classroom where a teacher might be encountered. Instead, it’s a door “downtown,” usually that of the superintendent or the curriculum administrator. The pitch is simple: “Want to raise scores on the QRF writing test? I’ve got the way to do it. And let me tell you, did this method ever raise the scores in X district! And I’m here to show you how your district can do the same thing.”

These systems are not new phenomena. During the years that I was setting up the inservice series offered by the Bay Area Writing Project, our office would get many phone calls from school district administrators or curriculum people like the following: “Last year our teachers had five, one hour inservice sessions with the Generic Writing System and they really liked it. But we’re trying to raise our test scores in writing and need some more inservice. How is your project different from Generic, or are they the same thing?”

On the surface, this is a perfectly reasonable question for a busy school administrator to ask. But in the beginning I had to bite my tongue not to say, in a tone of tortured indignation, “Our project like Generic!!! How can you even think that? The Generic Writing System is based on a simple-minded, narrow conception of how human beings develop as writers. The system bears no relationship to how anything worthwhile in the world gets written. Generic is formulaic, constricting, and based on false premises about how students develop writing ability. It’s like confusing veneer for solid wood. Generic substitutes the superficial arranging of words into a familiar shape for any kind of teasing out of meaning. Generic is not interested in that mind at work making meaning; it’s interested in forcing the student to get enough language on a page in a certain pre-determined pattern so that the end result may be designated a “composition.” And the formula which produced that piece of text can be called up at any time: it’s context-free.

However, at that time, I said nothing of the kind. Instead, I generally replied, “Well, the Writing Project is quite different from Generic, actually. Our program involves teachers in exploring the writing approaches demonstrated by our teacher consultants and then applying what they learned from this experience to their own classrooms and student populations.” I would then go on to discuss the specifics of the requested inservice, never mentioning Generic again. Somehow, then, it seemed bad form to criticize another’s program, no matter how simplistic it seemed. I was intent then on coexisting with other efforts to encourage writing in schools, especially after the long drought in the 50s and 60s when most of the attention in inservice was focused on the teaching of reading.

But I feel quite differently now. For the past three years I’ve been involved with the preservice component of the Project’s work and have come to look at schools from a different angle. I spend a great deal of time in classrooms and in teachers’ workrooms in schools during the day now, and I am getting quite concerned about the powerlessness of even the best teachers to combat all the “systems,” designed both for pedagogical approaches and for teacher evaluation, imposed on them, usually without consultation, by district and site administrators eager to comply with the perceived public need for increasing amounts of accountability. In elementary schools especially this accountability often takes the form of check-off systems to monitor students’ acquisition of discrete language skills. This type of evaluation follows neatly from the simplistic approach of Writing Systems. Becoming literate, seen through the focus of the System’s approach, is indeed a step-by-step progression through a predetermined hierarchy of exercises, divorced from the context of the classroom and the children’s lives outside school.

**Connections Between “Writing Systems” and Assessment**

Lately, I’m seeing more clearly the connections between the types of assessment chosen by the district and the types of inservice programs they select to help them achieve their goals for developing writing ability. For in order to choose an assessment program for a school or district, an administrator must attempt to
understand the theory of knowledge in a given field behind the testing program. And, because many administrators are not subject-matter experts, they look to the inservice programs in their districts as ways to explore what it means to learn in a certain area. It follows, then, that if the inservice programs in writing are "quick fix" systems designed to train teachers in a given formula for teaching a certain type of writing, then there is a strong chance that, for expediency's sake if for no other reason, the testing program chosen by the administrator will follow in some way the pattern of the system. And when this is the case, the teacher will be denied the opportunity to raise questions about what it means, intellectually and emotionally, for students of a certain age and developmental level to write anything of meaning to themselves and others. And surely we have learned through all the research of the last fifteen years that inservice must involve teacher decision-making and, further, that inservice and assessment must flow out of a larger, more grounded conception of what we are doing when we teach writing.

Connections Between "Writing Systems" and Instruction

One of the additional dangers of using a formulaic Writing System is that it centers the teacher's attention on the system to be presented — the mechanics and the sequence of it — and not on the learner's attempt to write something with personal meaning. The mechanics of such systems can be initially tantalizing. They present an orderly progression of exercises, and they usually build in attention to some of the clinical teaching directives for modeling and guided practice. They give teachers plenty to do in the classroom — run off materials, then work step-by-step through the packets with students, emphasizing completion of set tasks. Their very efficiency makes it almost impossible for a teacher to adequately follow the directions of the system and still have time to look at individual students' interests and needs.

In addition to focusing teachers' attention on managing the system, formulaic writing systems implicitly teach teachers as well as students that there is a form — say a composition with a certain number of paragraphs — which can be used in almost any situation as long as the key ingredient — most usually a thesis sentence or topic sentence — is present. If the teacher has had little recent knowledge of the research in composition and little recent experience of personal writing, then the writing systems' message seems to make sense. Thus, teachers are placed in the position of learning about a subject area from sources which the profession at large would decry.

