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Classroom writing: Understanding the writing process

Mary Jane McCollum
University of Northern Iowa

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Classroom writing: Understanding the writing process

Abstract

The writing across the curriculum movement began in the 1960s with a study conducted by James Britton and his associates (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, Rosen, 1975) on the kinds and uses of writing in the British schools. They studied over 2,000 pieces of writing collected from students aged 11 to 18. In the United States, during the 1970s, teachers realized that the standard approach to teaching writing skills did not seem to be producing desired results (Gray, 1988). A large percentage of young people seemed to lack the motivation needed to learn to write well. They weren't persuaded that writing was a life-skill or threatened by poor performance of high school seniors on college entrance tests (King, 1986).

Classroom Writing: Understanding the Writing Process

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Mary Jane McCollum

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Marvin Heller

7-29-88
Date Approved
Director of Research Paper

Marvin Heller

7-29-88
Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Adviser

Greg Stefanich

7/29/88
Date Approved
Graduate Faculty Reader

Greg Stefanich

7/29/88
Date Approved
Head/ Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

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History of the Writing Across the Curriculum
Movement

The writing across the curriculum movement
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writing was a life-skill or threatened by poor
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entrance tests (King, 1986).

English teachers then spent more time teaching
the mechanics and skills of writing, believing that
if the mechanical precision of student writing got
better, test scores would improve. But this did not
happen, and, in fact, scores continued to decline.

About this time, American colleges and universities initiated seminars in which faculty members from across the disciplines came together to talk about and learn how to improve the writing of their students. In the beginning the idea was that writing across the curriculum would be taught by people who were not writing specialists (Gray, 1988).

In 1973, Peter Elbow published <u>Writing Without Teachers</u> (Oxford University Press), a book which popularized Ken Macrorie's idea of freewriting. In the mid 1970s the University of California at Berkeley developed the Bay Area Writing Project which exposed teachers to the writing process firsthand and relied on journal writing to teach English. Also in the 1970s, the research on writing began to focus on the writing process rather than on the product.

All of this began to exert a growing influence on writing instruction in elementary and secondary schools. Donald Graves (1983) focused his research on elementary children. He consulted with students about their concerns and interests when writing. Lucy Calkins (1983) then built on this work by

showing teachers techniques for making writing
student-centered (Kirby, Latta, & Vinz, 1988).

With the publication of <u>A Nation at Risk:</u>
<u>Imperative for Educational Reform</u> (1983), came the
realization that a more dramatic reform of writing
was needed. Many new proposals for writing were put
forth. Most of them had the same theme: writing
should be taught with an emphasis on the process of
learning rather than on the product (King, 1986).
The result has been a split between those who
advocate a product approach to teaching writing and
those who favor the process emphasis.

The rationale for continuing the product
approach is that many teachers are not willing to
give up a style of teaching with which they have
grown proficient and comfortable (King, 1986).
Teachers who use the product approach favor less
active student involvement. The teacher's role is
to give assignments and to grade them. The
student's role is to hand in a final product.

The advocates of process learning, however,
favor more active student participation in the
learning process (King, 1986). Those who write
about topics understand them better (Shuman, 1984).

Writing then becomes a means of knowing (Britton et al., 1975).

While the term writing across the curriculum has become fashionable, few content area teachers have actually changed the way they teach to incorporate writing as a means of having students learn content material (Mayher & Lester, 1983). Writing is too often viewed as merely a collection of skills, and, in too many schools, it is still seen primarily as a way of disseminating knowledge to students (McCrimmon, 1970).

John Goodlad, in his book A Place Called School: Prospects For the Future (1984), pointed out that English/language arts courses have always formed the backbone of the curriculum. He also reported that almost all writing was confined to the English classes. However, student writing cannot be improved if it is isolated in the English classroom (Beyer, 1982; Pearce, 1984). English teachers have neither the time nor enough appropriate writing contexts to teach all of the writing skills required. What is taught in English class does not automatically carry over to other classes. Students do not transfer skills from one subject to another

unless they receive instruction in how to do so.
Content teachers, therefore, need to know what
writing skills are taught in the English curriculum
so they can reinforce, practice, and extend them
(Beyer, 1982). Also, teachers of various
disciplines may actually find they are teaching the
same concepts but using different vocabulary to do
it.

