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ABSTRACT

A survey of writing was designed to reflect the belief that improving writing instruction depends in part on implementing two principles. These principles are that one must be aware of and sensitive to the sources of language acquisition, and that one must know what students perceive as the major purposes behind their own writing, both present and future. The survey contains three sections in which respondents are asked to indicate the frequency with which they perform a number of activities (viewing, listening, and reading), the kinds of writing done now and expected to be done in the future, and expectations/disappointments of writing instruction. This survey was administered to six distinct groups: (1) 25 nonremedial high school students, (2) 24 developmental college freshman writing students, (3) 22 students in a regular college freshman composition course, (4) 23 upper-division college students in an advanced writing course, (5) 11 teachers and other professionals in the same geographic area as the surveyed students, and (6) 17 educators at an English teachers conference. The two principal findings from surveying these different groups were that both language acquisition and perceived writing needs were similar for most of the six sampled groups, and that instructors could use this information to improve teaching strategies in writing classes. (A copy of the survey instrument is attached.) (RL)

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The Real and Perceived Writing Needs of Students and Graduate Professionals: A Mimetic Approach to Helping Student Writers

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The Real and Perceived Writing Needs of Students and Graduate Professionals: A Mimetic Appraoch to Helping Student Writers

"My students are dull. They just don't have anything to say and they don't know anything." Of all the complaints that one hears from colleagues in English departments this is the most disheartening, partly because it is a judgment on students rather than on student writing and partly because, if true, it renders the teaching of writing a hopeless business. In a way it is a self-engendering complaint, for it is difficult for a teacher to conceal from students what is all too often his or her suspicion that they are unteachable. Fortunately the proposition is false: students do know something, though what they know often offends the academician's sense of cultural continuity. Even if the complaint were justified, however, the age-old belief that a good teacher can help even a poor student learn suggests that there are remedies available to the enterprising composition teacher. It seems to us, therefore, that in an era when student writing has led so many teachers to doubt that their students have the capacity to know, imagine, and invent, one of the most important contributions a researcher can make is to find ways to help teachers tap the knowledge and experience students do have. In so doing the teacher can develop new respect for students' minds at the same time that students benefit from succeeding at writing tasks, something that few of them have ever experienced.

Our research is based on several principles, the first of which is that writing is an imitative or mimetic process. Simply stated, everyone's rhetorical repertoire is built on a foundation of years of hearing spoken language and seeing words put together on paper in a variety of

ways for a variety of purposes. Mimesis is not mimicry in its most limited sense; it is rather the storing and subsequent retrieval of modes of expression, not unlike T. S. Eliot's concept of the catalytic combination of long-remembered language, emotion, or feeling as expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In daily life a person may converse, listen to radio or watch television, read newspapers, hear sermons, study technical manuals--and each of these activities leaves its mark on how that person expresses him or herself in speaking and writing. Thus our first goal was to learn where students and their teachers acquire their language, hence Part I of the "Survey of Writing" which appears as "Appendix A."

Second, we believe that student success in writing assignments is the best treatment for the melancholic assumption that students know nothing. It is critical that students perform some tasks well at the beginning of a course, so that both students and teachers can hope for better things to come. Based on our suppositions about the role of mimesis in writing, we decided to find out what kinds of writing students and former students do and what kinds of writing they expect to do in the future. Part II of the survey is designed to gather this information. If teachers can find out what kinds of writing their students do and what kinds they value, perhaps they can ask students, at least at the start of courses, to do those kinds of writing, and perhaps the students will do better on these types of assignments.

Our survey would probably not be necessary if it were not for the fact that generations of teachers and textbook publishers have misunderstood the mimetic process as it actually functions. As Young and Becker point out in "Towards a Modern Theory of Rhetoric,"[1] none of the four major Western rhetorical traditions is effective in today's classroom.

