

## Writing In Spite of Teachers: Issues in Teaching Writing (Trinidad and Tobago)

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After the observation that little teaching of writing is going on in Trinidad and Tobago schools, the article proceeds to discuss why writing should be taught, what we need to know about teaching writing, and how students learn to write. It also explores the writing-reading relationship. Using Ann Raimes' (1991) categories: Form, the writer, the content and the reader, it explores what is and is not done in practice, then considers the implications and makes some recommendations.

Peter Elbow (1973) wrote a book called *Writing Without Teachers* aimed at helping people learn to write without the help of teachers. For those of our students who do write well, they seem to have learned without much help from their teachers. Extensive classroom observation in secondary schools of Trinidad and Tobago reveals that very limited teaching of writing is going on. Random surveys of English teachers on the Diploma in Education course and in one senior comprehensive school indicate that teachers' perceptions of what writing in the classroom consists of includes anything from filling in blanks to sentence construction, answering comprehension questions and writing essays.

Though writing has always been conceived of as central to learning, and although it is clearly essential to examinations, there seems to be fairly thoughtless treatment of this languaging mode in the delivery of the curriculum; one which seems to assume that if a person reads, he will write, or that if a person has an idea in his head, he will be able to transfer it to paper. Research in other places (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Wilkinson, Barnsley, Hanna, & Swan, 1980; Freedman, Pringle, & Yalden, 1983; Humes, 1983; Beach & Bridwell, 1984; Burgess, 1985; Hillocks, 1986; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986; Shah, 1986; Soter, 1987), indicates that this is hardly the case, and work done in the

Caribbean (e.g. Craig, 1976, 1983; Robertson, 1988) suggests that such assumptions must be even more problematic in a Creole-speaking environment which expects writing to be done in Standard English.

The article will explore (a) why we teach writing, (b) what we know about teaching writing and how students learn to write, (c) what the teacher needs to know and current practice, (d) the relationship of writing to the other languaging modes (reading, speaking and listening) and (e) finally, the article will suggest some implications for the teaching of writing.

### Why Teach Writing

Knowing how to write (I use writing here to mean continuous prose writing) is a basic act of literacy and a long-standing goal of education, yet it continues to be discussed as if it were a new issue. And in some ways it is. In the past, when the availability of education was limited, writing was learned as if by osmosis. Now that mass education has been attained to some degree, understanding how children learn to write and what teaching strategies are effective have become imperative. In an environment where there is some doubt about the amount and quality of student writing, it ought to be worthwhile considering once again why writing should be taught at all.

In the Anglophone Caribbean, writing may be problematic for many students who speak a form of Creole but who must write in Standard English. As the Creole is English-based, many people, not only students, sometimes confuse meanings and words and structures, which may appear to be the same, but which are used quite differently in the two languages, for example, *again* in Standard English implies repetition, but in Creole *I'm not going again* implies a change of mind, not that the speaker has gone before. *He does live there* in Standard English implies affirmation and emphasis of the fact that he lives there, whereas in Creole it is a simple present tense statement.

All students in schools have to write. Standard English is the language of examinations and writing has traditionally been the mode by which students' learning is examined. Hence, in order to be successful, students have to be able to communicate their knowledge in language appropriate

to the subject in question. Academic discourse, then, is one type of writing with which students need to feel comfortable; an academic discourse which includes exposition and argument.

Ancillary to academic writing are a number of language tasks which our students need to learn: Filling out forms, writing various kinds of letters, expressing opinions, making requests, ordering goods, extending invitations and the like. Report writing and summary are more substantial types of writing, which have been and continue to be genres necessary to innumerable professional roles. They must be taught.

What makes writing more than just a practical skill and an adjunct to dealing with subjects across the curriculum is that we learn through writing; we write in order to learn, and we express *ourselves*—not only our thoughts and knowledge, but our feelings, beliefs, and commitments, in writing. These two aspects of writing carry us far beyond the pragmatic, so dear to the hearts of those who see education as a utilitarian exercise in preparing for the world of work. In addition, writing has epistemological, psychological and even political considerations which allow for students to develop their personalities, their relationships, their minds to the fullest capacity.

Writing is at least, a means to a job, and at best, a mode of stimulating thinking, aiding learning, expressing ourselves and our culture, and empowering people to break out of the social roles for which education traditionally prepares them.

### **What We Know About Teaching Writing and How Students Learn to Write**

Over the last decade, the spate of research around the world on the nature of writing, and on the learning and teaching of writing, has been enormous. Yet it has hardly permeated our classrooms, which continue to function primarily in relation to how the teacher was taught and what the examination requires, both useful rules-of-thumb in some cases, but neither dealing adequately with how good writers write nor how students can best develop writing skills.

