

Hounding the Faculty About Writing

Max Slisher

By 3:45 p.m. the faculty have digested fire drill procedures, lamented the cutback in teaching supplies, and haggled over reinstatement of the bell system for tardies. With fifteen minutes left until freedom, a novice teacher addresses the now-squirming group, "What can we do about spelling? I can't believe the terrible writing my students turn in." Then, from the rear of the room another voice adds, "Doesn't the English Department teach kids how to write any more?"

An undercurrent of grumbling swells, and accusing eyes pinpoint the nearest English teacher. If one so brave speaks up to say we should all teach writing and spelling, he is drowned out by a variety of denials ranging from the French teacher's sincere, "I'm not qualified to teach writing," to the physical education teacher's tart, "I'll check sentence structure, if you'll make sure every kid runs ten laps around your room." Faced with these responses, the English Department usually retreats down its rabbit hole and hopes the hounds will give up by the next faculty meeting. But, of course, they won't.

Perhaps, English teachers must offer their colleagues a concrete invitation to join them in their effort to improve student writing throughout the school. Perhaps then some of the hounds might stop baying and start demanding more literate responses from their students.

The Attack: Step I

At **Jenison High School**, English teachers attacked the problem which their colleagues identified: The same students who write effective prose in English classes compose poorly spelled, illogically constructed, and even obviously plagiarized reports for teachers in other departments. One first step at **Jenison**

was to recognize that most of the teachers in the content area departments felt insecure when grading for more than their course content; furthermore, few applied the standards for composition which the English Department teaches. So, in an effort to build some consistency of expectation into our school-wide writing program, English teachers developed a set of criteria for the writing of students in all subjects. We displayed these on a **Minimum Composition Skills** poster, which suggested that each essay or report contain an organizing statement, a body of supporting detail, and a conclusion restating the main idea. It also displayed the value of good mechanics. Laminated copies of the poster, attractively lettered by an art student, were presented to each teacher for his or her room.

Everybody for Better Writing: Step II

As a second step, the English Department continued in the following year to promote the **Everybody-For-Better-Writing** goal by setting up a "mini inservice" at a faculty meeting on evaluating student reports. To dissuade instructors from giving A's for neatly copying resource books, English teachers asked others to grade three different reports on Alexander Graham Bell. One report summarized facts about Bell in a student's words, with a few mechanical problems; one plagiarized an encyclopedia; and one creatively used a few puns in relating Bell's accomplishments. A surprising number of teachers did not like the creative paper, and many rejected the paper with errors. We then talked about why the English Department found the plagiarized report unacceptable. Not everyone agreed, but we planted seeds of doubt about long-accepted expectations.

Jenison High School Research Booklet: Step III

The English Department also organized its approach to teaching research papers: The high-school media specialist and one member of the English staff, having examined a plethora of different research kits and booklets, wrote the **Jenison High School Research Booklet**, which describes how to conduct research in logical steps, how to take notes, how to organize, how to write, and how to document a report or research paper. Each student receives this booklet before writing a ninth-grade research paper. The booklet then becomes a reference tool for the student's entire high-school career. All departments at **Jenison High School** use the booklet to guide their students in all assigned writing.

A Joint Research Paper: Step IV

Once the booklet was available, the ninth-grade English teachers arranged with the ninth-grade science teachers to assign a joint research paper to their students because they were dismayed to find that students who had just completed a good research paper in English would revert to poorly organized, plagiarized reports for their science research papers. English and science teachers met together and decided that students should choose a topic in science and then rely on their English teachers to guide the development of their papers. English teachers also graded the papers for writing format and scientific content as well. Then students had the opportunity to revise any serious problems before the science teachers graded for scientific content and English skills, respectively. Students appreciated writing one final paper instead of two; teachers appreciated the improved quality of student work; and everyone appreciated the attention which could be directed to the writing process as well as the writing product.

In-service Training: Step V

As English teachers we also looked at how we taught writing within the department. We spent an in-service day at Hope College

with Professor Nancy Taylor, an exciting and innovative teacher. For the first time our staff agreed, at least tentatively, that writing should be evaluated for content, organization, development, style, and mechanics in that order. Following the in-service session, at our next department meeting, we discussed these five criteria; and then each teacher graded a dittoed student composition. The grades ranged from **B+** to **D**. After teachers had explained their several grades, the ensuing discussion revealed similar assessments of the paper's strengths and weaknesses, but great differences in the value given to the five evaluative criteria. As a group we moved closer to accepting content and organization as more important criteria than mechanics when evaluating papers. More important, we found that the errors could be handled in more constructive ways than by simply grading a paper down.

Still pursuing the school-wide goal of better student writing, our entire faculty asked Professor Walter Foote from **Grand Valley State Colleges** to conduct for us a three-hour in-service on **Writing Across the Curriculum**. Probably a third of our staff resented the loss of three hours of their time to English Department concerns. Another third expressed ambivalence. However, the remaining third evaluated the presentation as rewarding. Many indicated that they intended to assign more writing to their students and to approach these assignments more seriously. Students' comments about the number of essay tests they are assigned and about the standards their teachers apply to their compositions prove that writing has become more important in our school. Professor Foote may return to **Jenison** this year to assist individual departments as they incorporate writing into their curricula.

