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What Shapes School Writing? Examining Influences on School Writing Tasks Over Time in U.S. Secondary Schools

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Two national studies of writing instruction in secondary schools in the United States over 30 years apart reveal the changes in the kinds of work students are asked to do. Findings indicate that in both the 1979-80 and the 2009-2010 studies nearly half of lesson time involved pencil on paper, but only a small percent of that was devoted to paragraph-length writing; nonetheless, there was a significant increase from 3.8% of the time devoted to paragraph-length writing in the earlier study to 7.7% in the current. There was also an increase in instruction of such practices as generating ideas, writing strategies, or peer planning and revision. Although students write more for English than for any other subject, they actually write more for their other subjects combined than they do for English. Much of the observed current patterns in writing education can be attributed to the high stakes examination system put in place since the previous study. Effective practices of successful curriculum and instruction were identified.

Deux études distantes de 30 ans ont révélé des changements majeurs aux États Unis dans le type de travail que les élèves de l'enseignement secondaire devaient fournir en écriture. Les résultats de la recherche menée en 1979-80 tout comme de la recherche de 2009-2010 montrent que les élèves passent presque la moitié du temps des cours la plume à la main, mais que seul un faible pourcentage du temps est consacré à la rédaction d'écrits de la longueur d'un paragraphe. Toutefois, il s'est produit un accroissement significatif du pourcentage de temps consacré à l'écriture de paragraphes puisque celui-ci est passé de 3,8% lors

de la première étude à 7,7% lors de l'étude la plus récente. Il y a eu également un développement de la formation à certaines pratiques scripturales telles concernant la recherche des idées, les stratégies d'écriture ou la planification et la révision menées avec les pairs. Bien que les élèves écrivent plus dans le cours d'anglais que dans les autres cours, ils totalisent en fait plus d'écrits dans l'ensemble des cours que dans le seul cours d'anglais. La plupart des phénomènes qui ont été observés dans l'enseignement de la production d'écrit peuvent être attribués au système d'examen à forts enjeux qui a été mis en place depuis l'étude la plus ancienne. L'article signale également les pratiques efficaces qui conduisent au succès du programme d'étude.

1. Introduction

This chapter presents two national studies of writing instruction over 30 years apart to examine the kinds of work students are asked to do in school. It considers not just the books they read or the topics they study, but what students are asked to do with the material they encounter in their subject coursework. The nature of this work, in turn, shapes what they are learning to know and be able to do. Should they prepare for business, reflect on personal experience, argue for social justice, or engage in storytelling? All are important, but each leads to the development of a different set of knowledge and skills.

These issues are important in today's world because of workplace and social globalization. Success in 21st century work and communication endeavors call for writing skills and instruction that foster not only sharp and critical minds, but facility in the various forms of writing and expression that are associated with success in present-day commerce and the workplace. In the United States, tests such as those being revised by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and those being developed to align with the new Common Core State Standards attempt to focus on students' growing ability to use writing as a way to think deeply and express themselves clearly. The Common Core calls for writing in each of the main curriculum areas and expects students to be able to write thoughtfully about what they are learning in ways that reflect the norms of modern writing. Despite well-intended goals, how these benchmarks are being interpreted and translated into action has been problematic. Our research team wanted to learn about the kinds of writing students are being asked to do as well as the kinds of writing they are actually doing in their subject classes. We saw this study as an appropriate opportunity to sketch a baseline for the next decade of writing research and reform needed in middle and high school subjects.

The more recent of the two studies, a collaboration between the Center on English Learning & Achievement at the University at Albany and the National Writing Project at the University of California-Berkeley, had 4 stages, each of which took about a year (Applebee & Langer, 2013).

2. Methods

The first stage was an inventory of what we already knew about the state of writing instruction in the United States. This involved primarily a series of re-analyses of background questions that accompany the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which assesses reading, writing, and other subjects on a regular basis in the U.S. and also gathers information from teachers, students, and administrators about the kinds and amounts of writing that are taught in particular grades and disciplines. With this as background, stage 2 followed with a year-long series of in-depth studies of instruction across the disciplines in 6 diverse middle and high schools in New York State, developing procedures for the next phases of the study and refining our sense of issues in teaching and learning across all subject areas.

The final two stages, which provide the majority of the data presented here, began with a close examination of “best practice” in 20 schools selected for their reputations for excellence in the teaching of writing. These related best practice to curriculum and instruction in more typical settings (stage 3), followed by a survey of middle and high school teachers in schools across the nation (stage 4).

In stage 3, schools with local reputations for excellence were selected through a process of soliciting nominations from state and national experts on the teaching of writing; their suggestions were validated against school-level achievement data on reading and writing performance. Each of the schools we studied does noticeably better than demographically similar schools on tests of writing achievement. In developing the sample, our emphasis was on diversity in successful practice rather than “representativeness.” Our selection criteria were also weighted towards schools and communities with historically underperforming populations, primarily schools serving the urban poor and the culturally diverse.