In 1986 George Hillocks, Jr. produced *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*, a comprehensive compilation of research up to that time. It is significant that the research is almost entirely empirical, but that Hillocks also reports considerable dissatisfaction with empirical methodologies. Some of the findings are now well-confirmed and may be important in the Caribbean context.

Hillocks identifies four modes of instruction and compares their use in a variety of studies (Hillocks, 1986, Chpt.8). The four modes of instruction are: 1. Presentational (teacher giving information, lecturing); 2. Natural process (student generators of ideas and forms: Teacher facilitator); 3. Environmental (teacher student balance, teacher plans activities, selects materials, students interact to generate ideas and learn), and 4. Individualized. Of these four modes, the environmental mode has produced more acceptable written work, and more demonstrably achieved learning. Applebee (1981) in his description of the best writing lessons exemplifies this mode:

In the better lessons, and even more so in the few that were really exceptional, the students were faced with problems that had to be solved out of their own intellectual and experiential resources. Often they would work together to solve problems posed by the teacher; this forced the students both to articulate their solutions more clearly and to defend them in the face of opposing opinions. The subject of the discussion seemed less important than the openness of the approach; what mattered was the sense that the students could offer legitimate solutions of their own rather than discover a solution the teacher had already devised. (p. 105)

Hillocks (1986) makes some telling points about the composing process:

1. None of the studies reviewed for the present report provides any support for *teaching grammar* as a means of improving composition skills. (p. 138)
2. ... available research into process would not lead us to expect the study of models to have much impact on improvement in writing. (p. 228)

3. The results of all these studies strongly suggest that *teacher comment* has little impact on student writing. (p. 165)...positive comments appear more effective than negative comments. (p. 168)
4. ... for guiding the production of written language and its revision, using *sets of criteria* appears to be the most effective. (p. 168)
5. Treatments categorized as inquiry...which help students learn how to generate information, analyze it, and plan how to use it, and which provide practice in using higher-level criteria for guiding and rethinking the results, should bring about better writing. (p. 231)

These points add to our understanding of teaching and learning writing. We need to see if they are applicable in the Trinbagonian context, and also to fit them into our developing conceptualization of how to teach writing. Raimés (1991) has offered a useful analysis of various approaches to the teaching of writing in which she categorizes them according to *form, the writer, the content, and the reader*. If, for example, we fit the first two points above into Raimés' category *form*, we see that research does not support traditional approaches to teaching which rely primarily on linguistic form and rhetorical form. Raimés writes from a second language perspective, not entirely appropriate to the Caribbean (Robertson, 1988), but closer in some respects to the Creole-Standard relationships than first language perspectives. I use her categories in the discussion which follows.

**Form:** Traditionally the teaching of writing "was characterized by an approach that focussed on linguistic and rhetorical form" (Raimés, 1991, p. 407). Writing was seen primarily as a way to test the application of grammatical rules. Teachers assumed that the grammar had to be correct before any meaningful ideas could be expressed. This attitude remains in place today. A new teacher in a composite school has said: "In writing I am starting with the sentence, the clause and the phrase. I am dealing with punctuation and capitalization" (Watts, 1992). Yet, research tells us that what is sometimes referred to as the *skills* approach will not on its own produce good writers. There are too many other aspects of writing,

such as the schematic strategies of particular kinds of discourse, which are not catered for. Furthermore, we know that a concern for language *correctness* does not figure in the early stages of composing, but in the later ones which involve revision and editing.

Rhetorical form has also been a consideration of those who focus on form. Millington (1986) and Phekoo (1989) did curriculum studies for the Diploma in Education<sup>1</sup> which involved using rhetorical forms to teach writing. In the United States, the use of rhetorical forms has traditionally produced *models* for the writer to emulate. The U.W.I. university course, *Use of English*, focusses particularly on expository and argumentative rhetorical forms. There has been some contrastive research (Pollard, 1986, 1989) on the difference in rhetorical forms between the Creole and the Standard. Particularly useful is her discussion of *indirect response* which highlights differences in processing responses to direct questions (1989).

Form has dominated our approach to the teaching of writing for years and continues to do so, despite the fact that some writers (Krashen, 1984; Soter, 1987) have warned that early attention to linguistic form in particular, would deter the expression of ideas and detract from the schematic techniques which support their development. Most writing research, as well, focusses on form, for as Raimes (1991) points out, aspects of form lend themselves particularly to empirical research

In the Caribbean context, it may be unwise to turn wholly to holistic language teaching strategies. As Ian Robertson (unpublished lectures) is wont to point out to his teacher-students, the specific differences between the students' language and written Standard English must be taught, in order for the student to make the necessary shifts between the different languages and delivery modes.