Writing Across the Curriculum Works in Individual Classrooms

In the years of stalking our elusive prey, we English teachers have found the science and social science departments most supportive. Some of our students even ask us for help in organizing or proofreading their reports for math.

(cont. on p. 91)

Fader (cont. from p. 54)

Furthermore, the use of writing in any curriculum as a means to the end of comprehending all subjects is persuasive of itself in the struggle to invest writing with the importance it possesses in the world of work but no longer claims in the home. One of the interesting social dislocations of our era is the poor fit between the decline of letter writing in the home and the increase in demands for writing in many different kinds of employment. Couple absence of practice in the home with decreasing practice in school (one inevitable result of increasing the number of students in secondary English classes--as in all others--during the last three decades), and no one should be surprised at the diminished competence in writing measured by many tests and regretted by all employers.

Finally, **Writing Across the Curriculum** offers a means for investing a young person's voice with an importance it may no longer possess in home or classroom. Homes with familial hours dominated by television and schools with all hours afflicted by large classes are unkind environments for nurturing the individual voice. The sense that one has something to say and someone to say it to, is a sense dulled by silence in the home and hordes in the classroom. That same sense, so basic to the belief that communication is worth the effort, is sharpened and expanded by the experience of writing at every opportunity. Inviting continuous, coherent participation in the process of communication, "**English in Every Classroom**" provides both student and process with an importance that nothing else in the curriculum can promise.

Daniel Fader, Chairman of the **English Composition Board of The University of Michigan**, has written extensively about the relationships between literacy and learning.

Reiff (cont. from p. 77)

not, what alternatives can I suggest for you to consider?

3. Can your paper be made more effective--in its conception of its audience, in its organization, or in its style and mechanics?

Using what they had learned from this exchange and discussion of drafts, students revised their papers before handing them in for final evaluation.

Student evaluations supported my impression that the workshop's most significant intervention in their writing was in how they conceptualized their work. One student reported that the draft exchange helped her reconceive the assignment: "I was lost on the first assignment; it wasn't until after the first draft I knew what to do." Speaking of the interchange that took place at that stage, she added, "Good criticism of my draft helped me to think. I learned to criticize and analyze--something I'd never done before."

The workshop also helped students in the **fine tuning** of their papers: They selected less awkward, often more elegant phrases, as well as appropriate punctuation. Students learned a sense of responsibility to one another as part of a community of learners. As they tried to help one another think through the problems in a particular paper, they often suggested approaches and sources of information to each other. Perhaps most important for their growth as writers, they experienced their writing as a process of vision and re-vision, in which initial ideas may be continually refined or transformed, and to which a careful reader may contribute a great deal.

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Social studies teachers have implemented the idea most fully. Dan Scripsema, Chairman of the Department, uses the research booklet in assigning a term paper in his **Civil War** mini-class. In addition, he both expects and grades for good spelling, complete sentences, and paragraph structure in daily work and tests. He says the extra burden on him is no problem. He notes that the students realize these standards are important in the course.

Steve VerSluis, a history and government teacher, assigns a bi-weekly essay in

which students must respond personally to an historical concept, character, or situation. He may ask, "If you were a citizen in 1800 and this were election day, who would receive your Presidential vote?" His students also read Civil Disobediance and write an essay on the dilemma of following conscience or authority.

Steve VerSluis and Dave Reeves, another social studies teacher, require student journals as an important part of the work in their courses. The students transform daily notes, by filtering the notes through their own perceptions, into thoughtful, well-written, and well-organized essays. On Dave Reeves' desk one can find books on grammar and style in addition to historical reference books.

The ultimate proof of the serious approach these teachers take to composition is that like English teachers, they lug briefcases full of student writing out of school each night. Steve VerSluis sums it up when he says; "Writing is learning. In writing an idea, a person begins to understand it more fully." Dave Reeves follows through with his idea by offering two versions of his tests. On the multiple choice and short answer test the maximum grade is a B; if a student chooses the essay test, he may earn an A.

Though our plan to involve more teachers from other departments in our effort to spread **Writing Across the Curriculum** has developed slowly, students now realize that good writing skills mean better grades in all classes. They are aware of the attitude toward composition standards that is growing within the staff. Instructors often use composition not only to evaluate students' knowledge, but also to stimulate students' involvement and critical thinking about the subject matter. Indeed, at faculty meetings these days, when they hear a howl of protest about fragments, members of our department no longer look for cover; instead, we just figure we'll soon add another to our family of new writing teachers.

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Stock(cont. from p. 70)
Winston, 1975.

Establishes the personal nature of reading and connects to Britton's theory of expressive discourse. Also provides good summary of learning theory.

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"The Teaching of Writing in Great Britain," English Journal, 67.8 (November 1978), pp. 49-67.

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Vygotsky, Lev, Mind in Society, eds. **Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman**, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978.

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Bailey (cont. from p. 80)

has made considerable progress toward implementing them.

To allow informed decisions as teachers develop a "policy for language," the Schools Council has supported studies of reading and writing. James Britton's Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), now generally known in America thanks to its distribution by NCTE, explores the functions of language as children develop in and out of school. (Britton was a member of the Bullock Committee.) Nancy Martin, Britton's colleague, subsequently completed a study of the effect of **Writing Across the Curriculum**, cautioning that a simplistic "language policy" would have little effect without a thorough evaluation of the role of language in learning. She identified the primary goal of schools as extending the