For this stage, we selected schools in 5 states that illustrate the diversity of approaches to assessment in the United States. Of the five states, California and Texas required essays on their state exams in English, but not in any other subject. Michigan similarly required essays in English, but also when we began the study required essays in social studies/ history. Kentucky used a portfolio assessment, where students were required to include writing from

subjects other than English, but could choose the subject area. And finally New York State continued a long tradition of requiring at least short explanatory writing in each of the major subject areas.

Once the sample was in place, teams of trained observers visited each school for at least three days. They interviewed 220 teachers and administrators, observed over 250 classes, and gathered a semester's worth of all of the written work completed for English, math, history, and science classes, from each of 138 case study students.

For the fourth stage, the national survey, we contacted potential survey respondents a total of five times in different formats (e.g., telephone, postcard, letter). We obtained useable responses from 1520 randomly selected public school teachers in Grades 6-12 (ages 11 to 17), in the four core academic subjects: English, history, science, and math. Teachers in our sample were comparable on a variety of background characteristics with National Center on Education Statistics data on teacher demographics in the U.S., as well as with non-respondents from our sampling frame.

The current study described above was designed to reveal changes in writing instruction since 1979-80, when I carried out a similar national study (Applebee, 1981). Because so much has changed in the teaching of writing, the current study did not attempt a replication of the earlier work, but to investigate instead issues that are relevant today, including, for example, the spread of digital technologies and the advent of high stakes assessments. These everyday tools of writing were unavailable to the largest portion of the student population in the late 1970s, and process approaches to writing instruction were nascent. In fact, this earlier study helped to prompt related research and changes in school policy and practice.

3. Results

3.1. Comparisons

Looking across time, there are some broad and noticeable changes in writing instruction. In 1979-80, some 44% of lesson time involved pencil on paper, but only 3% of that time included attention to paragraph-length writing (Applebee et al, 1981, p. 79). When students were asked to write at some length, the typical writing assignment was a page or less, begun in class and finished up for homework. The presentation of the task took approximately 3 minutes from the time the teacher began to give the assignment until the students were expected to start work. Instruction, to the extent it took place at all, typically occurred through teacher comments on completed work—which

students usually ignored.

Much research and pedagogical innovation in the teaching of writing has taken place in the intervening years and, based on survey and interview data, we can see that teachers' knowledge about writing instruction has changed accordingly. Interview and survey data suggest that teachers' views of writing instruction look very different today. They report being more likely to use a workshop format where students are encouraged to spend time prewriting, sharing drafts, and revising what they have written. They also report significant attention to formal writing instruction, offering a mix of traditional structural approaches and more constructivist cognitive strategies that may help in prewriting, drafting, and revision. Analyses of classroom observations, assignments, and student writing suggest, however, that the context for writing instruction has limited the changes that have actually taken place.

As in the earlier study, nearly half of lesson time (49%) involved pencil on paper (or fingers on keyboards), but again only 7.7% of the time focused on paragraph-length writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011: 15-16). (This is actually a significant increase from the 3.8% in the earlier study.) Although little writing was still being assigned, when it was, the typical assignment had grown to two pages, completed over as much as six days.

If we look just at English teachers, who focus most intently on writing instruction, over half report that they frequently spend class time generating ideas, providing instruction in writing strategies, or organizing peer planning and revision. Almost half report creating workshop environments for writing, or basing instruction around inquiry-based tasks. Reports from teachers in other subject areas are lower than those from English, but the general pattern of increased attention to instruction is clear across subjects.

Another feature that has changed across the 30 years between these studies is the attempt to provide more authentic audiences. Whereas in 1979-80 virtually all of the writing was to the teacher in the role of examiner, in the recent study significant numbers of teachers reported establishing a teacher-learner dialogue in which they reacted to at least some drafts without assigning grades. Teachers also reported creating opportunities for students to share writing among themselves, which also rose noticeably compared with similar data from 1979-80. Some 41% of high school English teachers today reported frequently encouraging such sharing, compared with only 16% in the earlier study.

Many of the more substantial changes are captured in two writing assignments, one collected in the earlier study (Figure 1.1) and the other collected in the present one (Figure 1.2).

Western Europe on the eve of the Reformation was a civilization going through great changes. In a well-written essay describe the political, economic, social, and cultural changes Europe was going through at the time of the Reformation. (25 points)

Figure 1.1 Ninth-grade social studies

The assignment in Figure 1.1 is in one sense an impossible task—books have been written on the changes in Western Europe at the time of the Reformation, and scholars will continue to find new themes to explore. But in the context of the classroom the task is a quite straight-forward request to report back to the teacher information that has been presented in class or in the textbook, most probably in a mix of both. For the student, it is a work of memory presented in a format that has been well-rehearsed.

