

**TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE:
A REVIEW OF HISTORY, MOVEMENTS AND METHODS**

Research Paper Submission

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Abstract

The ability of students in the American educational system to write proficiently is fundamental. Yet, too often writing is given a backseat to other traditional subject matter and taught only in the confines of the English classroom. The result yields college students lacking basic writing skills, and struggling in careers upon graduation. This study sought to examine the literature surrounding writing, the various writing movements, process writing as a successful teaching strategy, and the future of writing as a whole. The method of research for conducting this study was a review of literature. Conclusions noted it is imperative that colleges and universities look to the three most prominent writing movements of the past: Writing Across the Curriculum, The National Writing Project, and Writing in the Discipline to shape the teaching of writing at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Additionally, a definitive method for teaching writing must be identified that improves writing performance, and research indicates process writing may indeed be successful. Researchers recommended the effectiveness of process writing in a college classroom be studied, as well as the effect of writer attitude and different writing approaches.

Keywords: process writing, Writing Across the Curriculum, The National Writing Project, Writing in the Discipline

Introduction

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges recently proclaimed, "Writing is not a frill for the few, but a skill for the many" (p. 11). This statement was issued in a 2003 benchmark report by the College Board addressing the need for a writing agenda that would serve the 21st century. More than 30 years ago the importance of writing in schools and colleges became apparent and the inception of Writing Across the Curriculum took hold (Stanley & Ambron, 1991). This national interest paralleled the similar movement of Writing in the Disciplines and forced educators to realize the necessity of writing beyond the doors of the English classroom. Since that time, writing has become a significant component of many disciplines at colleges and universities across the country. As such, the need for skilled writers in all fields of study is clear to academia and industry alike.

Thompson (1987) stated college graduates are often criticized for their poor language skills (as cited in Stowers & Barker, 2003). Many wonder how that can be with Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Discipline in place. The battle for marked writing improvement has been waged, but it has yet to be won. Students and teachers must devote the time and effort necessary to mastering more than rote grammar and punctuation skills. They must truly learn that writing is not merely an act, but rather a process. Because of this national combined movement, researchers have agreed that one of the most effective techniques for teaching writing is process writing (Unger & Fleischman, 2004).

Because process writing entails more than merely producing and publishing a written work, the guidelines that frame the process writing model must be examined. Specifically how these guidelines address writing in a particular context or area of specialization is important to consider when designing effective and successful curriculum. The National Commission on

Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges (2004) declared, "Educational institutions interested in rewarding and remunerative work should concentrate on developing graduates' writing skills" (p. 19). Regardless of their chosen field of study, students must be able to write proficiently if they are to be successful in today's business world.

The necessity of writing is apparent to business and academia, yet many college graduates today still lack the fundamental writing skills necessary to succeed. Institutions of higher education are not fully preparing students for success if they do not emphasize and teach the importance of writing across all disciplines and in all fields of study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the various writing movements and methods of teaching writing that have shaped secondary classrooms today and determine the need for additional concentration on written communications for college graduates.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives guided the study:

1. To review the history of writing movements at the secondary and post-secondary levels in the United States,
2. To determine how writing skills impact students beyond college and into their professional lives,
3. To examine process writing as an effective means of teaching writing,
4. To recommend future practices for teaching writing.

Methods

To gather data to meet the research objectives, a search was conducted through various sources: (1) Index/Database searches including Proquest, Academic Search Elite and Eric Digest, (2) The National Education Association, and (3) books pertaining to teaching writing. Articles were grouped under four prominent themes: writing and its role in academia, writing movements, process writing, and the future of teaching writing in the United States.

Findings

Defining Writing and its Importance

Dating back to the inception of the Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Discipline movements, writing was defined in 1977 as, "Originating and creating a unique verbal construct that is graphically recorded" (Emig, p. 123). Interpreted loosely, this explains that writing involves more than merely putting words on paper; it is the externalization of thoughts (Lavelle & Zuercher, 2001). Biggs (1998) further delineated upon the definition claiming, "It is a complex activity involving attentional demands at multiple levels: thematic, paragraph, sentence, grammatical and lexical" (as cited in Lavelle & Guarino, 2003, p. 295). Alamargot and Chanquoy (2001) declare writing involves choosing the most suitable words for each idea proposed, following very rigorous grammatical guidelines, and using proper punctuation to translate the linguistic relationships linking ideas. Thus, while the process of writing is intricate, the significance of clear and cohesive writing is apparent.