The idea of using writing as a learning tool in
other subjects has not been very successful in the
past for several reasons. First of all, content
teachers often feel that if they are teaching
writing, they are doing the work of the English
teacher. They feel their job should be simply to
promote the content of learning, not to teach
writing skills (Melton, 1985; Tschumy; 1982).
Suggestions traditionally given by English teachers
to their content area colleagues are often limited
to recommendations about mechanical techniques such
as sentence structure or vocabulary. These
suggestions are unimaginative, and content teachers
are not interested in teaching grammar (King, 1986).

Content people do not like being told how to
teach writing in their classrooms. It is like

telling them there is a better way to teach
(Fulwiler, 1981; Tchudi, 1986). Although most
teachers will agree that some form of writing should
be interdisciplinary, many have no idea how to
incorporate it into their curriculum (Shadiow,
1981). While each is a practicing writer in his or
her own subject area, few have been trained to teach
writing skills to others, and because these non-
English teachers think they don't know how to teach
writing, they don't provide writing experiences for
their students (Shadiow, 1981).

Many teachers are already feeling overburdened
with curricular demands. They are being asked to
infuse career education, multicultural education,
environmental education, reading, and now writing
into their curricular areas (Shadiow, 1981).
Teaching writing, to them, means carrying home
stacks of compositions each night, and they will
resist any effort which adds to their teaching
burdens, takes away instructional time, or adds to
preparation time (King, 1986; Shuman, 1984). They
believe there is no time to squeeze writing into an
already overcrowded curriculum.

The Problem

The problem centers around several questions:

1. How can content teachers be convinced that writing needs to be taught in their classrooms?

2. How do we help them learn that writing will not add to their workload, and that, in many cases it may actually lighten it?

3. How do we help them learn to teach writing in ways which enable the students to learn about themselves as well as to learn class material? How do we help content area teachers see that teaching writing will enhance student learning?

This paper examines the differences between the product and the process approach to teaching writing. It describes and explains the writing processes. It presents current research which supports the use of the writing process approach over the more traditional approach which emphasizes the product. It presents four models of the writing process and a brief analysis of the models. It suggests ways of expanding writing experiences for students.

The Writing Process: A Case for the Process
Approach

Recent research reveals that educational
leaders in all areas of the curriculum agree that
English teachers alone should not bear the total
responsibility for teaching writing (Shadiow, 1981).
All content teachers need to be responsible for
helping to develop student writing ability.

Basic processes like group discussion, textual
comprehension, data gathering, inference making, and
verbal composition are critical for all subjects,
but none receive the attention they deserve.
Integration into all areas is desperately needed
(Moffett, 1968).

Learning language means learning how to use
that language to solve problems that are encountered
in all subjects, not just in English class. If the
whole human being is to grow intellectually, then
writing must be integrated into all subject areas.
What is common to all subjects should be taught in
all subjects (Moffett, 1968; Styles & Cavanagh,
1980).

Transactional writing informs, persuades,
instructs, and carries on business. This is the

kind of writing that gets things done in school
(Fulwiler, 1978). However, transactional writing
teaches children to acquire a language that is not
their own (Mayher & Lester, 1983). Rote
memorization, recall, and copying are the main
patterns of writing that students use to acquire
knowledge of the subject matter.

Current literature points out that it is more
important for students to engage regularly in
expressive writing than in transactional writing.
Expressive writing reveals the thinking process. It
helps writers find out what they want to say. It is
a unique mode of learning (Emig, 1971). It is often
unstructured and resembles inner speech (Moffett,
1968, 1981). Expressive writing is, however, seldom
encouraged by teachers, especially in secondary
classrooms, because they believe it is more
difficult to teach and a more difficult process for
students to learn (Fulwiler, 1978).

Too many teachers, both English as well as
teachers in other disciplines, look suspiciously at
expressive writing. Many feel it is too personal or
informal to assign in the classroom. Others feel it
is too difficult to evaluate. In the mid 1960s a

movement toward "free" writing developed. Teachers
were to encourage it and do nothing to discourage
it. Some advocates of this approach to creative
writing felt evaluation was impossible since if
everything was creative, it was all good writing.
Progress then was difficult to measure. This caused
many teachers to refrain from teaching expressive
writing (Britton et al., 1975).

Product v. Process

As James Britton (1975) has said, it is much
easier to study the product than the process of
writing. Much of the research on the spoken
language has concerned itself with speech, the
product, rather than with the processes involved in
speaking. This criticism can also be applied to
writing. In literary studies, however, there has
been more concern for the psychological processes of
poets and novelists. In examining these studies of
the processes by which authors have produced great
works of literature, many differences were found
between the way writers work and the way teachers
and textbooks advise students to write (Britton et
al., 1975).