The tradition of the sophists--that rhetoric is a purely utilitarian tool--or that of Plato--that good writing is simply a good man writing--are equally unacceptable to most instructors. The more commonly accepted traditions--Aristotelian rhetoric and literary criticism--are also flawed. Although Aristotle was keenly aware of the relationship between invention, arrangement and style, he was primarily concerned with the rhetoric of Greek public life. In our terms, therefore, the medium in which his students functioned and from which they acquired their language is as culture-bound as is today's medium, and the two are bound to different cultures. Literary criticism has a long and honored history in the West, and most English teachers are comfortable with it--in fact, too comfortable. It is too easy for some to teach criticism instead of writing. Furthermore, it is tempting to make the false logical leap and assume that students who read in a writing course will necessarily write better. Donald A. Murray puts this notion in perspective when he cites it as one of the persistent myths about writing pedagogy:

> Myth 8: Students learn by imitating models of great writing. The rhetorical teaching method used by the ancients is particularly attractive to the contemporary teacher who wants to make a science of composition. We do not, however, have a modern rhetoric which identifies and isolates the forms of discourse appropriate in modern society, with its diversity of rhetorical purposes, tones, appeals and audiences. And we have not yet found a method of applying the classical techniques of teaching and discourse to mass education.[2]

Students should read much more literature at every level of education, for mimetic absorption is a long and complicated process. But forcing college freshmen to write only criticism, or worse yet, believing that they will learn to write essays by reading them over a fifteen-week period, yields only frustrating results for students and teachers.

As we have pointed out, the mimetic process as it pertains to writing

is a protracted one. That is why Mary Bishop's analysis of the relationship between reading habits, television watching, and SAT scores comes as no surprise. She shows that twenty-five school children who read three times as much as twenty-five inner-city students scored an average of 192 points higher on the SAT Verbal Aptitude Test.[3] We are sure that Bishop would be the last to suggest that a semester with a typical freshman English reader would have the same results. Phyllis Brooks demonstrates how students can learn grammar by reading excerpts from experienced writers and then producing what she calls "persona paraphrases,"[4] but hers is a limited application of mimetic principles to achieve specific short-term results. What counts is where students acquire their language over a long period of time.

Another false shortcut open to writing instructors is provided by the rhetorical readers peddled by bands of publishers' sales representatives who tour campuses and prey on ignorance. These books hold out the hope that teaching rhetorical forms, in which most English teachers are well-versed, will teach students to think and hence to write. Our experience has been that if you ask a weak student whose only interest is sports to write a comparison/contrast essay, you are likely to get a poor paper. Ask that same student to predict the winner of the Super Bowl or World Series and you are likely to get a detailed and balanced assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two teams--presto, a decent comparison/contrast essay. Our point here is that we concur fully with Eckhardt and Stewart[5] when they argue that students should be taught that writing has purposes and that these purposes dictate form. Thus papers that clarify, or evaluate, or substantiate, or call for action can rely on the whole range of rhetorical formulas presented in most texts. So straightforward and sensible is their approach that

it hardly seems the product of academic thinking.

The "Survey of Writing" (Appendix A) is designed to reflect our belief that improving writing instruction depends in part on implementing two principles: (1) that one must be aware of and be sensitive to the sources of students' language (as well as one's own), and (2) that one must know what students perceive to be the major purposes behind their own writing, both present and future. The statistically quantifiable parts of the survey [see Tables 1 and 2] measure the responses of six distinct groups to questions about sources of language acquisition and perceived writing needs. The six groups are as follows:

(1) A non-remedial high school English class (average age 15) from Plattsburgh, New York (N=25);

(2) a developmental freshman writing class at the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh (N=24);

(3) a regular freshman composition course at the same college (N=22);

(4) an advanced writing course for upper-division students (N=23);

(5) teachers and other professionals in the Plattsburgh area (N=11);

(6) an audience of educators to whom this paper was originally presented at the New York State English Council conference in Syracuse, New York, October 1980 (N=17).

Our principal findings, which follow in greater detail, are that both language acquisition and perceived writing needs are similar for most of the six sample groups and that instructors can use this information to improve teaching strategies.

