How English Teachers Can Help Their Colleagues Teach Writing

Lee Odell

Increasingly, colleagues in other disciplines are recognizing the importance of writing and are looking to us English teachers for help as they try to improve the writing of students in, say, history or biology. Frequently, our colleagues' notion of help is expressed this way: "I know. We could collaborate. I'll read students' papers for content and you read them for grammar and style."

When we decline this invitation--as I think we must--we invite a series of questions: "Well, what can you (or **will** you) do? What do you English teachers know that will help me with my students? More important, how can we teachers of history (or science or...) help students with their writing without losing sight of our subject matter?" From my experience in working with colleagues in schools and colleges, here are several suggestions as to how we might respond to these questions.

We need to address colleagues' concern about what they call "grammar."

As we and our colleagues go over selected student papers, we can show them how to categorize errors. We can help them answer such questions as these: Which errors appear to be the result of careless proofreading and which seem to reflect a basic misunderstanding of, for example, the basic structure of a sentence? Which types of errors appear in the work of more than one student? Which types of errors could be eliminated by a brief explanation and which require the attention of a skilled tutor in a Writing Workshop? Answers to such questions will enable our colleagues to focus their efforts and set realistic goals for students. Once these goals are set, of course, there are no magic solutions to the problem of improving punctuation, spelling, and usage. What's needed is a certain amount of hard work guided by these principles: students must know what the teacher will and will not accept; they must have a reasonable amount of explanation as to what certain errors are and how they can be corrected; colleagues in other disciplines must take responsibility for seeing that students have edited their papers. This last point is particularly important in light of an experience one high-school English teacher reported to me. Most of this teacher's students used complete sentences in their essays, yet their social studies teacher complained that these same students turned in papers filled with sentence fragments. When the English teacher asked students about this, several of them shared one student's feeling: "Oh, well, that's social studies, not English. He [the social studies teacher] doesn't really care about that stuff."

We must expand our colleagues' notions of what "writing" is and of what kinds of assignments are possible.

For many of our colleagues, **writing** is a synonym for **expository essay** or **term paper**. Of course we want to help colleagues with these two types of writing. But we should point out that writing can take various forms, many of which need not be graded, or even read, by the instruc-

tor. Toby Fulwiler has done a very thorough job of explaining how short, in-class writing tasks can help students synthesize material that is being presented or can enable students and teachers to identify students' misunderstandings of a given topic (Fulwiler, 15-22).

In addition to showing colleagues how to use frequent, in-class writing assignments, we need to identify colleagues in other disciplines who give well-focused, stimulating writing assignments. We may find fewer of those colleagues than we would wish, for many people simply assign a report or term paper and turn students loose in the library. At best, this sort of assignment may require students to do some useful synthesis. But at worst, this type of assignment tends to become little more than a cut-and-paste job based on secondary sources and distinguished by a lack of independent thought on the part of the student. Fortunately, there are colleagues in other disciplines who give quite different assignments. Consider these examples for which I am endebted to Susan Burke (eighth-grade teacher), Doris Quick (high-school teacher), and Gary Gossen (university professor).

From a middle school social studies class:

On the basis of class discussion of consumer rights and young people's important role as consumers, identify a specific consumer complaint you have, and write a letter to the organization against which you have a complaint. Your letter must explain the complaint clearly and reasonably and describe a course of action that would solve the problem you are complaining about.

Read the attached excerpts from a diary in which a soldier in the American Revolution describes the hardships of life in the Continental Army. Using his diaries as evidence, write a letter in which you persuade the Continental congress to provide benefits to veterans after the war with England is won.

From a high school chemistry class:

Assume you have removed the following pieces of chemistry equipment from your lab table. [The list included 20 diverse items such as bunsen burner, asbestos gauze, evaporating dish.] You have three drawers in your lab table and each piece of equipment must be logically placed in one of the three drawers. Label the drawers and write a one page paper in which you describe your system for storing the equipment, and persuade your classmates that your system is efficient and logical.

Explain by means of analogy or model system any topic in chemistry we have discussed this year. Your audience will be students who are taking the course next year and who are having trouble understanding the topic you are explaining. Your paper (if good) will be retained in the teacher's file and used as supplementary material for those students who are confused about a given concept.

