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ABSTRACT

National Writing Project reports show that writing process institutes and workshops have effected some positive changes in attitudes toward personal writing. The many teacher-written articles appearing in professional journals attest to the use and benefits of personal writing in the classroom. Nevertheless, there is still no evidence that whatever has taken place in writing or content-area classrooms as a whole in the last two decades has improved student writing or content-area learning. The lack of positive evidence from existing research as well as the absence of truly cogent research on the subject is striking and must, until proven otherwise, constitute negative evidence on the usefulness of personal writing. Much criticism of the personal narrative is coming from university researchers and scholars; K-12 teachers either have not raised their voices or, if they have, have not sought or found publication. Why are there so few teacher-written articles pointing out problems with an emphasis on experience-based writing? Perhaps highly touted pedagogical ideas cannot be evaluated by K-12 teachers until university researchers and scholars begin to criticize them. Professional organizations urgently need to find ways to encourage and present ongoing critical dialogues by K-12 teachers on the pedagogical beliefs and practices advocated by university researchers and scholars, no matter how reasonable and appealing these beliefs and practices may seem. (Contains 48 references.) (SAM)

The Uses and Limitations of the Writer's Personal Experience in Writing Theory, Research, and Instruction**

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The concept of prior knowledge, however it is defined, has been quite prominent in reading research. Indeed, many educators believe that it is essentially a conceptual tool for reading researchers and educators. However, if we substitute "the writer's personal knowledge and experiences" or "what the writer already knows" for the term "prior knowledge," it is then possible to recognize the prominence the concept has had recently in the field of writing, although its prominence in the two fields stems from very different philosophical sources.

The emphasis that many curriculum theorists, researchers, and writing teachers have placed on having students write about what they already know--that is, about their personal beliefs, feelings, and experiences--has had far-reaching effects on the design of writing curricula, writing research, and writing pedagogy. It has led to dramatic changes in the content of writing courses at the secondary and college level, in the conceptualization of developmental writing programs in K-12, and in the kinds of writing activities teachers have been encouraged to assign in all subject areas. This expressivist pedagogy, as it is sometimes called, is based on the belief that both subject matter learning and students' motivation to write and to work on their writing can be considerably enhanced by writing assignments drawing on or focusing on their personal experiences, beliefs, and knowledge.

However, just as any wholesome pedagogical idea may be carried to an unproductive extreme, so, too, may the emphasis placed on the writer's personal experiences for the conceptualization of writing curricula, for writing theory, research, and assessment, and for writing assignments in the English language arts and the content areas. The purpose of this paper is to offer a critical perspective on the use of the writer's personal experience in these areas. After briefly pointing out the uses of the writer's personal experiences in all these areas, I discuss the limitations suggested by critical observations and speculations in the pedagogical or philosophical literature, as well as by the results of empirical research.

** This paper is a revised and condensed version of a chapter to appear in Ann Pace (Ed.), Beyond Prior Knowledge: Issues in Text Processing and Conceptual Change, Ablex, forthcoming.

I conclude with a brief theoretical discussion of the limitations of personal or personalized writing for stimulating intellectual growth, arguing on both theoretical and practical grounds for an intellectually balanced curriculum and a view of reading experience itself as part of the writer's personal experience. The results of my investigation underscore the importance of empirically examining the claims and possible effects of strongly advocated pedagogical beliefs and practices, no matter how reasonable and appealing these beliefs and practices may seem. They also suggest the value of using a variety of ways for examining these claims and possible effects.

The Uses and Limitations of the Writer's Personal Experience

A. In Conceptualizing Developmental Writing Curricula

The two most influential curriculum theorists with respect to the design of developmental writing programs in the past several decades have been James Moffett (1968; 1981) and James Britton and his associates. Although the sources of their ideas were very different (Moffett was highly influenced by his teaching experiences in an American private secondary school and by Piaget's work, while the ideas proposed by Britton and his associates may be best understood when viewed in the context of the general conditions in British schools at the time), both Moffett and Britton proposed organizing principles for designing writing assignments in developmental writing programs, and both placed experience-based writing at the center of writing development, regardless of the writer's age.