Historical Context:

The French Revolution of 1789 had many long-range causes. Political, social, and economic conditions in France contributed to the discontent felt by many French people—especially those of the third estate.

The ideas of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment brought new views of government and society. The American Revolution also influenced the coming of the French Revolution.

Directions: The following question is based on the accompanying documents in Part A. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author's point of view. Be sure to:

Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic.

How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?

Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions which follow each document.

Based on your own knowledge and the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.

Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.

Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

- Question: What were the most important causes of the French Revolution? (Discuss three.)

Figure 1.2. Tenth grade social studies

The assignment in Figure 1.2 seems much more ambitious. It begins with a similar catalog of conditions influencing the French Revolution, but it complicates this with a set of new materials for the students to analyze and synthesize, incorporating the new information into their response. These ma-

terials and the ways they are presented reflect changes we have seen in classroom instruction, with more time given to writing, together with extensive scaffolding of how to go about the task. Though clearly a more sophisticated task than the one from 30 years ago, this task too has limitations. Students do not really have time in an examination context to develop original theories of the origins of the French Revolution. They are urged instead in step one to develop a template for their response, a template which they can enrich with new details from the documents provided. There is an inherent tendency for writing of this type to become highly formulaic, as Hillocks (2002) has noted in his own study of writing assessments. In asking students to discuss 3 causes of the Revolution, this task even nudges students toward a variation on a 5 paragraph theme.

3.2. Writing in U.S. Schools Today

I want to turn now to other issues in writing instruction in the United States today, again from the perspective of the work are students learning to do.

One of the first things we found about student writing is that although many write more for English than for any other subject, they actually write more for their other subjects combined than they do for English (Applebee & Langer, 2011: 15). This means that a great deal of what students know and are able to do with writing is shaped by their experiences in other classes—particularly science and history.

The second striking fact about the work students do for school is how little of it requires writing at all. Students spend almost half their time in class with pencil to paper (or fingers to keyboard), but most of it is exercise work, copying from the board, or filling in information that has been organized by the teacher or textbook. Work that requires any composition—creating even the possibility of constructing new knowledge—represents around 18% of the work middle and high school students are doing.

Why is this?

In U.S. schools, the high stakes examination system drives curriculum and instruction to an even greater extent than we thought when we began the study. In any given year, nearly 76% of middle school students and 47% of high school students are likely to face a high stakes exam in English; the percentages are even higher in math. Schools and students face up to 3 sets of external exams that are “high stakes”—that is, they can determine whether a student passes or fails, a teacher gets a raise or loses a job, or a school gets closed.

Because the stakes are high, teachers pay close attention to the exams,

which come from three different sources. Across subject areas, teachers reported that between 61% and 91% of U.S. classes are shaped in important ways by state examinations, and another 49% to 73%, depending on subject area, by district exams (primarily a phenomenon of large urban school system). Finally, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams affect curriculum and instruction in another 19% to 27% of classes, figures that rise further in the upper grades.

Unfortunately, the importance of high stakes testing does not bode well for writing instruction. When we looked at the high stakes tests these classes were facing, very little writing was required to do well. Even in English classes, only 17% of the grade in middle school and 29% in high school required any open ended response; the percentages were lower for essay writing. Classroom-based testing is no more encouraging; its emphases follow the lead of the high-stakes exams. The bottom line is that students can do well in all subjects by learning to do well on multiple-choice items.

The tests we give are perhaps the strongest indicator of what is valued by society-at-large, and what we want students to know and be able to do. In our study, the teachers report that the tests have a very direct effect on classroom instruction. Some 75%, for example, report asking students to practice on similar items, and 62% use old exams as the basis for some of their classroom instruction.

Tests shape school work in at least 3 ways: whether to include writing in the curriculum; what kinds of writing to include; and whether to structure writing tasks around in-depth exploration of topics or as preparation for on-demand assessments. We saw evidence of all three of these influences in our study.

First, in classes facing exams that required a paragraph or more of writing their teachers required them to complete significantly more pages of writing than in classes with no writing on the exams. Further, teachers in these classes reported a significantly greater range of types of writing were important for their students' success (Applebee & Langer, 2013: 18-20). Interestingly, simply having open-ended items on the exam was not significantly related to pages of writing required, or range of types of writing considered important.

Second, there were clear differences among states in the importance that teachers placed on different types of writing. New York and California, for example, both include writing about literature in their examination systems, and teachers of English in those states rated writing about literature as more important to success in their individual classes than did teachers from other states (Applebee & Langer, 2011: 18-19). Similarly, New York is the only state in our sample to include document-based questions on the state history exams, and New York teachers rated analysis and synthesis across texts as more

important for success in their classes than did their peers in other states.

