

A Reader's View

Marv DeMilio

"I hate school. I'd rather be out in the woods or fishing. I won't do anything else when I leave this place anyway."

"I have such a hard time in school everything is hard espeshly righting get intrubel for not taking part of talking."

"School's ok. I suppose I'm just average. I get average grades. It satisfies everyone. My teachers say I could do better. Maybe later when I have to."

"I love school. I get all A's. My teachers like me. My parents are happy. It's easy, possibly too easy. Will it be more difficult after I graduate? Will I make it?"

"I enjoy school. It's challenging to help these kinds of kids and the others that fall into other areas of the learning spectrum. Helping them realize their potential and showing them the unlimited choices they can make when they leave me, enriches my life."

After the 1978 Summer Writing Institute held at Northern Michigan University, and with the voices quoted above in mind, I sat down to compose my thoughts about the teaching of writing which I wish to share with fforum's readers.

Because I have taught writing for six years and because I see roughly 7,000 pieces of writing from students in grades 7-12 in a given nine-month period of time, I have had to use traditional techniques in a humanistic approach to my writing classes. I'm a **realistic idealist**. Realistic idealism is not so much a philosophy as a responsibility to do everything I can to help my students realize their potential, to transcend their limitations, and to give them an appreciation for the multiple possibilities and choices that lie before them.

My responsibility is not only to them but also to the adults who are already out there, myself included, who will someday come to depend on them as the backbone of our society. These young people will be the leaders, the consumers, the decision makers, the teachers. My life and the lives of my children will somehow be affected by how I carry out my responsibilities to my students now and in years ahead. What I consider my responsibilities to my students grow out of my philosophy of grading as out of my sense of the relationship of hearing and speaking the language to reading and writing it.

Grading

In forming a philosophy of teaching writing, one must take all levels of learning into account, K through 12. Although I teach at the secondary level, I am concerned about what teachers are doing at the elementary level. As I consider the K-6 program, I am influenced by the recommendations made by the National Council of Teachers of English. The NCTE suggests that at this level, no grade lower than C- be given on any writing assignment. This grading recommendation addresses a concern for the students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities. I support the NCTE recommendation because as a junior-high teacher, I don't want my students stifled or turned off to English by the time they get to me. I will probably turn them off myself unless I'm careful. If a student is told at an early stage of his development as a writer that what he conscientiously puts down on paper is a failure, how can I expect him to make a sincere effort again? (He probably will though, in spite of our nearsightedness.)

Reading and Writing

I see no practical separation between reading and writing. Together they shape childrens' awareness of the world in which they live or think. Reading sparks

students' imaginations and reinforces their image-making abilities. Since it is in the first few years of school that students begin to make value judgments, choosing between what they like and don't like, between what they perceive to be the good and evil around them, often their values are developed and organized in their own minds when they begin to examine them in writing.

Speech and Writing

Because students know their language and speak it effectively when they enter school, I would hope the teaching emphasis would be put on helping them communicate as effectively in writing as they do in speech, not on making them self-conscious about what they already know by tearing language apart and beating them senseless with the rules and regulations of structured or traditional grammar. I view grammar as a tool that can function as a common ground of understanding between the teacher and the student. But when the teacher requires that the student dismantle the tool rather than use it, the tool becomes an end in itself, and the task is unattainable. When too much emphasis is put on grading and testing of grammatical structure, teachers and students lose track of their purpose: using the English language more effectively in writing and in speaking.

Looking at the Seventh Grade

At the middle-school level, especially in the seventh grade, the techniques used by the teacher are tremendously important because this particular year is crucial in a child's life, socially and physiologically. In most school settings, it is the first time the student has to move from room to room and teacher to teacher, facing four or five different authority figures daily. Students are not only responsible for organizing their work but for not losing it; just getting the right books to the right classes for the first few weeks is mind-boggling to the seventh grader.

The teacher must develop an atmosphere of mutual respect in his classroom if he expects students to trust him not only as a teacher, but also as a person. However, in spite of all our best efforts, some

will never write for us or for themselves. Personalities can sometimes get in the way of our expectations. It is this reality that tempers my idealism. I realize that I cannot touch all students. I have also come to believe that some kids don't belong in a typical school setting. Most of us are not prepared professionally or psychologically to deal with all students.