The American Diploma Project reported the ability to write well has emerged as an increasingly important skill in the 21st century (2004). The Project further declared skills involved in writing help prepare students for the real world, where it is imperative they be able to

write quickly and succinctly. However, reports on national education indicate writing skills of high school graduates are less than proficient (Enders, 2001). This indicates higher education may need to undertake the role of training students to write well. If institutions of higher education are to train students to write proficiently, it is logical to assume they must come to the university with basic skills intact. Yet, far too often many students come to college lacking the basic academic skills needed to succeed. Grimes (1997) claimed, “under-prepared students face lower completion rates, greater attrition, and greater anxiety” (as cited in Collins & Bissell, 2004, p. 663).

A survey of business professionals conducted by the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004) found that good writing is expected in today’s professional world. The survey concluded, “Individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one’s thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper” (College Board, 2004, p. 5). In fact, Moss (1995) conducted a corporate study of CEOs, human resources managers, and directors of training and found respondents were generally dissatisfied with college graduates’ communications skills. One respondent stated, “Our experience with college grads concerning communication has been poor. They cannot write, they cannot speak and generally have poor communication skills” (Moss, as cited in Quibble, 2004). Therefore, college instructors must include in their teaching pedagogy the enactment of discipline-specific writing in courses across the curriculum.

A 2003 published survey regarding the relationship between undergraduates’ level of engagement and amount of writing for a course found, “Of all skills they want to strengthen, writing is mentioned three times more than any other” (Light, 2003, p. 28). Light (2003) found students believe that writing plays a central role in their academic and life success. \

The continuous need for improving writing remains apparent three decades after it was first highlighted with the 1975 *Newsweek* cover story highlighting the decline of writing instruction in the public school system and advocating for response to this national crisis (Tchudi, 1986). While the *Newsweek* article indeed exaggerated the declining literacy of college students, it did serve to catapult writing to the forefront of American concern and led to the induction of several national writing movements that shaped how writing continues to be taught in institutions of higher education.

Writing Movements

Three of the most recent and recognizable writing endeavors at the secondary and post-secondary levels in U.S. history that are significant in the writing movement are Writing Across the Curriculum, The National Writing Project, and Writing in the Discipline. The first two movements were established in the 1970s and the latter evolved in the mid 1980s. The Writing Across the Curriculum movement stemmed from a paradigm shift in writing theory in the late 1950s and early 1960s that moved writing from a product-oriented endeavor to a process-oriented undertaking (Stanley & Ambron, 1991). In contrast, the National Writing Project was a direct result of the perceived writing crisis experienced in the mid-1970s and called for a “back to basics” approach in American schools (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). The Writing in the Discipline focus evolved from the previous two movements and was linked with composition scholars who advocated student concentration in a specific field of study (Ochsner & Fowler, 2004). All three movements are significant in bringing focus to the importance of writing skills for students in the American educational system.

The Writing Across the Curriculum movement began in the United States in 1974 and 1975 at Carlton College, which instituted the first faculty development workshops for Writing

Across the Curriculum. The idea took root, however, from the work of James Britton and others in England in the 1960s in their study of young children (Ochsner & Fowler, 2004). Britton used the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky to form the tenets of his argument that language was indeed a way of learning (Tchudi, 1986). Janet Emig expanded upon this concept by advancing “the notion that writing is a unique mode of learning because it involves three patterns: enactive (learning by doing), *iconic* (learning through images), and symbolic (learning through representations)” (Tchudi, 1986, p. 15). Stanley and Ambron (1991) make the argument that faculty in all disciplines should therefore assist students with communication in writing because writing plays a central role in the learning process. They further state the faculty workshops at Carlton ultimately led to a college-wide adherence for responsibility of writing. This in turn inspired other institutions to implement similar programs for faculty based upon a uniform pedagogical theory, resulting in the movement we see today that encompasses schools across America as well as abroad. Sorenson (1991) surmises that as a result of Writing Across the Curriculum, “Most students experienced less apprehension about writing and felt they were better writers – writing more varied, more complex, and more mature pieces – after only a year in a school-wide writing-across-the-curriculum project” (p. 2).

