Language and Learning Across the Curriculum

James Britton

Editor's note: It may be useful to readers of this essay by James Britton to recall the distinctions Britton makes between transactional language--"language to get things done" (DWA, 88); expressive language--"language "that might be called 'thinking aloud'" (DWA, 89); and poetic language--"language as an art medium" (DWA, 90).

I think we need to be clear at the outset that a concern for Language Across the Curriculum is not, in the final analysis, a concern for language--for the oracy and literacy of the students we teach--but a concern for the quality of learning in all subjects. This is political--for how could teachers of the other subjects be persuaded that what the English teacher is paid to do must be shared around amongst all members of staff? But it is far more than political; it is no less than a challenge to all teachers to consider the processes of learning, both in their own subjects and in the whole curriculum. It is a challenge to them to make a much needed, little heeded distinction between rote learning and genuine learning--little heeded because our policies for school organisation and pupil evaluation tend to blur that distinction. What has to be realised is that learning is not a uni-directional process (what the teacher "gives off," the pupil absorbs) but an interactional one, essentially social in nature--teachers and students learning with each other and from each other. Only in this way can what is learnt in school subjects effectively become a part of an individual's total learning pattern, his world-knowledge and his self-knowledge--in practical terms, his "know-how" in the here and now, and in terms of a wider understanding his "theory of the world in the head," as Frank Smith has called it (Smith, 11).

The view I am taking—that knowledge is a process of knowing rather than a storehouse of the known—is easily ridiculed. A story went the rounds some years ago of an inspector who asked a pupil, "Where is Newcastle?" and the pupil replied, "I don't know where Newcastle is, but if you'll tell me where it is, I'll tell you why it's there." A more recent story—and I know this one is true—will serve to turn the tables: a geography teacher in an Australian school was being rated by an angry parent. "My son isn't learning anything in your lessons. He doesn't even know the names of the principal ports of Australia." The teacher (sticking his neck out): "Well, Madam, do you?" Her reply: "Of course I don't, but I learnt them when I was at school!"

To Michael Polanyi, scientist and philosopher,

"Knowledge is an activity which would be better described as a process of knowing. Indeed, as the scientist goes on enquiring into yet uncomprehended experiences, so do those who accept his discoveries as established knowledge keep applying this to ever changing situations, developing it each time a step further. Research is an intensely dynamic enquiring, while knowledge is a more quiet research. Both are forever on the move, according to similar principles, towards a deeper understanding of what is already known" (Polanyi, Knowing, 132).

To view knowledge as a "quiet form of research" constitutes, as I have suggested, a challenge to our conception of the learning process. A science teacher at a London conference on Language
Across the Curriculum made his response to the challenge in these words:

"There seem to be two different and conflicting goals in science education: one is to teach a body of accepted knowledge, the other is to teach the process by which that knowledge has been acquired. One of these goals—the former—continues to be dominant in science teaching today, but I believe the latter goal—the process of science—is by far the most important. The way we work is bound up with the way we use language, and a change in emphasis from science as knowledge to science as process would require, amongst other things, a change in the way we use language" (Martin, et al., 165).

The second purpose appropriate to writing in school is learning in the widely accepted sense of that word: organising our knowledge of the world and extending it in an organised way so that it remains coherent, unified, reliable: building into our knowledge from experience the knowledge we take on trust from other people's experiences. I have before me a splendid example, a seventy-page book on Marine animals produced by fourth- and fifth-grade children in a California school. Chapter One begins: "The sea is
use of "language more widely rather than more 'correctly'" (Martin, p. 166). A further study, of children aged 7 to 9, agrees with all the work that has followed from the Bullock Committee's recommendations: "A concern for purpose and audience, for patterns of development in language mastery, for the effects of context on writing, for the treatment of writing and action to ease the learner's difficulties, is the foundation on which a policy for writing may be elaborated with some confidence" (Harpin, p. 156).

Various professional publications have summarized the new trends in British education for an American audience (for instance, Gerrard and a series of articles in English Journal). Among the best and most provocative of the British studies is one still little known here, and its conclusion parallels the views of faculty at The University of Michigan and at many other American schools: "To plan ways in which we can effectively improve our pupils' learning is inevitably to consider how we use language, the language environment of our school, the language expectations we have of our pupils, and the tuition and encouragement we give in language" (Marland, p. 264). In promoting Writing Across the Curriculum, American teachers need imaginative and persuasive principles and techniques; the British approach has much to instruct us in our task.