From a university anthropology class:

On the basis of our discussions and readings about communication among non-human primates, explain your answer to this question: Could Washoe [a chimpanzee who had learned some elements of human language] "think" a poem?

Attend a religious ritual and analyze it (following procedures discussed in class) as a symbolic statement of essential characteristics of the social groups involved.

The Age of Innocence and Tom Sawyer deal at great length with the theme of socialization in American life of the nineteenth century. Using an analytic approach demonstrated in class, analyze a character of your choice from each novel as he or she reaches a "compromise" with society.

As we identify people who make assignments such as these, we will expand our own

notion of what is possible in writing about, say, anthropology. We will also improve our credibility with our colleagues, since our suggestions can be based on the actual practice of colleagues and are not simply the product of an English teacher's fevered imagination.

We must help colleagues be more sensitive to audience.

We should encourage colleagues to think about such questions as these: What are the characteristics of the audience(s) for whom their students will write? For a given assignment, what may students assume about their audience's knowledge, biases, expectations? What constraints must students accept when they write for a particular audience? One reponse to these questions is to claim that students are writing academic discourse for an academic audience. This, of course, is true. But we must not over-simplify our conception of an "academic audience." Its characteristics and expectations may be more diverse than one might think. One way to test this speculation is to remember the last time we attended a common paper-grading session, one at which--with no prior training or discussion of criteria--we and our colleagues read and graded a set of essays. In my own experience, comments made at those sessions indicate that people are using different sets of criteria and are attending to different aspects of the writing, some responding to diction and syntax, some to organization, some to what Paul Diederich refers to as "quality of ideas." Thanks to recent work by Sarah Freedman, we have reason to think that for some readers "quality of ideas" weighs most heavily in the evaluation of a piece of writing (Freedman, 161-64). But even here it is possible for academic audiences to vary quite widely.

To illustrate this last point: As part of my work in **Writing Across the Curriculum** I have had occasion to read a number of student papers (complete with instructors' grades and comments) from a number of disciplines. Teachers of business courses frequently give students a set of facts about a company and ask students to recommend policies that the company should adopt. In evaluating students' papers, these instructors seem concerned with matters of practicality: Have students identified one or more specific courses of action for the company to follow? Given the information at hand, does it seem likely that the company in question **could** and **would** follow the writer's recommendations? In economics courses, instructors seem most concerned with how accurately students apply economic theory to new sets of data. In at least one political science course, the instructor places great emphasis on the imaginativeness of students' synthesis of materials studied.

Practicality, accuracy, imaginativeness: these are not the only criteria by which instructors judge the "quality of ideas" in students' writing. But these criteria do suggest the different values held by audiences for which students will be expected to write. If we can help colleagues give students a clear idea of the audience for whom they are writing, we will probably do a favor for our colleagues as well as for their students.

We need to help colleagues recognize the intellectual demands of specific assignments.

And we need to help devise ways to show students how to meet those demands. Consider the following history assignment, which asks students to write about a nineteenth-century novel in which the narrator purports to be describing life in Boston in the year 2,000.

> *Suppose that you had never heard of Edward Bellamy's novel* Looking Backward. *One day while killing time in the College Library, you came across a dusty, mutilated copy of the book. As you began to read* Looking Backward, *it seemed reasonable for you to guess, although you could find no date of publication, that the book had to be written after a certain date and probably before another date.*
>
> *What is the narrowest time frame you would choose? Write an essay in which you defend your choice with specific references to customs,*

(cont. on p. 94)

(Britton, The Dev., Chpt. 15). As the stories children write (whether autobiographical or fictional) become "shaped stories," more art-like, they move from the Expressive towards the Poetic. The more "shaped" they become, the more effectively they enable writers to explore and express their values, those ways of feeling and believing about the world that make us the sorts of people we are. I think you will sense this happening in the little story written by a six-and-a-half-year-old English girl:

> *There was a child of a witch who was ugly. He had pointed ears thin legs amd was born in a cave. He flew in the air holding on nothing just playing games.*
>
> *When he saw ordinary girls and boys he hit them with his broomstick. A cat came along. he arched his back at the girls and boys and made them run away. When they had gone far away the cat meeowed softly at the witch child. the cat loved the child. the child loved the cat the cat was the onlee thing the child loved in the world.*

In a subject-based curriculum (as far as using language is concerned), **Learning I** will be the principal focus for lessons in science, history, geography, social studies, while **Learning II** will be the principal focus in English lessons.