I have practically eliminated failure in my seventh-grade classroom by following NCTE recommendations. Although students must turn in all daily assignments and longer papers, they are graded according to their ability only, and unless they hand in something totally foreign to the assignment, they earn no less than a C- on written work. If they fail a test (below 70%), they have two more chances to pass it. For the most part this system works, but there are always a few students who refuse to try. When this happens, I contact the students' parents because parental concern in addition to my own usually helps. I have tried not grading at different levels on several occasions, only to be forced by the student to reinstate the system: students wanted something to work for and the measure of comparison.

In my classroom, I try to function as a resource person, helping students to exercise their talents and abilities by structuring classroom activities which motivate them to learn. I set the stage on the first day:

"I am concerned about your growth as students and my growth as a teacher. Writing is difficult and you will do a lot of it in thirty-six weeks. How many of you think can improve your writing? Help me to help you and you will."

They forget this neat little speech after three or four weeks, but they see improvement and that reinforces everything.

At the seventh-grade level, the teacher's personality is an important component of the learning process. Discipline, the kind that dreams are made of, also helps. By discipline, I mean their understanding of the need to sit down, write more than one draft, and complete a final paper as

best they can. I also let them know that I perceive each of them as an individual, having strengths and weaknesses, and I grade each on an individual basis. They learn to trust me after a few assignments, but the idea that I am human and fallible--must be discussed freely with the class many times throughout the year.

Macrorie and Warriner

I am very much influenced by Ken Macrorie's Writing to be Read. If I review Macrorie before each school year begins, I quell the Mr. Hyde side of me that wants to scribble red ink on all papers I read. Macrorie reminds the students to be **honest** in their writing and teachers to be tolerant when evaluating and discussing student work. Although I don't follow Macrorie religiously, I do use his recommendation for having students keep journals in both writing and literature classes. I stress **honesty** of tone, usage, and dialect. I also teach more formal lessons on sentence combining and organization. For example, I stress that writing helps organize and sort out thoughts: it stimulates and reinforces concepts or ideas sometimes laid aside or misplaced.

My students write daily, three to four assignments a week. The assignments are simple enough for students to understand how and why they are doing them, and unlimited in scope so as to enable them to come from as many angles as possible. In eleventh-grade composition classes, I use Warriner's Models for Composition, which as department head I took off the endangered species list and made a requirement. The book is not as restrictive or prescriptive as some think. There are only three or four sentence-skill sections and those deal with sentence combining, not grammar. I first tried this book for a semester with tenth- and eleventh-grade students. Most of the students enjoyed the book. The writings Warriner includes deal with an assortment of points of view and are interesting. Students actually want to talk about them afterward! Class use of the book enables advanced writers to do independent study, freeing me to work with the ones having more difficulty.

Dealing with abstract ideas is one of the toughest writing problems my college-bound

seniors have. Warriner's Advanced Composition text helps them to develop certain techniques that I have a more difficult time teaching them without the book. Let's face it, we are human and many of us do not have the time to do the research or attain the background necessary to develop individual, original creative writing units. If we don't limit ourselves to a text or become dependent on it as a bible for writing, we can still utilize the material and expertise of accomplished writers and editors in these texts.

As a **realistic idealist**, I know most of my composition students will not go on to college or choose writing as a career; and I adjust my curriculum accordingly. For example, my students and I explore how to word a letter for the best results in different situations. Since there are social pressures on all of us to speak, act, and write in the currently accepted polite style, and since I am not going to change the world in my lifetime, I do what I can to make it easier for my students to get along in this world by dealing with realistic life situations.

Writing in our society can be considered a valuable tool for survival, and at its very best, an opportunity for self-discovery and understanding; therefore, my students write. I assign realistic daily writings and deal tolerantly and conscientiously with students' writing. My classroom procedures grow out of what produces growth in my students' writing. I do not change methods in response to theorizing or philosophizing. I change them when I am convinced a new idea or technique works in the classroom.

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