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ABSTRACT

Adult basic education programs could teach writing by incorporating writing across the curriculum to learn as well as to communicate. Since expressive writing is a good way to encourage students to write without intimidating them, a free writing period genuinely could be productive if the teacher assigned a definite subject, such as a topic that had just been discussed. Free writing, usually in the form of journals, could be used (1) to start discussions, (2) to focus attention, (3) to summarize lessons, (4) to re-orient lost classes, (5) to respond to readings, (6) to generate paper topics, and (7) to monitor class progress. Disabled writers such as those in adult basic education classes need opportunities and encouragement to write to enable them to learn more about their areas of study and to discover that writing is not such an intimidating process. Teachers could then move on to provide instruction in form, structure, and ways of organizing ideas, also with a cross-curricular approach. It would then be the instructor's responsibility to intervene at any step of the process that troubled a student and to help throughout revision, thereby teaching the revision process. High school noncompleters need to write not just to pass the high school equivalency test but also to live fuller lives in many personal ways, from recording a telephone message to sending letters of inquiry to writing to family and friends. And all of these personal applications of writing skill could provide invaluable preparation for the workplace. (AEW)

Writing across the Curriculum in Adult Basic Education

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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

Over 25 million Americans cannot read and write; 72 million are functionally illiterate. According to recent census bureau figures, in the years between 1979 and 1984 an estimated 11.5 million people lost their jobs through plant closings, relocations, or technological innovations. An estimated 20 percent of those people need to improve their basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and communication if they are to find jobs and advancement. Every year we graduate 750,000 to a million kids from high school who are functionally illiterate, and an equal number are dropping out or are being pushed out of our school system.(1) All of these refugees from our school systems are costing this country billions of dollars in welfare programs, not to mention wasted human resources.

To combat illiteracy, adult basic education programs offer GED certificates and employable skills. These programs take many forms, generally operating through the public schools, two-year colleges, and a network of community-based organizations. The quality of the education varies, being offered by well-trained teachers on down to people who are not certified to teach in other settings; they use materials and methods that are theoretically and pedagogically current on down to texts and workbooks cast off from other educational environments. The training programs are clearly as varied as the people who attend them.

Last summer I took part in a cooperative training program in which UW-Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Area Technical College sought to upgrade the

teaching skills of practitioners in the thirteen Milwaukee community-based organizations. MATC supervises these GED teachers and asked that UW-Milwaukee provide faculty-consultants to the program. From UWM we had a reading teacher, a math teacher, and myself, representing writing, plus a counseling teacher. We each had counterparts at MATC, with whom we worked in weekly workshops with the CBO instructors. The plan was to train not only the CBO teachers but the MATC people as well, so that MATC could take over the training program in time. It was a good plan, because colleges and universities need to begin getting involved in adult basic education programs. We have much that we can share. In our spring and summer we learned enough about the environment, the needs, and the possibilities to draw up a course plan--but then the money ran out. Somewhere at the upper administrative levels the priorities changed and we no longer had the funding to continue.

One thing I found out from my ill-fated summer's work is that the GED teachers don't know much about teaching writing. They're conscientious and caring, but they just don't have the background and training to teach writing. Using their recycled workbooks or one of the glossy GED preparation books, they have taught discrete skills and elements related to writing: parts of speech, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, punctuation, spelling. And in the past they've had a moderate amount of success in getting their students to pass the multiple-choice GED. But changes are in the works.

Let me introduce here parenthetically a little something about the GED. The initials stand for General Educational Development, the title of the high school equivalency examination developed by the American Council on Education. Administered locally according to regional elibility requirements, the exam tests five areas: writing skills, social studies, science, reading skills, and

math. It measures skills and knowledge normally acquired in four years of high school and is available in English, French, and Spanish. People taking it range from teen dropouts to persistent housewives to prison inmates to many, many people for whom English is a foreign language. What I see as an urgency to train teachers in how to teach writing proceeds from a change in the GED effective in 1988, to include a writing sample in the exam. Writing skills will continue to be tested, but a piece of actual writing will also be included.