On the one hand such associations should seem obvious—decide that something is worth testing in a high stakes context, and it will be more valued. But on the other hand, teachers have very little awareness of the variation from state to state, and little opportunity to use these variations to ask what we really want students to know and be able to do.

Teachers are, however, very aware of the impact that high stakes tests have been having in their own contexts, and our interviews and questionnaires are filled with their worries. As revealed in the following comments, their concerns range from what is being pushed out of the curriculum, to a pressure toward formulaic writing and lowered standards of language use.

I used to do a research project but don't do it anymore because of the emphasis on tests. Research projects are so much more time intensive—go to bare bones to prepare for tests. (Grade 8 history teacher)

The exams have made me get rid of more writing . . . it gets to the point where you're testing on your curriculum . . . we stick to the unit, do the problems . . . a lot of the processing is skipped. They have to learn the answers, not the steps . . . and I have to address the curriculum. (Middle school math teacher)

There is not an emphasis on writing in the science state exams. . . . They aren't checking how the sentence is written or structure. Spelling is not counted . . . length doesn't count. (Grade 8 science teacher).

We tend to be repetitive of what we want them to write, . . . this is what you have to write, this is what has to be included, you have to include this number of quotes, you have to respond to your quote, so I think our essays become the same thing. (Grade 12 English teacher)

The work samples we collected from students in schools with reputations for excellence suggest the writing students are doing is limited in other ways, skewed heavily toward argument and explanation, with little room for imaginative writing. Story-writing makes up only about 3% of the extended writing students were doing.

These data are aggregated across classes, but there is also evidence of a move away from literature even in English classes. Although writing about

literature still dominates the high school English curriculum, it has declined by some 11 percentage points since 1979-80, when there were no national tests and only some states had lower-stakes subject-based exams, without general skills or competency assessments. Both trends reflect a utilitarian view of the values of reading and writing that has been pushing schools toward more emphasis on argumentative and informational texts, and away from literary experience and personal response.

3.3. Teaching to the Test

Another way to think about these results is an old one—they are a current version of teaching to the test, but with a twist: Whereas teaching to the test used to be a sign of weakness and a narrow curriculum, the accountability movement in which these tests are embedded explicitly seeks to couple curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This has produced another odd indicator of current trends—the number of published articles on teaching to the test, which has ballooned from 422 in the 1990s to 2710 in the 2000s, and is well on the way to more than double again in the 2010s.

One quick note on technology.

We had begun the study excited about the possibilities of new technologies to support and enrich writing instruction, which were non-existent issues in 1979-80. From social media to new instructional platforms, the possibilities seem endless for supporting collaborative knowledge development.

But, it isn't happening. Although we found technology deeply embedded in many schools, it has been assimilated into older approaches to teaching and learning. In our observations of classroom instruction, for example, the technologies that dominated were all designed to support the presentation of information, replacing the blackboard with higher-tech alternatives. Word processing, which can be a powerful support for individual writers (see Graham & Perin, 2007), was observed in only 5% of the classrooms—and is actually banned by some schools and districts fearful that their students will do less well on paper-and-pencil high stakes exams if they have grown used to the powers of word processing software.

4. Conclusions

Ironically, the results from our study suggest that this version of accountability is reinforcing the inequities it was meant to address. Poorer districts, which tend to be under-resourced and underperforming in the U.S., are focusing most narrowly on test items and seeking short-term boosts in test scores.

While richer districts, which tend to be well funded and higher performing, are integrating test content into a richer and more challenging curriculum, widening the performance gap.

So, what makes writing work? Stepping back from the details of our study, there are at least four important characteristics of successful curriculum and instruction:

1. Involving students in extended exploration of ideas that matter, not limiting their focus to strategies for answering multiple-choice or “selected-response” questions.
2. Embedding authentic reading and writing experiences in each of the academic disciplines, not isolating them as skills to be studied and assessed out of normal contexts of use.
3. Providing rich curriculum and instruction supporting student knowledge building, not focusing attention on formulaic responses to predictable examination item formats.
4. Supporting school-wide initiatives to change the nature of school writing, and not expecting reform to take hold out of the work of individual teachers working alone.

Changes in classroom practice across this time span have been important, reflecting many of the dimensions of successful practice prominent in both research and policy statements on the teaching of writing. Students today seem to write somewhat more, at somewhat greater length, and to a wider variety of audiences in each of the central academic subjects (English, science, mathematics, and history).

At the same time, the overwhelming majority of school work continues to be limited in scope and shallow in the depth of understanding required to do well. As Hillocks (2002) found in his study on testing, the power of tests to reshape what teachers consider necessary to teach and the kinds of writing students actually experience at school is widespread, even in the face of strong contradictory research and practice. There is a great deal more work for us to do in supporting writing instruction that will help make schools more exciting as well as more effective places for teachers to teach and students to learn.

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