The Difference Between a Writing System and a Writing Project

The most striking difference lies in the view of the teacher inherent in the approach. The "Writing System" begins, in effect, with a finished product — a carefully delineated incremental program by which a composition can be reconstructed. The training session for the system takes teachers through the program, usually accompanied by printed materials to be used by students. These writing systems are very tidy and reassuring; their message to teachers is — we know you're busy. We know you haven't had much course work in teaching writing. And we know you have to teach your students to write so they can be successful in passing the district and state competency tests. Therefore, we have worked out a system for you. We'll explain the steps and practice them here. Then all you will have to do in your classroom is use our materials and correct the papers according to the criteria we have set up.

Implicit in this message is a patronizing and debilitating view of what a teacher is and does. The teacher is seen as a manager or as an orchestrator of others' curriculum, not as a thoughtful professional, continually designing lessons to meet current needs. Missing entirely from this picture is the context of the classroom itself — the students in all their individuality of temperament and development and the teachers with all their prior knowledge and experience. Missing is the interplay between a lesson and a specific classroom situation, the one growing out of the other, responsive to it and to all the unpredictable responses which a given lesson evokes. The very art and craft of teaching is lodged in that interplay. And there is no room for it in the delineated series of activities characteristic of a Generic Writing System. Finally, so much of the student writing produced in response to these generic methods is virtually pointless — no voice is heard in this writing, no mind-at-work revealed, no realistic human purpose behind it (unless the purpose is limited to fulfilling the required assignment.)

The Writing Projects (and here I'm not speaking only of the National Writing Project but also of all the other programs — Breadloaf, Vermont, Iowa, etc. — which
put the teacher, not a method, at the center of what they do) are very different. They begin with a teacher, an individual teaching writing in a particular situation. And they base their activities on discovering what these individuals do, both in their classrooms and in their own writing. Out of this sharing of processes and methods comes debate and further investigation; current research is brought in to be discussed and evaluated. Out of all this activity comes the beginning of synthesis, but it's more an individual synthesis and a tentative one too, subject to the trial of classrooms and further writing experience and to continued conversations and experimentation with colleagues who are interested in similar questions of pedagogy and craft.

3. That, in particular, the interplay between reading and writing, between how others have searched for meaning to make sense of the world and how one proposes to do it oneself, is absolutely crucial to helping students develop the ability to write thoughtfully and originally. This movement back and forth between reading and writing is generally missing in writing systems. No teacher who has had to wade through several class sets of correctly structured paragraphs of empty platitudes about nuclear war or the abortion issue, written with no recourse to what has been already exhaustively written or spoken on those issues, can fail to see the limits of the Generic Writing System.

4. That individuals develop highly idiosyncratic writing processes, i.e. some students need solitude to write, others can write in front of the blaring t. v. or when wearing stereo earphones. Some writers need ongoing interaction with a response partner ("How does this sound now? Is it better?") and others don’t want to come near any kind of audience until they’re thoroughly satisfied themselves.

The Research Basis
We’ve now had a solid fifteen or more years of research on the development of writing abilities. While it is premature to say that there is agreement on “best approaches,” certain principles about the teaching of writing have been acknowledged by most researchers in the field. The importance of the responsive context in which one writes, the differences in students’ composing processes, the primary role the students’ intentions play in their selections of topics and their satisfactory completion of papers, the importance of teacher intervention during the writing process, the relative efficacy of teachers’ responses to writing, praise for what has been achieved instead of correction of errors only — all of these factors have been determined as instrumental in developing writing ability and are continually discussed at conferences and in journals and research reports.

Most of these considerations are missing from the Generic Writing Systems, which are presented as a collection of context-free exercises, freely adaptable to a range of developmental levels and purposes. More specifically, the following concepts about developing writing ability are generally missing in Generic Writing Systems:

1. That writing anything with genuine involvement and commitment is a result of engagement with an idea and a desire to make sense of it oneself and, usually, communicate it to an audience.

2. That the ability to write develops gradually over time in individuals and is an outgrowth of their involvement in other forms of verbal activity: speaking, reading, listening.

Beating the “Writing Systems”:
A Different Type of Teacher Research
Most professions hold their members responsible and accountable for their actions. In addition to quality control within professions, agencies of the local and federal government, such as the Better Business Bureau and the Federal Drug Administration, have as their charge the protection of citizens from unsafe and unscrupulous services or products. To date, there is no equivalent of the FDA either within or without the educational community. Our only means of bestowing methodological “seals of approval” or their reverse comes from either the dialogue carried out in professional journals or from what is taught in universities and colleges. To date, the “Writing Systems” have slipped through the cracks; neither journals nor courses have focused critically on the systems’ faulty premises in ways to significantly stem their proliferation.

I believe that Writing Projects are ideally suited to fill this critical void. Since their beginnings, most Writing Projects have been encouraging their teachers to become involved in investigating questions of interest to them through classroom-based studies. The NWP publishes a series of monographs of this teacher research, and other programs, especially the Breadloaf...
Writing Program, have research requirements as an integral part of what they do. Most of these investigations have focused on questions arising from the teachers' own writing or from their classroom practice. And this is how it should be, given the nature of the teaching day and the relatively little time teachers have for this research. So many questions continue to arise about teaching writing that teachers' first responsibility is to investigate their own contexts — the interplay between their students' development and their own teaching methods.