In a succinct description of the application of his organizing principles to a writing curriculum, Moffett (1981) proposed a sequence of writing assignments that leads students from recording or reporting their thoughts and experiences in their early writing, to generalizing and theorizing about their ideas and experiences at later stages of writing development. This sequence of writing assignments demands of the writer increasingly greater intellectual distance from both the subject matter of the writing and the audience for the writing, theoretically moving language learners gradually to higher levels of abstract thinking. But even at higher levels of Moffett's proposed sequence, students' ideas for their writing derive ultimately from the raw data of experience.

Moffett's curriculum was shaped in part by his view that too much, if not most, of traditional school writing consisted of dull, impersonal "reports" synthesizing material copied from references, or of contrived, uninspired literary critical essays about the literature students had read. In part, his curriculum was also shaped by his reading of Piaget, which suggested to him that language learning began naturally with ego-centered talk, usually in the form of spontaneous talk about the immediate present or narratives about personal experiences. To allow teachers to concentrate on the development of the learner's oral language abilities (which Moffett believed underlay reading ability at all levels of development), and to avoid penalizing students with limited reading ability, Moffett advocated the separation of composition programs from literature programs. In this way, writing assignments would be language-based, not text-based, and could not consist of formal analyses of literary texts or stitched-together facts from reference books.

Moffett's scheme aimed for intellectual growth through chiefly experiential or non-fiction writing. His textbooks dealt only briefly with the development of ideas through information drawn from reading material. While the developmental scheme proposed by Britton and his associates in their well-known study of student writing in British secondary schools owed much to Moffett's developmental scheme for expository writing, it incorporated both literary, or "poetic," writing and content area writing, which Moffett's scheme had not included. Their developmental scheme postulated writing development along two major axes, a literary one and a "transactional" one, a term which referred to the kind of writing "to get something done" in the world. At the center and beginning of a developmental writing curriculum, they proposed a kind of writing they termed "expressive." Expressive writing, as they described it, is the informal writing we do that is closest to our casual, intimate speech; it expresses our ideas, feelings, attitudes, sometimes for the eyes of others but more frequently just for ourselves. Their scheme moved students gradually from informal to formal writing along both axes, that is, from personal informal writing about feelings and immediate experience to mature forms of literary writing, and from personalized, informal writing about content area information to mature forms of transactional writing. Thus, even when dealing with content area material, Britton and his associates urged teachers to encourage students to write informally, expressing personal thoughts and feelings stimulated by what they thought they were reading about. As Britton and his associates argued, expressive writing "may be at any stage the kind of writing best adapted to exploration and discovery. It is the language that externalizes our first stages in tackling a problem or coming to grips with an experience."

However, as elegant as their organizing principles are, there seems to be no empirical evidence to support the validity of their organizing principles. Although many educators seem to believe otherwise, the study by Britton and his associates (1975) on the development of writing ability in adolescents did not furnish evidence for their developmental theory. As Hillocks (1986) comments, their study focused on the "kinds of writing produced as the result of assignments given in British secondary schools but...has little to say about the development of writing abilities" (p. 77). There also seems to be little if any evidence for the validity of their principles where one would chiefly look for such evidence--in developmental data on self-chosen writing by children.

Both Moffett and Britton conceptualized narrative writing and/or expressive personal writing as both easier and more natural than informative writing or non-narrative writing. One might expect to find personal writing the choice of beginning writers, before a teacher's influence or preferences might intervene. But such does not seem to be the case from the few studies that have explored this prediction empirically. Sowers (1981) examined 217 stories "published" by 22 first grade children. She found that in November the children wrote relatively few narratives--36 percent. But by June, 78 percent of their writings were narratives. The non-narratives "were typically attributes of the topic" (p. 192), for example, the characteristics of a whale. Sowers herself commented on the failure of both Moffett's and Britton's rhetorical theories to predict children's natural preference for non-narratives.

Newkirk (1987), too, found a great deal of non-narrative writing occurring naturally in primary grade children's compositions. He also found evidence suggesting the existence of a developmental sequence for non-narrative structures. In his study, Newkirk analyzed 100 pieces of non-narrative writing from first, second, and third grade classroms and identified eight categories into which he could group them. The categories ranged from labels, lists, and attribute series to coherently arranged paragraphs. From grades 1 to 3, Newkirk found an increasing use of more organized types and a decreasing use of less structured types. None of the third grade pieces were labels (i.e., a word or phrase naming a pictured item), while only 15% of the first grade pieces were coherent paragraphs. Because Newkirk's data were cross-sectional, he could not determine whether children whose informational writing was more developed and coherent actually went through earlier "stages." Nevertheless, he, too, commented on the failure of Moffett's and Britton's theories to predict this kind of writing, suggesting that mature forms of expository writing may have their roots in these early forms, not in narrative or personal writing.