The responses to Part I suggest a greater uniformity of language exposure than we would have expected, at least in groups 2 through 6. It should come as no surprise to high school teachers that the high school students watch more non-news television and read fewer books and newspapers than any other group. A distressing 55% have never gone to a play,

despite the fact that our college's theatre is perhaps a two-minute walk from their school. What intrigued us, though, is the fact that the mostly non-traditional students in the developmental freshman writing class provided responses indistinguishable from those of the older groups but sharply different from those of the high school students. Of course, not every high school student will attend college so that even the remedial college group is a presorted sample; yet the students in this class are all special admission students who are not drawn from pools of students likely to attend college. Hence we feel that the college environment itself has affected their responses. Being enrolled in college courses and being exposed to cultural opportunities seem to have altered these students' habits of language acquisition. Thus Part I of the survey suggests that the Bishop study cited above is valid and that high school students would probably benefit from the establishment of a more vigorous academic atmosphere. It also suggests that once in college students seem ready to avail themselves of the sources of language and culture to which some instructors think them permanently indifferent. In any case, since the responses of both non-traditional freshmen and typical juniors and seniors are the same, it would seem that college instructors will just have to deal with reality rather than cursing it.

Part II of the survey was designed to help enhance instructors' sense of reality by identifying real and perceived writing needs of students and professionals. Are students doing the kind of writing in school that they do voluntarily out of school? What kinds of writing do they believe they will be doing when they leave school, and are their expectations realistic? What are the perceived writing needs of those who are teaching the students? And finally, how can these data be useful to classroom teachers? These are the questions to which we can provide tentative

answers.

There are, first of all, several types of writing that all groups do and will continue to do. Most people write personal letters and expect to do so in the future. Likewise, many subjects (including 37% of the high school sample) write job applications, and a majority of students expect to be doing so in fifteen years. There should be no problem getting students to undertake assignments in these areas since they see them as perpetually important.

Next, there is speech-writing--something that many of those sampled do and which, judging from the responses of groups 5 and 6, is likely to continue to be of importance after graduation. Only 18% of the high school students expect to make speeches in the future, but that number is sufficiently high to expect that an enterprising instructor could convince a majority of his or her students of the importance of this medium.

Another promising area is journal or diary keeping. Twenty-three percent of the high school students keep diaries but only 9% expect to do so later in life. Yet 64% of the upper-divisional students, 38% of the local professionals and 55% of our NYSEC audience really do keep diaries. We reason that high school and younger college students see diary keeping as an adolescent activity, not realizing that for many adults it is a rewarding personal experience. Thus, we feel that samples of diary or journal writing from adults might convince the teenage writers that they are doing something that might become a lifelong habit.

Still other types of writing fall into the category of "probably important in my future, but not now." Only 14% of the high school students write business letters, but 73% expect to in the future. Likewise, just 9% write memos while 32% project that they will do so. We are not suggesting that writing instructors convert their courses into

seminars in business writing, but creative assignments in the area of business and public affairs would seem to be consonant with the students' perceived future writing needs. Among the older sample groups, overwhelming majorities write business or public affairs letters and memos, so once again instructors could benefit by providing adult examples, not the least of which might be documents prepared by themselves or their colleagues.

Two special interest areas that might show promise for instructors with certain populations are song lyrics and sermons. Although these forms of composition are not universally popular, they have their following. In such disparate groups as 2 (remedial freshmen) and 5 (local professionals), a fairly significant percentage hopes to write song lyrics in the future. In the remedial class, half expect to write sermons. This class has a relatively high number of black students, many of whom have close ties with black Protestant churches. It seems to us to be wise to encourage those interested to compose sermons; after all, there are few sources of language more fertile than the King James Bible or the tradition of American black preaching. Certainly Martin Luther King is among this century's greatest prose stylists.

Finally, there are very promising types of writing that exhibit what we call the "fantasy factor." Writing newspaper articles and books falls under this category. In most groups, the number of respondents who hope or expect to do these types of writing in the future exceeds the number who are actually doing it now. A surprising 28% of the high school sample and 56% of the remedial sample expect one day to write for city newspapers. Among the local professionals, 15% currently write for local publications, but twice as many hope to do so. An incredible 67% of the remedial students expect to write books or articles in a professional field.

