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Writing Instruction: Changing Views over the Years. ERIC Digest D155.

The emphasis in writing instruction over the past forty years has shifted from product to process. This Digest will review the course and the primary features of this evolution.

In the early 1960s, the National Council of Teachers of English commissioned a study to find out what was known about the teaching of composition. The result was a report entitled "Research in Written Composition" by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963), commonly known as "The Braddock Report." The authors found only rudimentary understanding of the teaching of writing: "Some terms are being defined usefully, a number of other procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations" (p. 5).

FROM PRODUCT TO PROCESS: THE 1970S AND 1980S

Writing in 1986, Arthur Applebee pointed out that instruction in the past had been largely "prescriptive and product-centered," stressing correct usage and mechanics while emphasizing "the traditional modes of discourse (narration, description, exposition, persuasion, and sometimes poetry)." However, the 1970s and 1980s saw "a groundswell of support for 'process approaches' to learning to write" (p. 95). Today, the five-step approach to the writing process is widely accepted, along with related activities such as brainstorming, journal writing, teacher/student conferences, and an emphasis on multiple drafts.

Looking back on the 1970s and early 1980s, Applebee found that three questions needed to be answered:

*How widely had they been adopted by that time?

*When adopted, how successfully were they implemented?

*When implemented, did they lead to noticeable

improvement in student writing?

PROCESS APPROACHES IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

Although they dominated the professional literature, process approaches had not been fully implemented in all classrooms by the mid 1980s. Because less than half of student writing was done for the English teacher, assignments in English classes should not differ too much from other kinds of writing lest students "decide that what they learn in English is irrelevant to the rest of their writing" (p. 98). Furthermore, student writing too often focused on textbook material, with the emphasis on accuracy of recitation rather than on each student's own thinking.

In 1986, Applebee found little use of process approaches to writing instruction. In particular, prewriting was often slighted and many papers did not progress beyond the first draft (p. 100). On the other hand, he did encounter terms such as "prewriting," "revising," and "editing" in textbooks, suggesting that increased use of such textbooks would lead to "more widespread attention to process-oriented activities" (p. 101).

Applebee had also hoped to "develop a series of models of effective instruction" and to find evidence that efforts to use the process approach paid significant dividends. Instead, he found that he had been too optimistic; his studies pointed to "some serious problems in current conceptualizations of writing processes" (p. 102).

Some of these problems were rooted in the difficulties involved in helping students understand what real writers actually do. Often, activities included in process writing became separated from the purposes they were supposed to serve, preventing students from developing "a generalized conception of the 'writing process' that the writers used in all contexts" (p. 102). Other problems arose from the fact that the process approach is not suited to every writing project: Some may require extensive prewriting, while others may require more careful editing and revision. Because students often ignore the great diversity of writing tasks, "process-oriented instruction easily degenerates into an inappropriate and lockstep formula" (p. 102).

Obviously, process-oriented instruction is of little value unless it makes a difference in student writing. A study undertaken by Hillocks (1982) analyzed "the results of experimental studies of writing instruction published between 1963 and 1982" (Applebee, 1986, p. 104). Hillocks considered four broad approaches: a) a product-oriented, teacher-centered mode of instruction; b) individualized instruction; c) natural process (an activity-based version of process-oriented instruction); and (d) the environmental mode, a structured process approach involving inquiry-based learning and group problem solving (adapted from Applebee, 1986, pp. 104-105).

Hillocks favored the "environmental mode" and said that the process-oriented approach was least effective of all. Applebee noted that each of the four approaches led to some improvement in writing achievement and that "the environmental mode that Hillocks champions is itself a version of process-oriented instruction and draws on a panoply of techniques he seems to be attacking" (1986, p. 105).

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE PRINCIPLES OF PROCESS INSTRUCTION

"Most instruction is based on the simple assumption that we can specify a curriculum by studying what experts do and teaching our students to do likewise" (p. 106). Process-oriented approaches were not effective in their early stages because they were based on mistaken notions of what writers do and of how the process should be taught. Applebee pointed out the need "to develop more adequate conceptualizations of both of these aspects of writing instruction" and specified the following criteria:

1. Writing processes must be reconstrued as strategies that writers employ for particular purposes.

2. For different tasks, writers will use different strategies, and for some tasks these strategies may involve no more than the routine production of a first and final draft.