Studies by Bissex (1980), Gundlach (1981 and 1982), Dyson (1987), Read (1981), and Hudson (1986) have also shown that young children compose non-narrative writing for many different purposes. Thus, there is much counter-evidence to Moffett's and Britton's theoretical placement of personal or narrative writing at the beginning and center of a developmental writing curriculum.

B. In Writing Instruction

The importance placed on using the writer's personal knowledge and experience as the source of the writer's information has been equally pronounced in the work of those advocating a process approach to writing. Donald Graves was impressed by the fact that the second grade children he studied in his dissertation research (1973) were more fluent on topics of their own choosing than on topics chosen by the teacher. Although there was and is no theoretical reason why either a process approach or topic control should necessarily imply chiefly experience-based writing, Graves and his associates went on to urge teachers to encourage the use of personal experience as the chief source of the developing writer's ideas and information from the primary grades on for several reasons.

One claim was that writing about self-chosen topics drawn from personal experience would encourage honest writing because students would write about what they really know and care about. Further, encouragement to write about their personal experiences would suggest to students that their personal thoughts and lives are appropriate content for the curriculum and for sharing with others in the classroom. Such personal writing would validate their inner lives and their specific social milieu. In addition, personal writing would remove the burden of reading from the child. In order to draw upon personal knowledge, students would not need to do research in reference books; the necessary information would be accessible through simple recall. Finally, and this was a key concern of writing process advocates, writing about what one already knows from personal experiences would facilitate revision--an essential component of the writing process. Revision can be facilitated when the information the student is

asked to provide in order to clarify a piece of writing is accessible without research. Thus, for many reasons, writing process classrooms have tended to result in much experience-based story writing.

However, Graves and his associates have provided little if any evidence from comparison groups or other research that their pedagogy led ultimately to enhanced writing ability at higher grade levels. Criticism of its focus on experience-based stories has appeared only sporadically, and rarely by classroom teachers, a point I will return to later. In an article in 1985 (Stotsky, 1985a), I noted that a writing program emphasizing experience-based story writing fails to give students much needed practice in reasoning out a logical order for their material, a thinking practice that is stimulated by genres with non-narrative structures. Equally important, such an emphasis leaves developing writers with little practice in incorporating information and ideas from external sources of knowledge, that is, in learning how to locate this information, to evaluate its quality and relevance, to incorporate it with integrity, and to integrate it coherently with their own reflections about the topic itself.

Further, the value placed on personal experience as the chief source of information for school writing may have negative consequences for both boys and girls but for different reasons. In Graves's Writing: Teachers and Children at Work (1983), one finds almost no mention of writing in the content areas. An emphasis on experience-based writing may tend to devalue the kind of informational writing, in science and technology especially, that boys apparently find more congenial to their interests (e.g., Graves, 1973; Bodkin, 1978). Given the much greater frequency with which males predominate in remedial writing classes at all educational levels, and the fact that, according to the results of every study of writing by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, females are better writers than males at all educational levels, it is highly questionable whether personal writing should dominate English language arts programs at all educational levels and whether a great deal of personalized writing should be required in content areas. An emphasis on personalized writing may not be desirable for girls, too, but for a very different reason. As I observed in a review of Graves' book (Stotsky, 1986a), girls do not tend to use information drawn from the sciences or the social sciences for their self-chosen writing. Girls seem to prefer writing about their personal feelings and experiences. By not requiring writing drawn from the sciences in the early grades, writing programs may unintentionally make it easy for girls to avoid learning much about the sciences and, in effect, limit their education and career options in many areas. However, I know of no published studies exploring these important issues.

In an essay critiquing the research and the pedagogical advice of advocates of freely chosen personal writing in the classroom, Smagorinsky (1986) suggests that it is a single type of writing that may not satisfy the needs of all students. As he notes from his own teaching experience, "some people like to write about themselves and others do not" (p. 113). For many adolescents, he comments, the journal, in particular, "is not a place for serious reflection, but an assignment for which they must fill up a given number of pages; they produce nothing but endless and tedious summaries of their day-to-day lives, with only the most occasional and cursory judgment or reflection" (p. 113). He concludes by suggesting that

although personal writing can provide opportunities for meaningful writing growth for some students, "it probably does not provide sufficiently complex problems to promote growth for all writers" (p. 114). Larson (personal communication,1993) believes that the lack of an audience for writing about personal experience may be its most serious deficiency for writing instruction.