The students in GED programs are for the most part casualties of the system. While they are a heterogeneous group, most of them dropped out of school because something was going wrong. And writing was likely not one of the things going right. They had experienced writing mainly as testing, done to show teachers what they knew and didn't know. It was an unfamiliar medium, inextricably linked with commas in the wrong places and words they couldn't spell, syntax that wouldn't come out right, wrong verbs, adjectives where they needed adverbs, pronouns mystifyingly faulty, and so on and on. Instruction in writing was often in the grammar book. They read very little, and that was a problem too. Not only were they missing subject matter that other students were acquiring through reading; they were also losing out on the internalizing of written forms that makes writers know how to write and that what they've written is right. For the dropouts, neither reading nor writing was fun. And neither got them anywhere.

I am proposing that adult basic education programs teach writing by drawing on the current interest in writing across the curriculum. I think it's a natural. For in many of these programs, a single teacher provides instruction covering the entire range of basic education: reading, math, social studies--the whole thing. These programs are something like elementary schools, where

writing across the curriculum could occur naturally as a teacher moves from social studies to science and so on. (Unfortunately, I'm told, elementary school teachers are too often just as compartmentalized as the rest of us and do not utilize the crossover possibilities. But that's another subject.)

Let me propose here today some ways in which adult basic education teachers could take advantage of crossovers. I'm going to borrow pretty heavily from Toby Fulwiler, because I think his writing-across-the-curriculum practices apply here especially well.

The foundation of all writing-across-the-curriculum programs is the premise that writing is done to learn as well as to communicate. A corollary is just as essential: that by writing to learn students learn to write. According to Fulwiler, who explains how writing promotes learning, "Writing helps people generate, develop, organize, modify, critique, and remember their ideas." In other words, "The very act of writing is an act of thinking."(2) And improved thinking leads to improved writing.

In order to accept that these two processes can happen, the person new to the writing-across-the-curriculum approach must understand that writing is done for purposes other than to inform and entertain. Drawing on James Britton's theory, we understand that writing can be transactional (writing to get things done, like at work or at school), poetic (writing to create a verbal artifact), and expressive (language close to the self). Most school writing is transactional, by which the students show the teacher what they know; sometimes kids are encouraged to write poems or stories. But Britton says that a more important kind of writing is the expressive. This is exploratory writing, begun without a plan or perhaps even a purpose but just an idea that the writer discovers in the act of writing.(3)

Teachers can encourage exploratory writing by assigning free writing--a five or ten minute period in which students are asked to write without stopping, without making corrections, without planning. This writing can be genuinely productive if the teacher assigns a definite subject--for example, the topic just discussed or a question derived from assigned reading. After a science discussion, for example, students might be told, "Write for ten minutes to explain how the tilt of the earth's axis affects the earth's weather." Some of reasons for using freewriting are

1. To start discussions
2. To focus attention
3. To summarize lessons
4. To re-orient lost classes
5. To respond to readings
6. To generate paper topics
7. To monitor class progress (4)

The free writing thus can come at the beginning of the class, at the end, or somewhere in between. Students are also encouraged to free write at home.

The vehicle for free writing is usually the journal. This can be a looseleaf notebook with two sections, one for private writing and another for public writing, or a folder with pockets works. When the teacher wants to read the journal, the student removes just the public pages and hands them in. The virtue of this method is that the student can feel truly free to write without concern for personal writing becoming public. Disabled writers like those in adult basic education classes need opportunities and encouragement to write--often and freely. By doing so, they become more familiar with writing as a medium of communication (in this case with themselves as audience); they discover that it's not such an intimidating process; and they learn that it

truly is a way of exploring and discovering ideas. Moreover, they do learn more about whatever subject they are writing on, so if they're describing the effects of the tilt of the earth's axis on weather, by writing it out on paper they are analyzing, synthesizing, inferring--in other words engaging in thinking skills of a higher order than recall.

The journal works best of course if the teacher keeps one too. In this way writing becomes a communal activity, something that people do, not just something the teacher tells the students to do. It can be especially helpful for the adult basic education teacher to write along with students. That is, while the students are writing about the tilt of the earth's axis, the teacher writes too--and in the discussion following the writing shares his or her writing with the students. ABE teachers are generally not experienced writers, and what they learn from writing can help as they try to work with the writing of their students.

