

Two Schools Look at ECB

The Livonia Schools and the ECB

Kenneth E. Cogswell

High school teachers of English are always under the gun. When SAT scores drop, it is obviously English teachers who are not doing a good job. When a high-school graduate makes an error on an application form, it is commonly suggested that English teachers did not take enough care in the teaching of spelling and following directions. A college freshman whose writing does not immediately conform to the particular and, sometimes, peculiar wishes of his instructor must have been the product of a deficient high-school English program.

I used to become quite upset over the many and varied criticisms of English teachers from different sources. I say used to become upset, not to indicate that I have less concern for the skills of our students, but because I have learned, however belatedly, that criticism of students' writing skills is inevitable. In no way would I wish to debate whether English teachers are doing a poorer or better job than their colleagues in other departments. I now recognize that the writing proficiency of our students is on display more frequently than the skills taught in other departments.

In probably every community in the United States, employers express vague and non-specific concerns about the composition skills of our graduates. On one level, the criticisms are related primarily to cosmetic errors: our products cannot spell, punctuate, or capitalize correctly. On another level, our former students are said to be unable to organize and present data in a logical and coherent manner. The most pernicious aspect of

these criticisms is that they are true for many of our students.

For many years, I have been intrigued by the fact that we can introduce particular writing conventions in the first grade and reinforce them in each subsequent year, and yet numbers of students will not have mastered them by grade twelve. I have known too many students who can communicate well orally but who have great difficulty in communicating simple ideas on paper. I have read too many convictionless papers, written to fulfill assignments rather than because the author had something to say. I have seen too many technically correct papers, flat and drab, because the student authors had no feeling for or sense of the power of language. And I have known too many English teachers who have assigned reams of skill drill exercises instead of having their students write--in the belief that "students have to know all of the rules before they can write."

None of the statements above are intended either as an exculpation or an indictment of English teachers. One basic fact appears to be evident. Most of us, as English teachers, do not know well enough how to teach students to write.

"Teachers teach as they were taught," is a truism in education. If this is indeed true, each succeeding generation will produce good and bad teachers of composition in about the same proportion as the previous generation. This is not a comforting thought.

In my many years of working on curriculum

and instruction, I have seen various efforts to improve the outcomes of instruction in English. There have been requirement changes for students; there have been "broken-front" and common system-wide approaches to program; there have been various organizational arrangements of courses and time-frames, behavioral objectives, and mandated units of instruction. I have participated in, and I have conducted myriad workshops, many at the end of a long day when the participants were all very tired. I have seen one pattern emerge which seems to produce better and more lasting achievement for students. This pattern is relatively simple.

1. *A group of teachers decides that improvement in a particular area is important.*
2. *The group seeks out all available resources to help formulate plans for what they wish to do and how to do it.*
3. *The group develops a plan of action.*
4. *Each member of the group implements the change in the manner agreed upon by the group and shares in a common evaluation of the outcomes.*

In Livonia, we have had a nucleus from which such a pattern could emerge. Some time ago, at the request of the department chairs of our four high schools, we established a **High School Composition Committee**. This group has expended a great deal of personal time and effort in examining problems of teaching composition and making recommendations regarding improvement in this area. A not-surprising finding of the committee was the need for continuous in-service training of our high school English teachers.

With this need identified we were fortunate to find that the **ECB** was willing to assist us through its Outreach Program. In fact, we found that **ECB** members were willing to do more than provide simple assistance. Since our administration and Board of Education do not wish to have teachers away from their students very often, we could release only twelve

teachers from four half-days of instruction to attend the workshop sessions. Members of the **ECB** gave of their evening time so that we could have additional meetings.

Although it would be presumptuous of me to attempt to speak for all of our teacher participants in responding to the workshops, I do wish to comment upon several aspects of our work with **ECB** members which impressed me greatly.

Our meetings were conducted in a friendly, collegial atmosphere; while **ECB** members had some specific information to share, we were, in fact, two groups of English teachers seeking to improve the teaching of composition. In the course of our meetings, **ECB** members consistently modeled both a high level of professionalism and a consistent concern for students as developing writers. They communicated this concern not only in their statements but also in demonstrations of practices they had developed.

While our time was limited, our **ECB** workshops constituted a total package. Participants were made aware of significant findings from research; activities were related to learning theories; and specific "how-to's" were offered as examples of classroom practices or assignments. Some models were presented as tentative, or as "where we are now" conclusions, emphasizing the fact that we are all working together on common problems. The process brought to us some new perceptions, confirmation of some things we were doing or anticipated doing, and some new goals for the development of our writing programs.

The **English Composition Board of The University of Michigan** is regarded as a prestigious institution in our school community. Consequently, through our association in the workshops, we have obtained an authority base more credible than English teachers alone have in their own schools. Thus, we have been able to recommend program modifications and our administrators have supported these modifications which are influenced by the **ECB's** approach to the teaching of writing.

(cont. on p. 90)

Events

March 26-28. **Conference on College Composition and Communication**, Dallas, Texas.

April 2-5. **Secondary School English Conference**, Nashville, Tennessee.

April 10-12. **Language Arts in the Elementary School**, Portland, Oregon.

April 24-25. **MCTE Spring Conference**, Sheraton Southfield, Detroit, Michigan.

Robert Root directs Introductory Composition and teaches writing at **Central Michigan University**, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

Freisinger, Petersen (cont. from p. 67)

And Britton argues for an interpersonal basis of learning rooted in talking, listening, writing, and discussing with one's peers. Therefore, we urge small-group work in all classes. Thom Hawkins' Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing outlines theories and methods for using groups in the composition class while also engaging students in the writing process.

Louise Rosenblatt and David Bleich, in particular, have developed models of the reading process which share theoretical assumptions with Britton's concept of the writing process. Their most accessible works are Rosenblatt's re-issued Literature as Exploration and Bleich's Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism. Both authors have expanded their theoretical considerations in, respectively, The Reader, The Text, the Poem and Subjective Criticism. These books imply significant precepts for both literary criticism and for learning in other disciplines.

Two books, in particular, offer epistemological arguments for using writing and personal, spoken language to develop knowledge in the science classroom. In The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas Kuhn claims that all scientific perception depends on a paradigm. Kuhn

argues that a paradigm is defined tautologically. That is, members of a scientific community share a paradigm on the one hand; on the other, they also define themselves as members of a scientific community because they share the paradigm (see Postscript, p. 176). This idea of the social structure of knowledge also informs Michael Polanyi's treatise Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. A readable introduction to and discussion of the implications of Kuhn's and others' work in this area is Carolyn R. Miller's "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing."

In this brief essay we have introduced the works which we considered essential in shaping our concept of **writing across the curriculum** at **Michigan Technological University**. On page 68 is a list, with publication data, of all the works cited in this essay, (2) a bibliography whose selections provide a more complete list of background sources which have informed our program, and (3) the publication data for other works cited elsewhere in this issue of **forum**.

Randall Freisinger, Director of Freshman English, and Bruce Petersen, a member of the Humanities Department, teach composition at **Michigan Technological University**. Both have conducted many workshops for the faculty at **Michigan Tech** and elsewhere in **Writing Across the Curriculum**. They are active contributors to professional journals.

Cogswell (cont. from p. 85)

There will always be a need for us to continue our efforts to improve our writing programs and our competencies as teachers of composition. The **ECB** presentations were consistently thought-provoking and representative of extensive thinking and research into the teaching of composition: They have been of great value to our Livonia program.

Kenneth E. Cogswell is the Language Arts Coordinator for the **Livonia Public Schools**, Livonia, Michigan.