That an excessive emphasis on experience-based story writing (and on reading chiefly literature) may not stimulate the full growth of writing ability has been put forth most recently by a group of Australian educators, known informally as "neo-Halladayans." They have expressed their concerns about the limitations of an "expressivist" pedagogy quite vocally. For example, Gunther Kress (1987) notes that " some genres...convey more power than other genres. As a minimal goal I would wish every writer to have access to all powerful genres.... I worry that overly strong emphasis on individual creativity quite overlooks the fact that children come to school with very different linguistic/generic preparation from home...(p. 43). Some have strongly advocated explicit instruction in genres, especially argument. Addressing scientific writing specifically, Frances Christie noted the role that reading plays in developing scientific writing. "[S]cientific enquiry, like any other form of enquiry, is shaped in conversation, and from the point of view of the learner that conversation should be not merely with other learners in spoken discourse, but it should also be with books..." (1987, p. 31). She goes on to point out that it "is not by accident that in Australian schools at least, children write few and very poor expository texts on the whole: they have very little systematic exposure to good written exposition" (1987, p. 31). Drawing on the work of these Australians, Berkenkotter and Huckin (forthcoming) suggest that by "ignoring conscious instruction in the patterns of discourse that accompany formal learning in different domains and subject areas of the curriculum, teachers can easily exclude those children and adolescents whose ways with words make them the most vulnerable to surviving the political economy pervasive in the broader culture and reflected in its instituitons" (p. 14).

So far, experimental studies have failed to provide support for the superiority of a "natural process" in learning how to write. Hillocks' (1986) meta-analysis of experimental studies on modes of writing instruction demonstrated that an environmental mode of instruction was over three times more effective than the "natural process" mode. The description of those studies categorized as featuring a "natural process" mode of instruction indicates that most of the writing done by the students in these studies was highly experience-based. Nor have the National Writing Projects offered any substantive evidence to justify its emphasis on experience-based writing for both the writing that the teachers do at their institutes and for the writing these teachers are urged to encourage in their own schools. Indeed, we do not have a single large-scale published study reporting the before and after effects of National Writing Projects on student writing. Although they are regarded as highly successful, reports of national writing projects have so far tended to feature teacher self-report data.

C. In the Study of Literature

An emphasis on personal experience has spread from the writing class to the study of literature. Teachers who ask students to use a response journal to record their first impressions of a literary work usually ask students to bring their own experiences, ideas, and feelings to their responses and interpretations, thus facilitating links between their reading and their own experiences. The attempt to make response to a literary work a direct and personalized transaction has been called by some an attempt to put life into literature (Hynds, 1989). Most reader response studies have thus analyzed the content of student response from this perspective, often looking at the differences between more able and less able readers in the kind and extent of personalized understanding they brought to their responses. For example, Smith (1991) found that a group of "successful" ninth grade readers brought more personal experience into their reading than a group of less successful readers. Although there are extremely few studies in which the responses of a group of students encouraged to make regular personalized journal entries are compared with those of a group not doing so in an effort to determine the effects on literary learning, one study, by Beach (1990), encouraged a group of college students to make an autobiographical response to several literary works and found that those students who both elaborated on autobiographical information and reflected on it tended somewhat to enhance their interpretation of the works in comparison with those who did not elaborate and reflect on their personal experiences as much.

However, a question that needs to be raised is whether encouraging students to bring their personal experiences to their interpretation of literature should be the chief goal of literary study. Such an approach may have drawbacks. In a philosophical text on how to understand a literary work of art, Roman Ingarden (1973) suggests the dangers in bringing too much "life into literature." Ingarden writes:

> ...in reading a literary work of art, this prior knowledge can often be the source of false suggestions or--even worse. It can lead the reader to read the work of art not as a work of art but as information concerning a certain reality. This unfortunately often happens with naive readers, who are not mature enough for an aesthetic apprehension of the work. But it is worse when, as happens even in some circles of literary study, literary works of art are read and "interpreted" in this way and are even evaluated from this standpoint. The world portrayed in the work of art then either disappears altogether from the reader's field of vision, or if it is apprehended, it is only attended to in order to be compared with a reality (pp. 162-163).