In Janet Emig's study (1971) of the writing processes of eight 16-and 17-year-old high school students in Chicago, good writers expressed their thoughts aloud as they wrote in reflexive (personal/ expressive) and extensive (transactional) modes. These students' writing behaviors were influenced by the mode of discourse and the audience. When the students were asked to complete school-sponsored, transactional writing tasks, the writing was begun without any hesitation or difficulty, with only minimal pauses for thought, and with no voluntary revision. However, when the writing was self-sponsored, the students began with long prewriting periods, paused longer to think about their texts, and made more voluntary revisions (Emig, 1971).

Since most students did not feel committed to the school-sponsored task, they wrote without establishing a purpose and showed no concern for style. They were glad to be finished writing.

In a study by James Britton and associates (1975), 2122 pieces of writing were collected from students aged 11-18. This collection of writing revealed that expressive writing was underused in schools. Expressive writing consisted of only about

5% of the writing in any year. All of the
expressive writing was done in English classes; none
was done in any other subject area (Rosen, 1978).
Transactional writing dominated the school
curriculum. It was only about 50% of the writing
the first year (11-year-olds), but by the end of the
school curriculum (18-year-olds) it was between 80%
and 90%.

A national survey of writing in secondary
schools (Applebee, Lehr & Auten, 1981), found that
the writing done in schools was heavily weighted
toward mechanical tasks. When students were asked
to write a paragraph or more, the tasks were usually
informational, with the teacher serving as examiner.
The major focus of writing instruction in all
subjects was the teachers' comments on student
papers. In those classes where students did write
at length, writing was used mostly to test
knowledge; the teacher acted as the examiner rather
than as participant.

These studies suggest that school-sponsored
writing is a limited, and a limiting, experience.
Transactional writing is the only form of writing
used in many schools; it is other-directed. The

writer is concerned with sending a message to the reader. As McCrimmon (1970) has stated, this kind of composition is slanted toward the needs of the reader. The effectiveness of the work is judged by the ease and clarity with which it is understood. Schools have concentrated on teaching students to write compositions which tell a good story. In this kind of writing the instructional goals focus on the organization of material, the development of paragraphs, sentence construction, appropriate diction, and standard usage. These goals teach a young writer how to organize and present material. Comments on these papers deal primarily with locating mistakes, spelling, sentence structure, and mechanics; and student revisions, if there are any, are directed at these kinds of problems. The goal of instruction then, is to help students gain proficiency in these skills. If these goals are achieved, the writer knows how to organize and present material. In this kind of writing, the teacher is more interested in the end product because it is easier to criticize (Emig, 1971).

Also important, however, is the learning that takes place during the writing process. It is a

process of making choices. Writers need to understand their own thoughts and how they shape them into a pattern. Often writers will not know where they are headed when they sit down to write. The first draft of a story may in no way resemble the final draft. Writers grope their way along through draft after draft, making decisions along the way. Often writers' ideas on a subject grow as they write about it. By putting all of these thoughts together, by sorting bits and pieces, and by building a framework, writers are able to build meaning (Beyer, 1982; Styles & Cavanagh, 1980). Writing then becomes a way of discovering rather than a way of telling. When writing is used as a way of telling, writers are chiefly concerned with discovery (content). Writing then becomes a mode of learning, an action, rather than a thing simply corrected (Elbow, 1981; Emig, 1977; Fincke, 1982; Irmscher, 1979; Mayer & Lester, 1983).

While many schools have adopted a writing-as-process vocabulary, sometimes it is nothing more than that. Many districts have bought new texts which claim to teach the process without sacrificing phonics, spelling, and grammar. Others use the

writing process as though it were a content itself
by mandating class activities (Kirby, 1988).

Part of the problem may be a misunderstanding
of what the writing process is. First of all, there
is not just one process. Process is not content or
curriculum. Process is not static. Writing
processes involve the interaction between writer and
text. They are everything writers do to construct
text--draw, daydream, talk, copy, read, role-play.
Processes are:

> the visible and invisible things writers
> do to wrestle ideas onto the page . . .
> there are no good processes; there are
> simply processes that work in the
> production of the text a writer wants, or
> processes that fail and ultimately
> frustrate the writer. Processes lead
> writers to explore and understand ideas or
> to confuse and circumvent ideas.
> Processes are ways of describing what
> writers do and don't do during the
> formulation and production of texts
> (Kirby, 1988, p. 720).

We must teach exactly what these processes are and
what happens during the interaction between writer
and text.

Understanding the Writing Process: Four Models

There are many "stage" models of the writing
process. These models are attempts by researchers
to explain the steps in the writing process. Four
of the most widely recognized ones are presented
here.