While writing at one time was taught strictly in the English classroom, the Writing Across the Curriculum, National Writing Project, and Writing in the Discipline have changed all of this. The National Writing Project and Nagin (2003) report, “It is striking how other disciplines have begun to incorporate research on the composition process into their own teaching strategies” (p. 25). Writing plays a crucial role in all fields of study and this has been affirmed by the addition of writing on standardized tests. “It is an independent category in state and national standards and is assessed on state, national, and international achievement tests”

(Unger & Fleischman, 2004, p. 90). Many faculty have begun to adopt the Writing Across the Curriculum philosophy into their own disciplines and declare “writing initiates students in to the modes of discourse in their disciplines” (Laipson as cited in Stanley & Ambron, 1991, p. 51). This should not be mistaken for meaning that writing is a generic skill, applicable in any classroom. Spear, McGrath and Seymour make the argument:

If writing is really to count in the classroom, it must be because the intellectual structure of the classroom and the discipline demand it and because writing partly forms the intellectual structure of that classroom and that discipline. Insisting on a generic justification for writing leads to the detachment of reading and writing from the norms and practices of particular disciplines . . . (as cited in Stanley & Ambron, 1991, p.).

Writing can evoke learning in core subjects and is therefore vital it be included in classrooms where its merits are valued and recognized by students and teachers alike (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges summarized the need for writing across disciplines by declaring that if education in America is to reach its fullest potential, a writing revolution must take place that yields to the power of language and communication and gives it a proper place in the classroom (College Board, 2003). Following closely behind the movement for teaching writing in all disciplines is the movement for improving the teaching of writing in U.S. schools.

Whereas the Writing Across the Curriculum project addresses incorporating writing into all classrooms, the National Writing Project is a professional development network that began in 1973 at the University of California, Berkeley (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). The program extends to more than 175 sites in 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S.

Virgin Islands. Lieberman & Wood (2002) summarize that the National Writing Project helps teachers improve how they teach writing and fosters student learning through learning communities at the different sites across the country. They elaborate by declaring each site grows from a school-university partnership in which teachers attend a five-week invitational institute staffed by university and school-based personnel. “These opportunities to write and reflect with other teachers help create an ongoing social network of teachers that develops throughout the year” (Lieberman & Woods, 2002, p. 40).

The link between writing and learning established by Writing Across the Curriculum and the National Writing Project naturally led to context-specific writing in varying fields of study. The idea of writing in content areas expanded to become not only a method for teaching writing, but also a means of improving student education (Tchudi, 1986). Tchudi (1986) states, “The college student who writes in the content fields will not only be a better writer, but also a better thinker, a more liberally educated man or woman” (p. 16). While proponents of Writing in the Discipline emphasize the effectiveness of writing in a context-specific area can not only improve writing, but also education overall, the available literature has not emphatically garnered research data to substantiate this logical claim. The challenge for proponents of writing is to find the appropriate technique for teaching writing that facilitates both overall educational learning and improved writing performance of students.

The Writing Across the Curriculum, National Writing Project, and Writing in the Discipline endeavors strive to improve the writing of students in America, yet each approaches the task in a different manner. These writing movements that began more than three decades ago still hold true today as we encounter the same concerns of insufficient student writing skills. However, today the spotlight shines more prominently on higher education and its role in the

process of preparing graduates for the workplace. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (p. 70, as cited in the National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003)

asserts:

Effective writing skills are important in all stages of life from early education to future employment. In the business world, as well as in school, students must convey complex ideas and information in a clear, succinct manner. Inadequate writing skills, therefore, could inhibit achievement across the curriculum and in future careers, while proficient writing skills help students convey ideas, deliver instructions, analyze information, and motivate others (p. 3).

While it is abundantly clear writing matters, the dilemma as to how to most effectively make students proficient writers is something educational institutions are still tackling today. Sublett (1993) notes, "A lifetime of professional writing faces many students who we annually launch from our colleges and universities into the world of work. Too many students leave the campus unprepared for this critical aspect of their careers" (p. 11).

Process Writing

As a result of the emphasis placed on writing, researchers have developed a consensus on the most effective approach to writing instruction (Unger & Fleischman, 2004). Flowers and Hayes (1981) termed this method as process writing and developed it as a result of a study that looked at the steps accomplished writers used as they wrote (as cited in Unger & Fleischman, 2004). They identified the process as "planning and organizing ideas, translating ideas into text, and revising the result" (Unger & Fleischman, 2004, p. 90). "Most research today supports the view that writing is recursive, that it does not proceed linearly but instead cycles and recycles through subprocesses" (National Writing Project and Nagin, 2003, p. 25). What has resulted

from Flower and Hayes' research of process writing is a "set of instructional guidelines for five stages of the writing process: (1) engaging in prewriting tasks; (2) creating an initial draft; (3) revising the text; (4) editing for conventions; and (5) publishing or presenting a polished final draft" (Unger & Fleischman, 2004, p. 90).