What is being suggested here is that readers' attempts to read the meaning of their experience into literary texts may seriously diminish the capacity of a literary work to stimulate their imagination and aesthetic growth. Thus, whether students should be explicitly encouraged to personalize their responses to literature needs more discussion.

D. In Content Area Instruction

A focus on personal experience has been strongly recommended for writing in the content areas as well, chiefly in what are called academic journals or reading logs. Some followers of Britton's ideas on expressive writing have even encouraged teachers in the academic disciplines to have students use these journals as their primary tool for learning. Part of the rationale is a belief that the best understanding of content area material derives from learners' efforts to personalize the information they obtain from their instructional material or scientific observations. Theoretically, anything the learner can bring to bear on a new subject can assist the learner's effort to understand it, but advocates of journal writing seem to assume that what the learner can bring from personal experience may be the most useful.

Although the literature on Writing Across the Curriculum is now voluminous, of the over 600 published books, articles, reports, and dissertations that Anson, Schwiebert, and Williamson (in press) were able to locate in a recent survey, they report that only a few were research studies and their results by no means "conclusive." They found almost no effort at empirical support by those who have proposed theoretical rationales for writing-to-learn activities and advocated their practice, and no real evidence to support them. In an empirical study of the benefits of academic journals, Anson & Beach (1990) examined the relationships among categorical ratings of linguistic features in the journals of 110 college students in an introductory linguistics course, and the relationships between these features and students' course performance. They sought to find out if something students did in their writing could be related to something they did in their thinking which led to better learning as measured, in their study, by standardized tests in the course. Although the researchers recognized that other means of assessment might be preferable to objective tests, they nevertheless had to conclude from their analysis that there was still no strong empirical evidence that journals help students to perform more successfully than they otherwise would in content area courses. On the other hand, there does seem to be a body of empirical evidence supporting the use of summary writing, question-asking, and note-taking for improving reading comprehension, retention of information, or enhanced achievement in academic subjects. These writing activities are traditional study skills that demand a focus on what is in the text rather than on what the reader can bring to it from personal experience (see Stotsky, 1984).

Greene found that even constructivist theory did not receive empirical support in his study of students' writing in a college history course in response to two different tasks. Although a problem-solution task was expected to produce greater learning than a summary/review kind of task (because the problem-solution task was expected to draw more on personal experience), no difference was found in the learning of the two groups.

In a chapter on the "cognition of the scientific work," Ingarden (1973) discusses how prior knowledge or experience may actually serve as a detriment to the understanding of a "scientific" work, and describes the kind of intellectual balancing act the serious student must engage in to learn something new yet retain critical independence. A reader may misunderstand an academic text, Ingarden suggests,

> "under the influence of the language of a branch of knowledge which he has previously mastered or under the influence of facts he knows from experience....The reader's prior knowledge, having become automatic, often has the result that unimportant shifts in the meaning of individual expressions which are based on the new cognitions in the work remain unnoticed by the reader. The sentences are then understood in a language no longer present in the work. The facts newly discovered in them are often not precisely apprehended in their peculiar nature and novelty because one would have to perform new free acts of cognition in order to achieve this apprehension, and these acts of cognition are obstructed by the automatic prior knowledge. ...The difficulty of a correct understanding of scientific works which are really creative and demand of the reader that he apprehend something new lies in the fact that on the one hand he must have complete mastery over his prior knowledge, but on the other hand he must have the strength to free himself from the burden of transmitted factual material and from linguistic habits and be intellectually receptive to the new things that the work offers. In order for the reading of such works to be really successful, however, the reader must still have the strength to maintain his intellectual freedom in relation to what is newly offered after he has apprehended it with as much penetration as possible. ... (p. 161)

The question, then, is whether the adoption of a personalized approach to the learning of academic material through journal writing necessarily helps make students more receptive to new ideas or whether it hinders this receptivity and leads to misunderstanding. Part of the problem in assessing the worth of personalized writing in the content areas is the need to find out more precisely what students do in their journals. It seems reasonable to believe that learners should be able to use personal experiences to access abstract ideas. But concept development may not take place if the writer does not move from personal experience to focus chiefly on the concept and, instead, continues to mesh personal experience with the concept or, worse yet, ends up focusing chiefly on personal experience. It is by no means clear exactly what students have done in their academic journals in all these studies. We don't know whether students have been taught how to use an academic journal in a way that could be intellectually beneficial and whether students have used journals that way, even if taught well and given appropriate examples to guide them. The point remains, however, that we have almost no empirical research to support their use. Thus, it is not at all clear that personalized writing can contribute to the learning of academic material.