Whether the topic be marine animals or ugly witches, what teachers and students say and write makes learning manifest. Thus there is in every classroom evidence of one kind of learning or another--neither of which a teacher can afford to ignore. Further, it is my experience that when teachers of different disciplines study such evidence jointly, important pedagogical and curricular issues come up for discussion.

James Britton, author of numerous books and ariticles in the field of composition theory and research, is associated with the **University of London Institute of Education.**

Odell (cont. from p. 59)

institutions, inventions, or anything else the narrator mentions.

In order to determine when the book was originally published (and thereby formulate one's thesis) one might:

> --*focus on inventions and customs mentioned in the book;*
>
> --*identify inventions and customs not mentioned in the book but known to us today;*
>
> --*determine dates (e.g., the date at which a particular invention was made) for things that are mentioned and for things that are not mentioned in the book;*
>
> --*consider alternate conclusions about the publication date of the book and explain how those conclusions are less plausible than one's own.*

Without presuming that this brief list identifies all the intellectual work a writer might engage in, I want to use this list to make two points. The first is that the intellectual work associated with the Looking Backward task is somewhat different from that involved in the writing assignments mentioned earlier. In their letters of complaint, the eighth graders would need to (1) explain what they expected or hoped; (2) show that their experience fell short of what they had expected; and (3) explain a specific sequence of actions that would resolve the conflict between experience and expectations. In describing their system for organizing laboratory equipment, high school chemistry students would have to classify items on the basis of their use in various experiments. My first point, then, is that different writing tasks make different intellectual demands of writers. My second point is that teachers can show students how to meet those demands. For example, the history teacher who assigned the Looking Backward paper might make a practice of having students examine short texts, trying to date those texts by determining, say, what inventions the author does mention and what inventions, known today, the author does not mention. The advantage of this teaching

procedure is that it accomplishes two goals at once: it enables the teacher to focus on materials of his or her discipline and at the same time to teach students a discovery procedure which they can use in writing their essays.

None of these suggestions, of course, will solve all the problems of teaching writing in other disciplines. None come with any guarantee of certain success. All entail a good bit of work for us and for our colleagues. That, I think, simply acknowledges reality. Improving student writing is a difficult, time-consuming task, one that demands the best efforts of all of us. These suggestions do, however, help us focus our energies; my own experience suggests that time spent in these areas is likely to pay off. At the very least, it will preclude our having to check papers for grammar and style while someone else reads them for content.

Lee Odell, a member of the English Department at **SUNY**, Albany, has written frequently about a wide variety of topics related to the teaching of writing.

Maimon (cont. from p. 83)
also hold dormitory hours, sometimes during those bleak, wee hours when so many undergraduates are actually confronting that intimidating blank page.

The Graduate Program in the Teaching of Writing and Other Outreach Activities

Beaver offers a Master of Arts in Education with a Concentration in Written Communications. During the summers of 1981 and 1982 the **National Endowment for the Humanities** is sponsoring extended institutes on the **Beaver College** campus for secondary and post-secondary humanists who are interested in the teaching of writing.

Elaine P. Maimon is the Director of the Writing Program at Beaver College, Glenside, Pennsylvania

---

Stander (cont. from p. 86)
disciplines and the logical appropriateness of teaching such conventions in the content areas. Although this idea, in spite of its obvious logic, is not readily embraced by many content-area teachers, the **ECB** presentation was extremely effective. **Andover**'s staff grew as a result of its relationship with the **ECB**; and it is hoped that **Andover**'s writing program will be further enhanced through a continuing relationship with our **ECB** colleagues at **The University of Michigan.**

Aaron Stander is the Secondary Reading Consultant for the **Oakland Public Schools** , Pontiac, Michigan.