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understandably eager to demonstrate their prowess in their own fields, to teach the writing component, what will in fact happen to the onerous, unappealing task of teaching writing? I fear that, in spite of orientation programs offered them in the teaching of writing, the graduate assistants will neglect writing in favor of their subject matter. If instead these same courses are relegated to non-tenured junior staff members, who know the facts of academic life and are eager to earn tenure, won't the same thing happen to the tedious job of teaching writing? We must wait for the Class of '83 to graduate to discover how successful the program is.

Ah, but if in actuality we could incorporate the teaching of writing in courses beyond introductory composition within the student's own field, if we could indeed convince the entire academic community that good writing is everyone's responsibility, then I too would lift my voice in strident yea-saying. For under such a system my colleague from another department would be less self-righteous, realizing that the teaching of writing is his job too.

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a radiant water galaxy. It's a world of its own in a special way. Under its foam crested surface, there exists a universe of plant and animal life. With the tiniest microscopic beings to the most humungus creature that ever lived, the sea is alive!" (Our Friends in the Waters, a Book on Marine Mammals Written by the Kids in Room 14, Old Mill School, Mill Valley, California, 1979).

I shall call this kind of learning Learning I in order to distinguish it from my third category of purpose, Learning II. In Learning I, we are in fact organising the objective aspects of our experience; in Learning II we are organising the subjective aspects of our experience, and though it is familiar enough process, we do not usually recognize it as learning. The principle of organization of Learning I is, in essence, logical: that of Learning II is artistic. In the terms devised by the London Writing Research Project, Learning I employs language in the role of participant—a spectrum from Expressive to Transactional; that of Learning II is language in the role of spectator—a spectrum from Expressive to Poetic
(Britton, *The Dev.*, Chpt. 15). As the stories children write (whether autobiographical or fictional) become "shaped stories," more art-like, they move from the Expressive towards the Poetic. The more "shaped" they become, the more effectively they enable writers to explore and express their values, those ways of feeling and believing about the world that make us the sorts of people we are. I think you will sense this happening in the little story written by a six-and-a-half-year-old English girl:

*There was a child of a witch who was ugly. He had pointed ears thin legs and was born in a cave. He flew in the air holding on nothing just playing games.*

When he saw ordinary girls and boys he hit them with his broomstick. A cat came along. He arched his back at the girls and boys and made them run away. When they had gone far away the cat meowed softly at the witch child. The cat loved the child. The child loved the cat. The cat was the onlee thing the child loved in the world.

In a subject-based curriculum (as far as using language is concerned), Learning I will be the principal focus for lessons in science, history, geography, social studies, while Learning II will be the principal focus in English lessons.

Whether the topic be marine animals or ugly witches, what teachers and students say and write makes learning manifest. Thus there is in every classroom evidence of one kind of learning or another—-neither of which a teacher can afford to ignore. Further, it is my experience that when teachers of different disciplines study such evidence jointly, important pedagogical and curricular issues come up for discussion.

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institutions, inventions, or anything else the narrator mentions.

In order to determine when the book was originally published (and thereby formulate one's thesis) one might:

---focus on inventions and customs mentioned in the book;

---identify inventions and customs not mentioned in the book but known to us today;

---determine dates (e.g., the date at which a particular invention was made) for things that are mentioned and for things that are not mentioned in the book;

---consider alternate conclusions about the publication date of the book and explain how those conclusions are less plausible than one’s own.

Without presuming that this brief list identifies all the intellectual work a writer might engage in, I want to use this list to make two points. The first is that the intellectual work associated with the Looking Backward task is somewhat different from that involved in the writing assignments mentioned earlier. In their letters of complaint, the eighth graders would need to (1) explain what they expected or hoped; (2) show that their experience fell short of what they had expected; and (3) explain a specific sequence of actions that would resolve the conflict between experience and expectations. In describing their system for organizing laboratory equipment, high school chemistry students would have to classify items on the basis of their use in various experiments. My first point, then, is that different writing tasks make different intellectual demands of writers. My second point is that teachers can show students how to meet those demands. For example, the history teacher who assigned the Looking Backward paper might make a practice of having students examine short texts, trying to date those texts by determining, say, what inventions the author does mention and what inventions, known today, the author does not mention. The advantage of this teaching