E. In Theory-Building

Writing based on personal experience heavily dominated early research on the writing process, whether experimental or ethnographic. In part this focus was due to the emphasis on self-selected topics in Emig's (1971) case study research on secondary school students, in the research on children's writing

conducted by Graves and his associates, and in the pedagogical writings of Donald Murray (e.g., Murray, 1991). It was also due to the ease with which researchers could examine many of the thinking processes entailed by the act of composing if students did a kind of writing that could be initiated and completed in their presence. Experience-based expository essay writing was explored in all of Flower and Hayes' early studies (1980; 1981a; 1981b; 1984) of the composing processes in college-level students. However, the theoretical models and generalizations derived from research on the writing process might have been very different if they had included data from students who had to search for external sources of information for their writing. It is very possible that the use of personal experience in writing research retarded research on the research process and on other genres.

This possibility is suggested by the results of what seems to be the major naturalistic study of the search process for the research paper (Kuhlthau, 1983). Kuhlthau found that she could identify six phases for the search process, all of which involve various kinds of reading and writing activities and each of which may influence the other phases in the search process. The results of her study suggest that the search process for the research paper (and probably for any kind of writing requiring external sources of information) may be distinguishable from the composing process. Her research, together with McGinley's (1990) study, which found that college students gained insights from self-directed reading and writing activities during the predrafting or planning process, calls into question the conceptualization of the planning process in cognitive process theories of composing as chiefly if not solely a mental phenomenon Existing cognitive models may continue to be useful for short, spontaneous expository essays based on the writer's personal experiences, but an understanding of the composing process for other kinds of writing--in particular, research-based writing--would seem to require other, very different models, perhaps, even, a model of the search process that includes both reading and writing processes within it (Stotsky, 1990).

F. In Assessment

Topics drawing on personal experience have also figured heavily in assessments of writing ability because of the inherent unfairness in asking students to write on a topic that would require background knowledge when the purpose of the assessment was to gauge growth or skill in composition, not understanding or knowledge of a particular subject. If the goal of an assessment is writing ability, not academic achievement, students can be asked to write on something other than their experiences, beliefs, or attitudes only if they are provided with sufficient written information, such as case study information, or pictorial information. For example, in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) studies of writing ability (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986; Applebee, Langer, Mullis, & Jenkins, 1990), the researchers provided students in one of the writing tasks with a brief series of pictures showing stages of a plant's growth in order to be able to assess some of the kinds of thinking and writing that a research report entails. Nevertheless, as is true of most studies on writing from sources, the NAEP study had to

control both topic and sources on all their items for informative writing when they assessed the thinking and writing skills entailed by informative writing.

The results of NAEP's writing assessments have so far failed to show that any significant growth in writing ability has accrued from whatever changes have taken place in the last two decades in writing classes and in the kinds of writing activities students engage in other subject areas. The most recent NAEP assessment (1990) found that levels of writing performance in 1988 appeared to be substantially the same as in 1974, and that relatively few students performed at adequate or better levels (p. 6). Moreover, based on student self-report data, it appears that writing instruction has also remained relatively unchanged (p. 74). This finding is extraordinarily puzzling in light of the enormous professional and financial investment that has been made in the past decade and a half through the National Writing Projects, in-service workshops, and other forms of staff development that have trained teachers at all levels of education to use a process approach for teaching writing and to introduce more informal personalized writing into subject area classrooms.

The Limitations of Personal Writing for Intellectual Growth

There is clearly a much greater emphasis on writing in most curricula today, and the amount of writing many students do has probably increased. It is certainly possible that the lack of evidence to support the extensive use of personal or personalized writing for promoting growth in writing and enhancing content area learning may stem from the many practical difficulties that teachers face in implementing ideas requiring a greater investment of their and their students' time, more complex organization of teaching and learning activities, and more self-discipline and consistent study habits in students than other types of instruction did. These realistic obstacles to full implementation of experience-based process-oriented approaches for teaching writing or using it in the content areas cannot be discounted in an attempt to understand the conundrum described above.