However, I would like to suggest an additional area for investigation, that of researching the assumptions and methodology of the more prevalent Writing Systems currently being promoted and comparing what is discovered about the system in question with the research literature currently available. This type of research and analysis lends itself to teamwork among teachers and also to important collaboration between practicing teachers and their university researcher colleagues. I envision a research program of this type to include the following stages:

1. **Involvement:** Once the Writing System has been identified, the team of teachers and researchers would attend and participate in the system's training sessions, noting all aspects of the writing process discussed. The team would meet between sessions to discuss the implications of the events of the training session. They would be attempting to outline the assumptions on which the Writing System was based, as evidenced by what the trainer said and did, by the materials presented, and by the activities demonstrated and suggested for classroom implementation.

2. **Investigation:** Once the training session was complete, the team would then begin by coming to agreement on the central premises of the Writing System presented. Then they would investigate the research literature in the field of written composition, looking particularly for studies which relate to the premises underlying the training they had just undergone. Once they were convinced they had accumulated enough material, they would assign members to write short pieces discussing the implications of specific premises of the training system in relation to what has been established in the field.

3. **Publication:** The end product of their activity would be to answer the question: Are the premises of the Writing System in congruence with current research and thinking in the field of written composition? The finished papers discussing these issues would be made available to the Writing System's trainers, and to the professional community at large through publication in monographs and professional journals.

Such collaborative investigations could accomplish several important goals. First, they would encourage increased classroom practitioner-university researcher partnerships. Each participant would bring different skills to the investigation, and the resulting discussion would be mutually enriching. Second, such collaboration would encourage classroom teachers to take a positive rather than a negative role in determining both the premises on which they will be evaluated as teachers and how their students' writing ability will be assessed. At present, many thoughtful teachers only have recourse to complaint and covert resistance when yet another system is imposed on them. Third, published investigations of this kind could be regulatory models for the profession. The published research would serve as fair warning to educational entrepreneurs that when they attempt to sell teaching and training systems to schools they will be subjected to the same kind of rigorous scrutiny that any new product destined for human consumption receives.
Afterword

When Art Peterson asked me to comment on my 1987 article, I felt immediately uneasy at the thought of revisiting old words, old pronouncements. But then I remembered how I had enjoyed writing that piece, how it became a professional catharsis of sorts. So I sat down to it again. And was immediately both relieved and saddened. Relieved because I still agree with my emphases then and saddened because things haven’t changed much at all. The writing systems are still with us. In fact, they’ve expanded to intricate computer programs that can quantify anything you want to know about your writing except whether it says anything or moves a reader. There are also many new textbooks series, all proposing the way to write almost anything. The absoluteness of these respective approaches continues to terrify me.

Especially since for the past ten years I’ve been involved with the Puente Project, a UC statewide academic and community leadership program which has been remarkably successful at turning around the dropout rate for Mexican American/Latino students in community colleges and high schools. Directed by Felix Galaviz and Patricia McGrath, Puente focuses on two crucial areas: 1) improving students’ academic abilities through rigorous and extensive reading and writing, and 2) connecting the students and their families with Mexican American professionals who have been successful both academically and in their careers. Writing systems haven’t worked, ever, for these Puente students. In the past most of them have been relegated by these systems to stupefyingly dull remedial tracks where they have practiced the parts of language without any sense of engagement with making meaning.

Instead of finding pre-packaged systems of instruction, Puente counselors and teachers who work with these students consider context central: who are the students? what have been their previous experiences in school? how do they see themselves as writers and readers? what expectations does their community have? They must know the students and their communities well in order to plan the lessons and experiences which will encourage these particular students at this particular time. They know they have been successful when their students become engaged with self-chosen topics to write and read about, stay in school, fiercely develop their academic skills, and transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

And then what about the crucial importance of teachers’ involvement in their own writing? That’s rarely a part of these systems’ approaches except in the most superficial ways. Many of the Puente students have never been around adults who read and write regularly. These students need to see these behaviors in action before they’re willing to take the risks they need to take, especially if they’ve experienced repeated failure in English classes before. So in Puente classes a lot of time, initially, has to be given over to modeling how one goes about writing something. The teachers and counselors write and share their very rough drafts with the classes, demonstrating the evolution of their pieces. The classes also spend time listening to culturally-relevant articles, stories and poems, examining the writing done by previous students, learning to talk about this writing responsively rather than only evaluatively.

The timing of all of this, the choices made, the emphases placed, cannot be dictated by a system. These context-dependent decisions have to be made by thoughtful professionals who write regularly themselves, share their writing with others, reflect on their own idiosyncratic processes and through this, come to understand the complexity of the act of composing. Teachers who have this experience are more empathetic of their students’ frustrations, more resourceful in finding alternative teaching strategies, and far less narrow and arbitrary in their directives and evaluations.