**Teaching of Writing: History, Issues and Trends in School-Based Writing Instruction, Research**

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Writing pedagogy has been shaped by an array of influences over the years, including social and demographic change, insights derived from research, and grassroots movements among teachers. Recognizing that writing assumes many guises and serves varied purposes, teachers and researchers continue to chart the challenge of preparing diverse students to meet the literate demands of private, academic, and civic life.

**History**

Written composition became a concern for American high schools in the late nineteenth century. At the time, elementary schools did not teach composition; rather, writing instruction meant teaching students to form letters, to spell words, and to have legible (if not beautiful) handwriting. The high schools, however, focused on preparing an elite group of males for universities, a task that would increasingly demand attention to writing. In 1873 Harvard University initiated a writing requirement as part of its admissions process, asking each candidate to produce a composition about a literary work. Other colleges soon followed with similar requirements, and high schools began to prepare students to fulfill these expectations. Further guidance was provided by the illustrious "Committee of Ten," chaired by Harvard president Charles W. Eliot and charged with formulating parameters for secondary curriculum nationwide. In its final report, the group made the then-revolutionary claim that one purpose of English was "to enable the pupil … to give expression to thoughts of his own" (p. 86). And so began the teaching of composition in the nation's schools.

Writing continued to have a place in the secondary curriculum throughout the twentieth century. Students were commonly assigned essays in the forms of description, narration, exposition, or argument, following rhetorical traditions dating back to the late nineteenth century. If teachers followed contemporary textbooks, they taught lessons on the ideal written product, focusing on words, sentences, and paragraphs as component parts, and emphasizing usage and style. Student essays were graded on the basis of how well they approximated these forms and conventions.

Stimulated by the 1966 Dartmouth conference, which brought together leading British and American specialists in the teaching of English, major pedagogic and empirical shifts marked the late 1960s and early 1970s. Active research programs studying writing in the schools followed in both countries, and new ideas were introduced from abroad. The consequences were twofold. First, leading literacy educators argued that assigning and grading writing was not enough, suggesting that students should be supported through an elaborated process of generating ideas, reflection, planning, composing, and revising. Second, U.S. educational leaders began to argue for the teaching of writing in these ways at the very start of schooling, maintaining that learning to write could help students learn to read, and vice versa.

Founded in 1974, the National Writing Project (NWP) quickly emerged as a major professional development movement in the United States. Building from the work of exemplary classroom teachers, the NWP has continued to influence writing curriculum, instruction, and evaluation internationally. By 1985 the U.S. federal government funded a research center devoted to the study of written language; attention turned to how writing develops across the lifespan, the influences of varied school and out-of-school experiences on learning to write, and how these lived experiences intersect with learning to write in school.

**Issues and Trends in School-Based Writing Instruction**

As educators have recognized that writing is judged effective where it is appropriate to audience, purpose, and occasion, innovative classrooms have come to provide practice in addressing a range of rhetorical contexts and composing challenges. This focus on the contexts in which writing occurs has been accompanied by an equally intensified interest in the diverse profiles of individual writers–what they bring to particular composing events, and how teachers can effectively support and monitor their growth over time. While these concerns have been reflected in university-based research and emerging theoretic conceptions of the writing process, pedagogic innovations have been primarily formulated by teachers themselves, most notably through the work of the NWP.

A hallmark of these teaching innovations has been an abiding concern with the nature of students' composing processes, and with how teachers across the grade levels might more effectively gear instruction to individual needs, backgrounds, and interests. Process-oriented instructional approaches have become common, with teachers providing opportunities to brainstorm ideas, complete initial rough drafts, receive peer and teacher feedback, and revise and proofread. Ideally, such approaches acknowledge that writers in the world beyond school do not follow a prescribed series of steps. Acknowledging the social aspect of the writing process, many teachers have also provided paper and electronic publication opportunities. Recognizing that discrete grammar instruction does not reliably enhance student writing, teachers have increasingly addressed matters of correctness and style as students polish their own drafts.

Guided by theory, research, and insights from their own work with students, teachers have also formulated instructional approaches that acknowledge the developmental trajectories of writers of various ages. Although teachers continue to guide young children toward the standard forms, many are encouraging students to explore sound-letter correspondences through their own "invented spellings," drawing on research that explores these approximations as important developmental building-blocks. Later, as students move through secondary language arts classes, teachers provide assignments similarly informed by an awareness of students' emerging abilities, as thematic instructional units offer opportunities to build from basic writing tasks to more sophisticated challenges that ask students to synthesize and critique information gleaned from divergent sources.

The Writing-to-Learn and Writing-Across-the-Curriculum movements have fostered interest in activities that encourage writing as a tool for exploration and learning in all fields of study. Students may be asked to generate hypotheses or reflect on issues in journals and during spontaneous writing, while more formal writing assignments provide opportunities to learn the discourse conventions of particular disciplines. Especially in middle schools, interdisciplinary teams are creating promising venues for language-arts teachers to assist subject-area colleagues in integrating writing activities across the curriculum.