On the other hand, we must be willing to consider the possibility that personal or personalized writing is not the optimal vehicle for promoting growth in writing and enhancing learning in the content areas. Other theories, with different pedagogical implications, may have more intellectual benefits than the expressivist pedagogy that has dominated the conceptualization of writing instruction for the past several decades. And even if personal writing can be shown to be more motivating than other kinds of writing (even if not necessarily easier or more natural), perhaps the motivational element is less important in the long run if it comes to reflect a less intellectually challenging curriculum. What many students find satisfying as an activity may not be the final or sole criterion for determining what they should do or how they should learn. We need to look critically at the notion that personal expression and a view of the world chiefly through the lens of personal experience is cognitively stimulating.

In Language and Thought, Vygotsky (1962) argued that the true direction of the development of thinking was not, as Piaget claimed, from ego-centered thinking to socialized thinking but from socialized thought to individualized thought. Again in contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky claimed that language is a tool of

thought that serves to develop thinking from the time that thought and speech merge in the pre-school years. According to his analysis, thought and language interact in a spiral developmental relationship; language may direct intellectual growth as much as thinking may influence language development. Vygotsky saw school instruction playing a leading role in the development of conceptual thinking. "Instruction precedes development" is an oft-quoted phrase of Vygotsky's. It does so in part, Vygotsky claimed, by providing children with "scientific," or academic, concepts. According to Vygotsky, these scientific concepts serve to influence and reorganize children's understanding of their experiences with the world--their "spontaneous" ideas, as he calls them. Part of the function of formal schooling is thus to help students depersonalize their experiences and to see them as examples of ideas. The end of the developmental process is not self-centered thinking but idea-centered, or ideocentric, thinking, i.e., the ability to think with as well as about abstract concepts. And if this is to happen, ideas must eventually be freed of the data of raw experience; personal experiences cannot serve as a permanent bridge to abstract thinking. If it does, a dependence upon concrete experience will limit the student's ability to form systems of ideas and to manipulate relationships among them for the purpose of making generalizations or formulating hypotheses. Students will be limited to viewing experience from personal points of view--whether their own or others--and be unable to understand them from the perspective of a conceptual framework.

Vygotsky also saw reading and writing, but especially writing, as contributing to the development of conceptual thinking. He and his associates referred to reading and writing as activities that developed the "higher mental processes." Although he did not spell out systematically how writing could develop thinking, we can conjecture on the basis of his suggestion that inner speech, or semi-verbalized thinking, is heavily predicative--that is, that the subject of a thought is often understood rather than explicit. While the subjects of conversational utterances and of narrative in general tend to be personal nouns or pronouns (Havelock, 1978), the subjects of academic prose are more apt to be non-personal nouns or abstract ideas, or phrases or clauses, all semantically difficult or complex ideas. Thus, if school writing stimulates the use of academic concepts as subjects of predicates, that is, if it stimulates the use of an IT in place of an I in the developing academic writer's thinking, it develops the psycholinguistic roots of conceptual thinking, facilitating the gradual transformation of egocentric thinking into ideocentric thinking. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the notion that Vygotky's ideas reflect "white male" or "Western scientific" thinking and that abstract thinking may not be desirable, customary, or possible for females. But I would like to point out that "essentialism" does not appear to be very different from "patriarchy.")

Although personal experience may provide a concrete meaning for a concept to help students understand it, it is questionable whether students will learn to see their experiences as particular instantiations of an abstraction if they are consistently and regularly taught to understand academic concepts as co-extensive with their experiences. An excessive focus on personal or personalized writing at all educational levels may make it even more difficult than it normally is for students to develop more

inclusive superordinate categories within which to situate their personal experiences. Undoubtedly, school writing should elicit more reflective and critical thinking than it now does. But if it is to do so, Vygotsky's ideas suggest that this reflective or critical thinking might better be directed more to academic content than to the writer's personal experiences or feelings. Teachers who ask for a chiefly self-centered or person-centered perspective in much if not most of their students' writing may inadvertently subvert, in the English language arts class, one of the primary goals of formal schooling, and, in the content areas, the intellectual function of academic language.

