

Good writing is more than merely a means of clearly stating concepts in a written form.

Give Johnny some practice

by Robert Gassen

During my teaching career, I have been frustrated and puzzled by the amount of research done to pinpoint problems in learning and the subsequent lack of actual changes the research produces in terms of improving classroom performance. Somehow, the problem-to-solution technique often gets off the ground but then crashes into a heap of footnotes and gets hauled off into the jargon scrapyard. Parents' groups demand action, tests are given, heads shake in bewilderment and despair and, finally, we decide to do more research.

Several months ago, I read the results of a National Council of Teachers of English research study that pinpointed some of the most important problems in secondary education. According to Arthur Applebee of Stanford University, only three percent of writing assignments in secondary schools are more than one paragraph in length.¹ Moreover, Applebee reports that most teachers use writing assignments "that require students to parrot back facts to a teacher in the role of examiner."²

Nothing in Applebee's study surprised me. In fact, I have been aware of the problems that students do not write often and that writing assignments often require little sustained thought, personal response, or development. I have encountered the problem as a student and teacher, and I have read eloquent articles dealing with these issues in many English education journals. However, as Applebee's research concludes, nothing has changed.

As most teachers of writing and scholars in other disciplines would agree, good writing is more than merely a means of clearly stating concepts in written form. It is, above all, a means by which one orders his experiences. One does not often fully understand what he really has to say until he has written it, examined it, and rewritten it. In its highest sense, writing is a means of sharpening the thinking process. The teacher's role in writing, from the upper elementary grades through graduate school, is to examine the student's writing and to suggest ways for him to sharpen his thinking process. For example, a response to an essay question may be illogical and lack adequate supporting details. A psychology teacher, for instance, should be very capable of suggesting improvements in the quality of essay answers pertaining to his discipline.

To some teachers, writing should take place only in English classes. Such teachers often rely on objective

tests and projects of various types, including reports that are little more than poorly paraphrased articles or chapters from texts. In many cases, students become mere storehouses of information. In one college history course, I recall underlining important bits of textbook information and taking copious notes. At certain times, I would demonstrate my mastery of the text and the notes by taking multiple-choice exams. Each test contained one essay question such as "State three major causes of the Bolshevik Revolution." The causes, of course, were contained in my notes. My task was merely to recall them. At no point in the course was I required to make inferences, draw conclusions, or do any type of critical thinking. This course was not an exception to the rule. I had many teachers, especially on the secondary level, who used such methods and, according to Applebee, such teachers are in the majority.

I was surprised to discover what graduate-level professors consider essay exams. One graduate-level speech pathology exam that I read contained a section entitled "short answer essays." These so-called essay questions merely asked the student to list information. Further, the answers did not require paragraph form or complete sentences. Another part of this exam entitled "long essay" asked the student to reproduce from memory an idea or process such as "Explain in detail the communication process as stated in our text." Again, this section required no demonstration of composition skills or critical thinking.

I am not against some memorization and essay questions that do not require creative thinking. What disturbs me is that many students receive very little or no instruction and practice in writing essays that call for such skills as refutation, drawing conclusions, and so forth.

Stating the problem is easy. The solutions, however, are neither easy nor quick. They require overall changes in the attitude of many teachers and a greater emphasis on essay writing in certain curriculum and methods courses. Teachers of any content subject must understand that instruction in writing is not the exclusive province of the English teacher. Any skill requires frequent practice and training. Writing is no exception. If educators are truly concerned about improving the quality of student writing, they need to accept the notion that students must be expected to write essays of varying lengths on a regular basis in many of their content area courses. Students must view writing as a total school experience, not as an English course activity only.

I am not suggesting that sociology teachers become English teachers. However, teachers should spend some time instructing students on the best ways to answer essay questions, provide students with the opportunities to use writing skills, and offer students constructive criticism of their writing. A social science teacher, for example, could provide a list of problems and ask students to respond to one of these problems in an essay. In reading these essays, the teacher could point out weaknesses to be avoided in future essays. Through this strategy, the students would gain practice in writing, sharpen their thinking skills, and learn ways to improve future essays.

The goal of a greater emphasis on writing in content area courses is difficult to achieve for two reasons.

First, teachers are often no different from other professionals. They learn from example. If students do very little writing and are taught through their writing activities that an essay means only a listing of concepts or steps in a process, then as teachers, they will often continue this

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trend. We learn by doing, and what we are doing in schools is perpetuating the problems that Applebee describes.

Finally, writing assignments requiring sustained thought on a subject demand more time to carefully evaluate than other types of assignments. A teacher cannot use a grading key on a long essay that requires a student to propose a solution to a problem. In secondary schools, many teachers, already burdened by large classes, are reluctant to increase their burdens.

What is needed is a change in teachers' attitudes and habits, and the place to start the change is in the colleges of education Methods courses, especially those concerned with special methods, need to put more emphasis on writing essays. The prospective teachers of content area courses need instruction on teaching students to write challenging essays. Instead of merely learning that writing assignments and essay questions are necessary,

the prospective teacher must also learn how to teach students the techniques of good essay writing and how to evaluate student essays. These skills should then be utilized in student teaching. Those in charge of teacher training must initiate changes in attitudes toward writing.

Since writing is a tool of critical and creative thinking, teachers should encourage writing. Although many teachers are overburdened with large classes and extra duties, they should use writing whenever possible and strive to improve the quality of writing assignments. In some cases, it may be a matter of rearranging priorities.

Endnotes

¹National Council of Teachers of English, "Best Techniques For Teaching Writing Neglected in High School Classrooms," *News*, November 12, 1981, p. 1.

²National Council of Teachers of English.