Given this interest in writing as a process and as a tool for learning, some have worried that teachers may be paying insufficient attention to the quality of students' written products. This focus on the quality of completed writing has infused recent policy debates, and both national and state-level efforts have introduced standards for writing and testing programs. Because writing varies considerably across tasks and contexts, developing valid standardized tests that reliably measure achievement and growth is an enterprise fraught with challenge. Although the most credible tests include actual writing samples, the cost of rating such exams has led some to advocate the use of machine-scored tests assessing students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar; because students' scores on such tests often correlate well with scores on actual writing, argue some, they offer an affordable and efficient alternative. Because tests tend to drive curricula, teachers and literacy scholars worry that such assessments may encourage teaching practices predicated on an insufficient model of proficiency in writing–one that privileges discrete skills over an ability to negotiate the demands of writing for real purposes and audiences. As literacy educators argue the need to ground instruction in a broader conception of writing achievement, test-makers continue to work toward assessment strategies that better encompass the range and complexity of the kinds of writing people do in their lives beyond school. During the 1990s the National Council of Teachers of English convened the New Standards project, a group of literacy educators charged with formulating approaches to portfolio assessment that might serve both classroom-level and larger-scale purposes. The cost and complexity of such endeavors have relegated portfolios primarily to the levels of schools and classrooms, where they continue to provide evidence of students' processes, products, and growth over time.

As writing pedagogy enters a new millennium, several issues present enduring challenges for educators. Large-scale writing assessments have continued to reveal comparatively lower levels of achievement among linguistic minority students; in the mid-1990s, for instance, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data suggested that European-American students were achieving at a higher level on most of the assessed writing tasks than students from other ethnic groups.

The technological revolution has considerably changed the views of what might be deemed minimal writing and literacy skills. Computers provide new kinds of support for writers as they generate and organize written text and also, through electronic mail and the World Wide Web, have introduced what Melanie Sperling and Sarah Warshauer Freedman (2001) call "a new textual component to human relationships." Amidst widespread conjecture concerning the long-term consequences of these new technologies, researchers continue to explore students' and teachers' experiences with such tools. The implications are many–in terms of expanding our definitions of the writing process, and our conceptions of the relationships among writers, readers, and the texts they create and encounter.

Negotiating this and the many other issues before them demands much of teachers' time and focus, even as most continue to see well over a hundred students each day and to juggle multiple responsibilities. These new approaches to teaching writing are considerably more energy intensive than the decontextualized drills of earlier times, but in most quarters, teachers' workloads have not been adjusted accordingly.

**Research**

During the 1970s cognitive studies by John Hayes and Linda Flower (1980) provided insight into the recursive nature of writing. This work charted the various subprocesses that writers negotiate in the service of fulfilling goals and solving rhetorical problems. That is, writers plan what they wish to say, translate those plans into writing, and evaluate and revise their work. Researchers found that these subprocesses do not follow a fixed sequential pattern; rather, writers move recursively among these various activities (pausing in the midst of composing, for instance, to revise or to pursue additional planning).

Teaching innovations related to this research have been informed by continuing interest in the nature of students' composing processes, and in how teachers across the grade levels might more effectively gear instruction to support the processes of diverse writers. Process-oriented instructional approaches have become common, with teachers providing opportunities to brainstorm ideas, complete initial rough drafts, receive peer and teacher feedback, revise, proofread, and pursue paper and electronic publication opportunities. As teachers experimented with new classroom practices that supported writers through such elaborated composing sequences, researchers began to compare the effectiveness of varied kinds of process-based instruction on writing improvement. George Hillocks's meta-analysis of these studies (1986) revealed that the approaches leading to the most significant gains in student writing provided students with clear and specific objectives, and opportunities to work together to solve particular writing problems.

Research on the nature and development of spelling knowledge and skills, especially among preschoolers and primary grade students, has been conducted on primarily white, middle-class, monolingual youngsters. This work has revealed that students' spellings follow a developmental trajectory, with their initial errors providing much information about how they understand the system of English writing (information that can guide teachers' efforts to help their students to acquire standard forms).

Focusing on a similar student population base, research on the teaching of grammar has suggested that such instruction has little effect where it remains divorced from students' actual writing; however, teaching that links grammar to students' genuine communicative needs as they attempt to write for real readers does appear to benefit students' writing and learning.

Finally, researchers have found important links among the activities of writing, speaking, and reading. These links are related to the finding that writing is primarily a process of making meaning, enacted in social, cultural, and material contexts. Thus, especially given the diversity of our student population, it is critical that teachers understand the ways students make meaning outside of school and that teachers know how to help students use what they bring as a resource for what they learn inside the classroom.

*See also: JOURNALISM, TEACHING OF; LANGUAGE ARTS, TEACHING OF; LITERACY, subentry on WRITING AND COMPOSITION; READING, subentry on TEACHING OF; SPELLING, TEACHING OF.*

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