What is needed pedagogically is a developmental writing curriculum that places a balance between ideocentric and personal writing at the center of writing development. What is needed theoretically is a view of reading experience itself as a form of prior knowledge for developing writers to draw upon. It is not clear why writing researchers and teachers have been inhibited in conceptualizing reading experience as part of the writer's prior knowledge, for it is clear that reading experience is the chief source of the developing writer's syntactic, generic, and lexical knowledge, and that academic language seems to be acquired primarily through the meaningful reading and writing of academic prose, as I have tried to show in much of my own work (Stotsky, 1981; 1983a; 1983b; 1985b; 1986b).

A failure to decenter or to go beyond personal experience or a personal perspective has often been noted in basic writers. Since poor writers are usually poor readers, this problem may be a reflection of their level of ability and experience in reading and discussing idea-centered prose. Extensive experience in reading idea-centered prose may therefore be a powerful influence on the shift from self- or person-centered thinking to idea-centered thinking and thus on the ability to decenter in writing. If so, reading experiences of all kinds should be emphasized as a significant part of the writer's prior experience in English language arts curricula. In practice, this means that students should be given a variety of reading experiences and asked to bring these as well as their lived experiences to their attempts to understand their literary and academic texts if they are to become more competent writers and more knowledgeable about the world they live in than they now appear to be.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I've sought to examine the usefulness of the writer's personal experience in writing theory, research, and practice by drawing on the fruits of a variety of modes of inquiry and by looking at all the areas of the curriculum affected by the notion that personal or personalized writing is the key to growth in writing and learning. By looking at the results of various modes of inquiry in all these curricular areas, I believe some tentative judgments can be made. It is possible that the large number of writing process institutes and workshops have effected some changes, as suggested most visibly by National Writing Project reports showing teacher enthusiasm for these projects and by the many teacher-written articles in professional journals attesting to the use and benefits of personal writing in their classrooms or schools. It is also possible that programs stressing experience-based or personalized writing have not been as widely implemented or as well-implemented as was planned. Nevertheless, there

is still no evidence that whatever has taken place in writing or content area classrooms as a whole in the past two decades has improved student writing or improved content area learning. The lack of positive evidence from existing research as well as the absence of truly cogent research on this question is striking. Altogether, it must constitute negative evidence on the usefulness of the writer's personal experience until there is a large body of clear evidence supporting its use. One can only wonder why so little focused research has been done.

One must also wonder why there have been so few teacher-written articles pointing out the problems they see with an emphasis on experience-based writing. In all my reading of professional journals and books over the years, I can't recall more than a handful of articles containing some criticism of the emphasis on personal writing. A few authors of college level texts (such as Lawrence Behrens) have urged an emphasis on informational writing, but K-12 teachers either have not raised their voices or, if they have, have not sought or have not found publication. I raise this point because so much criticism of the personal narrative is coming from university researchers and scholars and so much is being said by them about the need for explicit genre teaching that we must ask why we haven't been hearing all these years, at least occasionally, from those in the K-12 trenches. When new ideas are proposed by academic scholars/researchers, are they propagated so aggressively by the policy and opinion makers, by the curriculum coordinators, and by those teachers always looking for new ideas, that those who reserve their judgment and then find flaws through the school of hard experience feel inhibited in speaking up (possibly afraid of being pejoratively labeled as a "traditional" teacher) or find no time to write up their concerns or, if they do, find few journals willing to give their criticisms much space?

These questions are especially important to ponder now when we have another pedagogical concept sweeping even more extensively through the whole K-12 curriculum than personal or personalized writing did. I refer, of course, to the mind-boggling variety of ideas and activities being promoted in the name of multicultural education. Despite all the controversies taking place across the country with regard to its scope and to its influences on the English language arts as well as in other curricular areas, I am suprised to find no teachers giving critical papers on the topic at professional conferences and no teacher-written critical articles appearing in professional journals, according to an ERIC search recently completed on the topic. It's as if highly touted pedagogical ideas cannot be criticized or evaluated by K-12 teachers until university researchers or scholars begin to criticize or evaluate them. Perhaps the most important thing I have learned from my investigation of the usefulness of the writer's personal experience in writing theory, research, and practice is not how little evidence there is to support it, but how urgently professional organizations need to find ways to encourage and present on-going critical dialogues by K-12 teachers on the pedagogical beliefs and practices advocated by university researchers and scholars, no matter how reasonable and appealing these beliefs and practices may seem.

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