Rohman (1965) developed a three-stage model;
prewrite, write, rewrite; which has influenced many
textbooks (Shah, 1986). This is one of the first
models which recognized a need for the writer to
think before beginning to write. Rohman identified
thinking as:

> activity of mind which brings forth and
> develops ideas, plans, designs, not merely
> the entrance of an idea into one's mind;
> an active not a passive enlistment in the
> "cause" of an idea; conceiving which
> includes consecutive logical thinking but
> much more besides; essentially the
> imposition of pattern upon experience.

This thought is required for writing to be successful.

Britton and his associates (1975) also developed a three-stage description of the writing process; conception, incubation, and production. Conception leads up to the art of writing. The conception process may be very brief or very long. There is usually some specific incident, perhaps an assignment given by a teacher, which sparks the decision to write. The amount of choice the writer has will vary depending upon the assignment. The writer, however, selects from what he knows and thinks, from all of his previous experience, and begins to formulate expectations for the writing task.

The way the writing task is constructed will determine the writing process. There is wide variation from writer to writer in all stages of preparing to write. For many, the conception stage can be harder than the actual writing process. The writer may be baffled by the task and not know how to proceed. The writer may ask questions already answered, or just sit silently for fear of showing

ignorance. The writer may remember past failures that make him think he may fail again.

Britton's second stage is called incubation. In this stage the writer is able to explain the whole process to himself.

The third stage is called production. In the production stage the actual writing occurs--the putting of pen to paper.

Applebee, Lehr, and Auten's three-stage composing model (1981) includes prewriting, writing, and editing. During the prewriting stage, ideas are formulated and information assembled. Incubation takes place. In the writing stage, lines of thought are worked and reworked on paper. During editing, the final stage of the composing process, the written product is polished by paying special attention to writing mechanics and to intended audience.

Lucy Calkins (1986) prefers these terms: rehearsal, drafting, revision, and editing. Rehearsal is a way of living, an extra-awareness. Writers see potential stories everywhere. Rehearsal is the planting of seeds which may not grow for days, weeks, or even years. Rehearsal also includes

the gathering of raw material. It is a growing readiness to commit to the act of writing.

Drafting implies the tentativeness of early efforts at writing. Drafting is a first attempt at getting ideas down on paper.

Drafting becomes revision. Re-vision means seeing again. Writers become readers and then writers again. Sentences or whole sections may be crossed out, moved around, or rewritten.

During editing, the writer can step away from the written page and view the piece objectively. It is a time for tightening, linking, clarifying. It is a time to look at the words on the page and hear the sound of them being read aloud.

Analysis of the Models

While each of the stage models does not have the same number of steps or the same labels attached to them, they do have several things in common. All four models fall into three basic categories: (a) Stage 1--Preparation for Writing, (b) Stage 2-- Writing, and (c) Stage 3--Evaluation.

Rohman and Applebee call their preparation stage "prewriting," while Calkins prefers the term "rehearsal." Britton views both his "conception"

stage; which he defines as the stage "when the writer knows that he is going to write and he has formed some idea of what is expected of him" (1975, p. 25); and his "incubation" stage which is the process of "arriving at an understanding, working towards a synthesis, coming to terms with a general principle" (p. 30); as preparatory stages in the writing process.

It is important to note that this preparatory stage is viewed by all four as the most important and often the most neglected. It is in this stage that the teacher plays a very important role. The teacher needs to encourage all types of discovery; talking, drawing, reading, role-playing, storytelling, daydreaming; activities that prepare the writer for writing (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983).

The second stage "Writing" is the one most often studied and yet least understood. It involves many cognitive processes not yet fully understood. The insights into these psychological processes can only be obtained from watching and listening to writers at work, studying what writers say about

what they do, and sometimes inferring something
about the process from the product (Shah, 1986).

Calkins prefers the term "drafting" over
"writing." Drafting implies a certain urgency in
getting a message down on paper, but nothing is
permanent. She also includes in this stage
"revision." It is a continuation of the writing
process by "re-seeing" a draft of a paper.

Table 1

Comparison of Writing Models

	Rohman (1965)	Britton et al. (1975)	Applebee et al. (1981)	Calkins (1986)
Stage 1 Preparation for Writing	Prewrite	Conception Incubation	Prewrite	Rehearsal
Stage 2 Writing	Write	Production	Writing	Drafting Revision
Stage 3 Evaluation	Rewrite		Editing	Editing

In "Stage 3: Evaluation," all 4 authors address what happens after the actual writing stage has occurred. The bulk of the work has been completed, and this is where the tightening and polishing occur. Since Britton views his "production" stage as any writing that is occurring, production continues through all stages of writing and correcting until the product is complete and the pen is put down.