Hill (1992) advocates encouraging the principles of process writing as one of three issues crucial to improving instructional practices in writing. As a part of the process writing approach, revision is perhaps the key that may unlock the learning potential for students. Lehr (1995) defines it as "the heart of the writing process—the means by which ideas emerge and evolve and meanings are clarified" (p. 1). In addition, Flowers (as cited in Zimmerman, 1998) states, "Reflection is of great importance in the social cognitive view of the writing process because it is where writers gain control over their own writing and reading processes" (p. 31). Sensenbaugh (1990) summarizes by stating that if learning is to be accomplished through writing, the purpose of writing must change. The purpose should not be to summarize, but rather "to encourage the students to interact with each other and with their own ideas," thereby allowing the process writing approach to enable both teachers and students to focus on writing to learn (Sensenbaugh, 1990).

As testimony to this process writing approach and its place in the U.S. educational system, the National Assessment of Educational Progress administers a test of writing to large national samples of students (Unger & Fleischman, 2004). They report (2004) that those students who engage in the process writing approach score higher on the test. Unger and Fleischman (2004) conclude, "By focusing attention on an area of instruction that has often been overlooked, the process writing approach has had a significant impact on U.S. education" (p. 92).

Future of Writing

Just as universities and colleges face enormous pressures and institutional demands, students today are facing new challenges in terms of what transferable skills and abilities they must possess to succeed in life. Parks and Goldblatt (2000) contend that many students incorrectly assume they are striving to master vocational training in preparation for a job, when in fact they must “learn abilities that will sustain them through multiple career changes, new roles in marriage and community life, and forbidding political crises in the environment, economy, and social justice” (p. 586). This outlook paves the way for moving writing from merely *across* disciplines, and suggests moving it *beyond* the curriculum.

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools suggests that while writing has taken a backseat to other skills learned in the classroom, it is not to say that American students cannot write, they simply cannot write well (College Board, 2003). Stowers and Barker (2003) make this case by claiming that while effective writing skills can propel students in their careers, poor writing skills play a direct role in limiting their chances for success. Renewed emphasis must be placed on writing if we are to ensure today’s students succeed in an increasingly competitive and global marketplace. The National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges found in a recent study that unless we devote attention to the development of such skills as writing, we are condemning many students to low-wage, hourly employment (College Board, 2004).

If knowledge is power, then writing is knowledge. If students can convey their thoughts effectively on paper there is no limit to what they can accomplish. Abraham Lincoln captured this notion long ago:

Writing – the art of communicating thoughts to the mind – is the great invention of the world...Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions (College Board, 2004, p. 36).

Conclusions/Recommendations

The literature is abundant with evidence pointing to writing being an imperative component of classrooms from K-16. It is important to understand the writing movements of Writing Across the Curriculum, the National Writing Project, and Writing in the Discipline as they relate to the emphasis placed on writing in the American educational system. Historically, these three movements were the largest efforts in recent time focused on increasing writing ability of students. However, these movements focused on both increasing writing productivity at the secondary level and post-secondary levels. According to the literature, it is assumed students come to a college or university with basic writing. However, research has shown that may not be the case. Therefore, it is recommended research be done focusing on techniques for improving basic writing skills of college/university students.

The literature is rich in supporting the importance of writing skills for career success. Even in today's technological world, writing is still a fundamental key for successfully communicating in the workplace. Therefore, it is recommended that colleges and universities place more emphasis on pushing students to mastery of writing basics. It is also recommended that students work to ensure they have the right tools, including strong writing skills, in the toolbox to be competitive in the job market.

As a result of this study, researchers have concluded process writing offers the most logical and efficient way to address the teaching of writing in the classroom at the secondary

level. In addition, the literature supports the notion that writing far transcends its historical place in the English classroom and is appropriate in any and all courses where learning takes place. Most recently, the College Board embarked on two benchmark studies that indicated writing remains to be entrenched in the classroom today, and if students are to succeed they must win the battle of writing well. It is recommended that research be conducted focused on measuring the effectiveness of process writing in a post-secondary classroom and positioned to ascertain its effect on improving the writing performance of students. Additionally, the effect of different writing approaches as well as writer attitude must be considered and studied.

Writing is a necessary and useful skill for all individuals, regardless of life path or profession. Faculty in all areas at high schools, colleges and universities alike must focus on writing as a part of their curriculum. Obviously it is important to focus on the process of teaching writing to be most effective, but what is probably more important is to focus on setting high standards for writing in the classroom. Therefore, academia must seek to determine how best to prepare individuals to meet the challenge of successfully performing written tasks. Academia must also seek to prepare faculty to be vigilant in expectations of writing performance at all levels in the academic setting.

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