Fifty-four percent of the local professionals expect to do the same, despite the fact that only 8% are currently so engaged. Only in the NYSEC audience, a highly rarified group, is the difference between present and future activity only 10%. These types of writing are largely fantastic goals; few will ever reach them. But they are admirable goals that symbolize a desire for excellence that some instructors no longer expect to find among their students. Although we may know that only a few will be journalists or published authorities, we can still allow our students to act out their fantasies on paper. Let this pride and ambition work for them and cause them to work harder.

We have not discussed the results for the categories "compositions for school" and "lab reports" since students are going to continue to write these whether they like them or not. This does not mean, however, that instructors cannot structure these assignments on the principles we have outlined. What we have tried to do in our survey is to identify types of writing that students believe will be important to them in the real world as well as those that they would like to see in their futures in a more idealized world. In either case, student motivation, and hence performance, should be better than one could expect on the "What I Did on my Summer Vacation" or "Should North Korea Be Admitted to the U.N." essays. If instructors want to find out what students really do know, then they had better devise assignments that will tap their knowledge.

The subjective parts of our survey are difficult to summarize, but generally speaking, respondents expressed anxiety over their writing deficiencies. Among the adults, few were satisfied that they had received good writing instruction, most feeling that they had not been taught to generate or organize ideas. How much of that, we wonder, stems from purposeless assignments in English courses?

We are in complete agreement with James Moffet when he writes, "What a student of writing needs is not external facts but more insight about what he and his peers are doing verbally and what they could be doing." The same is true of their teachers; they too must know what their students are doing verbally. We, as teachers of English, must find ways to tap students' latent, often dormant, interest in language. And when we can do this, especially, early in the semester through assignments geared to their interests or expectations, we and our students can enjoy the fruits of mutual success.

Plattsburgh, New York

Notes

[1]Richard E. Young and Alton C. Becker, "Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Approach," Contemporary Rhetoric, ed. W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 123-143.

[2]Donald A. Murray, A Teacher Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968), p. 107.

[3]Mary S. Bishop, "The Relationship Among SAT Scores, Reading Habits, and TV Viewing," The English Record 31:2 (1980), p. 26.

[4]Phyllis Brooks, "Mimesis, Grammar, and the Echoing Voice," Ideas for English 101 (Urbana: NCTE, 1975).

[5]Caroline Eckhardt and David H. Stewart, "Taxonomy of Composition." CCC 30:4 (1979), pp. 338-342.

[6]James Moffet, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968), p. 93.

APPENDIX A

"Survey of Writing"

Survey of Writing

This questionnaire is designed to learn something about people's writing habits. Please answer all questions that apply to you.

Age _____ Sex _____ Educational level: High School Student _____
College Student _____
Non-Student _____

I. Indicate the frequency with which you perform these activities:

	Often	Sometimes	Never
watch television (non-news)	_____	_____	_____
watch television news	_____	_____	_____
listen to radio (music)	_____	_____	_____
listen to radio (sports or news)	_____	_____	_____
read popular magazines	_____	_____	_____
hear church sermons	_____	_____	_____
read novels or short stories	_____	_____	_____
read newspapers	_____	_____	_____
" " (news and editorials)	_____	_____	_____
" " (sports pages)	_____	_____	_____
read non-fiction books	_____	_____	_____
read technical or scientific journals	_____	_____	_____
read poetry	_____	_____	_____
attend plays	_____	_____	_____
see movies	_____	_____	_____

II. Check off which kinds of writing you do on a more or less regular basis; then consider which ones you think you might be doing on a regular basis fifteen years from now.

Now	15 Years from now	
_____	_____	personal letters to friends or parents
_____	_____	business letters or letters to government officials
_____	_____	compositions for school

Now	15 Years from now	
_____	_____	lab reports
_____	_____	articles for a local publication (school newspaper, church newsletter, etc.)
_____	_____	articles for city newspaper
_____	_____	job applications and resumes
_____	_____	diaries or journals
_____	_____	stories, novels, plays, or poems
_____	_____	song lyrics
_____	_____	sermons
_____	_____	speeches
_____	_____	interoffice memos or records of business transactions, patient visits, etc.
_____	_____	books or articles in a professional field

III. A: If you are a student, list three things you would like to learn in writing classes.

1.