It is important to understand that these models are a way of describing what is happening during the writing process. Becoming a good teacher of expressive writing requires an understanding of the processes by which children learn.

Recursive Writing

The shift between any of these stages can occur second by second, minute by minute, throughout the writing process. The writer selects a topic, jots it down, writes a few lines, and rereads them. The writer may cross out a line or make a few changes. The writer may question his purpose. He may even start over with another topic. He is constantly shifting through the writing stages.

Thirty children in a classroom may be working at very different stages of the writing process. Using the process approach does not fit neatly into a teacher-led, direct teaching method of instruction. It would be easy to teach the steps in any one of these four composing models as discrete and linear to keep the class working in unison. On Monday everyone chooses a topic; on Tuesday everyone freewrites for 10 minutes. But writing is not a linear activity moving from one stage to another. Various researchers (Britton et al., 1975; Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1977, 1981; Gray, 1988) have observed that most writers do not proceed in a linear pattern like textbooks suggest. Prewriting does not end abruptly and writing begin. Rewrite and editing periods may occur at any time in the writing process, not just after the entire product has been developed (Flower & Hayes, 1977). Writers constantly move back and forth as they shape their thoughts about their subject.

Expanding Writing Experiences

Expanding school-wide writing experiences involves a variety of types of assignments in addition to teaching the composing process. All

teachers can participate by widening the audience for student writing, offering supportive conditions for writing, providing increasing opportunities for writing, and increasing the prewriting experiences of students (Shadiow, 1981).

Although writing instruction may be the primary responsibility of the English teacher, content teachers must realize their contribution to teaching writing, so every teacher can become a writing teacher. All disciplines must recognize their interdependence.

Teachers themselves need to serve as model writers. Because they do not understand expressive writing, many teachers are afraid to write. It is difficult to ask students to do what teachers will not do. If teachers value writing, then they must model it. As students view the teachers' writing experiences, they gain an understanding of the writing process and begin to understand what is expected of them.

Conclusion

It is ironic that the writing across the curriculum movement is gaining momentum now when the big push is back-to-the-basics. Writing across the

curriculum is not a skills approach to teaching writing. Spelling and punctuation are not at the heart of the curriculum. This must be made clear to school board members, administrators, and parents because the success of such a program may hinge on it (Tschumy, 1982). Without their cooperation, writing across the curriculum programs could disappear from the classrooms within a decade (Jenkinson, 1988). These programs could fall victim to those who believe there is only one approach or process to follow, to programs that inadequately train teachers, or to state or nationwide testing programs. Standardized tests do not measure students' writing ability, yet more and more teachers are teaching to these tests so their students will perform well on them. When testing programs dictate the curriculum, it is difficult to teach writing as a process.

Writing must be looked at as a way of arriving at understanding, a way of assisting learning in all subject areas (Tschumy, 1982). Using it only in the English class limits its usefulness. Knowledge that has been written about is knowledge that has been personalized and related to experiences. This kind

of knowledge is desirable in all curricular areas.
In writing, students can take new information and
interpret it in light of what they already know. In
this way, writing becomes the vehicle for learning.
As Irmscher (1979) puts it: "Writing is a way of
fashioning a network of associations and increasing
our potential for learning" (p. 244).

Schools must broaden their view of the function
of writing. While writing does allow teachers to
see what a student has already learned, this cannot
be the sole function of writing. In using process
models such as those of Rohman, Applebee, Britton,
and Calkins, teachers are able to identify at least
some of the conscious mental processes writers might
use on a particular writing assignment. In
identifying these processes, teachers are able to
enhance their understanding of the process of
discovery and the demands imposed by the tasks.

It is all too easy for content teachers to get
isolated within their areas, focusing only on the
content of their disciplines. But if everyone in a
school is aware of the benefits students can acquire
from an ability to use the writing processes
effectively, writing can be an effective tool for

learning across the curriculum. Through writing, students can learn more about their topics as well as about themselves and their audiences. Writing is a good way to learn facts and concepts, to clarify thinking, and to refine cognitive skills (Beyer, 1982). These are goals most teachers share regardless of the discipline. When all teachers understand that writing is a way of learning, a way of discovering, a way of developing (Elbow, 1981; Emig, 1977; Odell, 1980); and provide students with opportunities to practice and master the writing process; then they have become teachers of writing.

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