Free writing is important to the writing process, but not <u>all</u> important. Students do need to learn form, structure, ways of organizing ideas. To accomplish this, teachers assign formal writing. Students must learn ways of organizing: outlines, maps, diagrams. This kind of writing can be done with a cross-curricular approach too. Students are given real subjects, based on their subject-matter studies. For example, students might be asked to "List and explain three causes of the Civil War," following a reading and discussion of that conflict. This kind of writing calls for a structured approach, starting with an outline, and the outline itself might be the idea generator.

In a training session for ABE teachers, the consultant/teacher can present a list of topics something like these:

1. Explain how the tilt of the earth's axis affects the earth's weather.

2. Describe the process of photosynthesis.
3. Explain how the theory of supply and demand works in an economy.
4. List and explain three causes of the Civil War.
5. Explain and give examples of faulty pronoun reference.
6. Describe the way you work out work problems in math.
7. What are three ways for discovering word meanings? List them and illustrate how you would apply them to the word liquefy.

The teachers could discuss ways of developing these topics (for example, a chronological structure for describing the process of photosynthesis or of working math problems, exemplification for explaining faulty pronoun reference). Then the teachers should be encouraged to think of additional topics.

Writing across the curriculum programs characteristically take a process approach. That is, rather than assigning a writing and then taking up the final drafts to read and grade, a teacher might intervene at any step in the process. The teacher is involved in idea exploration, assisting students in ways of discovering and uncovering ideas, engaging in a dialectic that opens up the student's mind to new ways of looking at ordinary things. And the teacher helps the student to find new information that is needed for filling out ideas, working alongside the student as ideas begin to fill pages. He or she looks at rough drafts and suggests ways of revising to strengthen and improve the piece of writing. The teacher assists the student throughout the process of revision, thereby teaching what revision is. And the teacher teaches editing skills. By the time the teacher receives the final draft, he or she has done a lot of teaching about writing.

Intervention in the writing process also takes the form of collaborative learning. Teachers can set up peer workshops in which groups of two, three, or

four students read and respond to one another's writing. A frequent response to such a suggestion for remedial writers is that they probably don't know enough about good writing to be helpful as critics. But research and practical experience have shown that even low-level writers can become effective critics if they have appropriate guidance. They must learn to concentrate first on content, then on form, which is easy to do if the writer reads the paper aloud. They must learn to respond positively and personally wherever possible. They should look for purpose, audience, organization, and evidence to support points. They should be able to summarize the main point. They might have guidelines such as these:

1. In a sentence, summarize the writer's main idea.
2. Name two things you liked about this piece of writing.
3. Were there any places where you wondered where the writer was going with the subject?
4. Were there any places where you would have liked an example or more explanation?
5. Did you like the beginning? How could it be improved?
6. Did the conclusion seem like a good finish?
7. Is the vocabulary appropriate? Are there any words you don't understand? Any that are too much like slang?

Guidelines would change from time to time as the assignments change. The advantage of teaching students to be good critics is that they also become better writers. They know what their audience is looking for, and, perhaps most important, they have an audience--real people, friends whose opinions they value.

I haven't explored all the ways that the cross-curricular approach to writing can be applied in adult basic education. I know that something needs

to be done in order to make better writers of uneducated adults and better writing teachers of their instructors. High-school noncompleters need to write not just so they can pass the GED exam but also so they can lead fuller lives--to write a note recording a telephone message, to write instructions that can be followed, to write letters to their friends or grandmothers, to write letters of inquiry or application or complaint, to write invitations or decline them, to send thanks or congratulations or sympathy. And all of these personal applications of writing skill translate into the workplace--telephone messages, memos, brief reports. On both personal and occupational levels, functional competency is necessary for learning adults. I think the writing-across-the-curriculum approach can assist them to that end.

1. Roger D. Semerad, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor for employment and training, in CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, Sept. 17, 1986, p. 39.

2. Toby Fulwiler, "Writing Is Everybody's Business," NATIONAL FORUM 65 (Fall 1985), 21-24.

3. James Britton and others, THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITING ABILITIES, 11-18; London: Macmillan Education, 1975.

4. Toby Fulwiler, WAC Workshop, Marinette, Wis., June 1986.