2.

3.

B. If you have completed your education through college, what are two things you are glad you learned in writing courses?

1.

2.

What are two things you wish you had learned?

1.

2.

APPENDIX B

Results of the "Survey of Writing"

in Two Tables Corresponding

to Parts I and II of the Survey

Table I: Results of Part I by Percent

	Group #	Often	Sometimes	Never
(Non-News)	I	55	41	0
	II	10	90	0
	III	4	78	9
	IV	8	84	8
	V	8	92	0
	VI	16	82	6
TV News	I	5	82	9
	II	33	61	6
	III	13	65	9
	IV	40	52	6
	V	62	30	8
	VI	53	41	6
Radio (Music)	I	82	14	0
	II	72	28	0
	III	74	22	0
	IV	76	24	0
	V	38	54	8
	VI	53	29	18
Radio (News)	I	9	64	23
	II	39	44	17
	III	39	57	4
	IV	24	68	8
	V	15	70	15
	VI	35	45	11
Popular Magazines	I	18	64	14
	II	44	44	11
	III	43	39	9
	IV	24	68	8
	V	30	55	15
	VI	29	53	18

	Group #1	Often	Sometimes	Never
Sermons	I	23	41	28
	II	11	50	39
	III	18	48	26
	IV	24	52	24
	V	8	15	78
	VI	29	29	35
Novels	I	9	73	9
	II	33	56	11
	III	26	52	9
	IV	40	60	0
	V	62	30	8
	VI	88	12	0
Newspapers: Editorials	I	14	59	28
	II	44	56	6
	III	26	52	13
	IV	52	48	0
	V	92	8	0
	VI	76	18	0
Newspapers: Sports	I	59	18	23
	II	28	50	22
	III	30	43	26
	IV	24	32	44
	V	15	23	62
	VI	11	47	29
Non-Fiction	I	9	68	9
	II	28	56	17
	III	30	52	9
	IV	8	80	12
	V	62	30	80
	VI	47	35	18

Table I: Results of Part I by Percent

	Group #	Often	Sometimes	Never
Technical Articles	I	0	28	77
	II	17	39	44
	III	18	30	52
	IV	8	40	52
	V	38	38	23
	VI	41	53	6
Poetry	I	0	32	55
	II	17	44	39
	III	22	30	43
	IV	12	52	32
	V	15	46	38
	VI	47	53	
Plays	I	0	18	55
	II	6	61	33
	III	9	48	35
	IV	8	60	12
	V	15	78	8
	VI	41	59	0
Movies	I	41	59	0
	II	16	84	0
	III	39	52	0
	IV	36	64	0
	V	15	78	8
	VI	0	100	0

Table 2: Responses to Part II in Percent

	1		2		3		4		5		6	
	H.S. Students Age 15		Freshman Developmental Writing Course		Regular Freshman Writing Course		Junior/Senior Level Writing Course		Local Professionals		NYSEC Audience	
Personal Letters	77	73	84	78	87	83	96	80	85	78	76	76
Business Letters Ltrs. to Officials	14	73	0	78	4	65	28	80	92	92	94	88
Compositions for School	95	9	89	0	61	9	100	4	46	15	35	18
Lab Reports	37	5	67	22	61	9	28	4	0	0	11	0
Newspaper Articles (local)	5	18	17	56	4	43	16	32	15	30	65	53
Newspaper Articles (city)	0	28	0	56	4	61	4	24	8	8	6	18
Job Applications	37	64	61	50	61	52	72	52	38	30	53	35
Diaries	23	9	61	11	61	18	64	40	38	30	55	47
Stories	14	0	39	33	48	26	16	16	30	28	53	53
Song Lyrics	0	18	17	50	22	13	4	4	23	30	6	6
Sermons	9	5	11	50	0	30	0	0	0	8	0	0
Speeches	68	18	56	39	26	48	32	52	30	30	41	47
Memos	9	32	17	78	18	61	16	56	78	70	82	65
Books and Articles in Prof. Field	9	32	11	67	9	43	4	40	8	54	55	65