3. More extensive writing routines must be recognized as problem-solving heuristics appropriate to work-in-progress; they are unlikely to be so useful in writing about things (or in ways) the writer already knows well. (Applebee, 1986, p. 106)

INSTRUCTIONAL SCAFFOLDING

Another important aspect of process writing is the concept of instructional scaffolding, based on the belief that "learning is a process of gradual internalization of routines and procedures available to the learner from the social and cultural context in which the learning takes place" (p. 108). New skills are learned as children work on tasks that might be too difficult to undertake alone. Parents or teachers can ask questions and rephrase children's comments to provide focus and direction. In the classroom, "The scaffolding provided is embedded in the materials of instruction (textbooks, assignments, direct instructional activities) as well as in the more immediate interactions between teacher and student" (p. 109).
Finally, Applebee discussed several aspects of instructional scaffolding that "suggest some of the features that a more comprehensive reconceptualization of teaching will require": (a) allowing students to take a more active role; (b) building on students' knowledge while introducing challenging new material; (c) following a natural sequence of thought that helps students learn useful approaches to the task; (d) collaborating with students to help them solve problems; and (e) encouraging students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning (adapted from Applebee, 1986, p. 110).

Application of the preceding principles would result in more effective application of process-oriented approaches to writing.

*Students would be encouraged to choose their own topics whenever possible, and assignments would be expanded to allow students' opinions and solutions to play a part.

*Teachers would become interested readers and skilled editors of students' writing, not just evaluators.

*Emphasis would shift from students' knowledge about writing to strategies and procedures they need to deal with more and more challenging tasks. (p. 111)

THE VIEW FROM THE 1980S AND 1990S

In the early 1980s, Hairston (1982) asserted that writing instruction had undergone a "paradigm shift" as a result of research in the preceding decades. Some of the elements in the new paradigm include focusing on the writing process, with teacher intervention as needed, and teaching strategies for invention and discovery. Furthermore, writing is evaluated according to how well it fulfills the writer's intentions, and writing is also considered a recursive rather than a linear process. Finally, writing is viewed as a way of learning and developing and as a disciplined creative activity that can be analyzed and described (adapted from Hairston, 1982; cited in Graves, 1999, p. 13).

Thirty years after publication of The Braddock Report, Jensen (1993) followed up on its findings by asking a number of experts to respond to this question: "What is the single most important thing that we as a profession know now that we didn't know 30 years ago about the teaching and learning of writing in the elementary school?" After reviewing the 16 responses received, she reached these conclusions:

*Writing in the early years is a natural "gateway to literacy."

*All children can be writers.

*Understanding writing and writers means understanding complex and

interrelated influences--cognitive, social, cultural, psychological,

linguistic, and technological.

*We write so that both we and others can know what we think.

(Jensen, 1993; cited in Graves, 1999, p. 26)

Elaborating on the first point, Peter Elbow of the University of Massachusetts said that very young children "can write anything they can say, whereas they can read only a fraction of the words they can say." Therefore, "writing is easier, quicker, and, in a sense, more 'natural' than reading--certainly more naturally learned" (Graves, 1999, p. 27). Concerning the idea that all children can be writers, Glenda L. Bissex of Northeastern University said that an expanded view of writing allows many more children to see themselves as writers. They include "not only the young poets and storytellers, but the inventive spellers who are working to understand and use our writing system, the children who write about dinosaurs and kittens" (p. 28).

Colette Daiute of the Harvard Graduate School of Education stressed that "gaining an interdisciplinary view of the myriad influences on writing will increase our ability to help children who have serious difficulties with literacy." Susan Florio-Ruane of Michigan State University pointed out that "the forms and functions of literacy in school children's lives transcend classroom reading and writing instruction." We must consider "both the different home and community experiences children have around literacy and the nature

(and limitations) of classrooms as places to learn and practice literacy" (Graves, 1999, pp. 28-29).

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