In a similar observation, Lisa Delpit (1991) defines *skills* as conventions (the characteristics of edited English) and *strategies* (the processes enabling literate people to comprehend and compose text). She urges that they "should be taught explicitly to children who do not share in the culture of power" (p. 541). As long as Standard English remains the language of examinations, explicit differences between it and the student's own language have to be taught in order for him or her to be clear about the conventions of each.

**The Writer:** In the seventies, researchers in the United States, notably Emig (1971) countered the excessive interest in form by researching the composing processes of the writer. For teachers, this meant new approaches to the teaching of writing; it meant intervention during the writing process rather than only at the end. Students selected topics, generated ideas, wrote drafts, revised. Ideas and organization came first, concerns for *correctness*, later.

Process was first discussed at U.W.I., St. Augustine in a curriculum study by Jones (1981). Since then two studies have attempted to deal directly with process approaches: Brathwaite (1989) and Salazar (1991). Their findings and their experiences do not agree. What is important, however, is that teachers have experimented with process approaches and documented student response.

The study of process lends itself to case studies and the accompanying tendency not to generalize, so that considerably more research will have to be done before the true impact of this approach can be adequately assessed. Nevertheless, the process approach has had a profound impact on the teaching of writing generally, providing it with theory and methodology which can encompass a variety of approaches.

**The Content:** Another approach is the content-based approach which attaches writing to various subjects across the curriculum. Mohan (quoted in Raimes, 1991, p. 141) claims that in this approach, students have to deal with thinking processes as well as the shape of the content. The Bullock Report (1975) in England emphasized the importance of English across the curriculum, and Marland (1977) characterized and justified the practice in his book by that title.

In Trinidad and Tobago, two recent curriculum studies, Griffith (1990) and White (1991) tried to develop the essay writing skills of sixth form economics students. Both studies refer to Bloom's behavioural objectives as a basis for developing higher order thinking skills in the context of written essays. Neither explores very fully any of the specific techniques that writers actually use in the production of logical continuous prose, for example, the former had students writing opening paragraphs and closing paragraphs with the *body* of the essay in outline form.

Neither reports any significant improvement in the writing of the students, which, given the constraints of the course requirements and the time allocated to the study, is hardly surprising. The significance of the studies is that these sixth form teachers have begun to grapple with improving writing content.

**The Reader:** This approach focusses on the reader, and is reflected in the CXC syllabus by its concern with *register*. Higher education focusses on academic readers. Normally in our system, academic discourse would be developed at the sixth form level. According to university sources (Lalla, 1989), however, this has not been the case. Attention to the audience *per se* is, in fact, nothing very new; for example, it is represented in the CXC syllabus and university English usage course. Concern with the reader has for some time been an antidote to the limits of a classroom situation where writers tend to write for the teacher or even for themselves and their peers. Watson (1987) did a curriculum study on writing for an audience in which Form III students wrote (and illustrated) story books for primary school children.

Raimes is quick to point out that these four approaches (form, writer-based, content-based and reader-based) are not discrete. Nevertheless, they may provide the platform for making some comments about what teachers of writing need to know and some additional ones on current practice.

### What the Teacher Needs to Know and Current Practice

Writing is an exceedingly complex process. Hillocks (1986) reports that writing itself requires at least four types of knowledge:

1. Knowledge of the content to be written about (content);
2. procedural knowledge that enables the manipulation of content (writer);
3. knowledge of discourse structures including the schemata underlying various types of writing (e.g., story, argument), syntactic forms and the conventions of punctuation usage (form);



4. procedural knowledge that enables the production of a piece of writing of a particular type (reader).

A number of workshops which I have conducted at schools and at conferences have confirmed what teachers in some other parts of the world have discovered, that is, it is important for teachers to write and analyze their own processes so that they can experience and respond to the problems confronted by students in learning to write.

In addition, in order to make decisions about what to teach and how to teach, and when to intervene in student writing, as well as how to value a piece of writing, the teacher has to know about how the language works, about different uses of language, about classroom management, about teaching strategies, about interpersonal relations, and the personal histories of the students. Much of this is not the kind of knowledge that will be delivered to the student. Rather, it is knowledge which must figure in teachers' decision-making processes as they organize and respond to student writing.

An emphasis on linguistic form detracts from the content of writing. Many of our students who regularly use Creole, bring considerable life experience into the classroom which they can discuss intelligently in Creole. They are particularly responsive to literature which relates to their life experience (Watts, 1991). The responsibility of the teacher, then, is to ensure that the student is able to render his emotional and intellectual experiences in the Standard language as well, and that it, too, can reflect his or her personal development.

Dennis Craig's textbook series, *New World English*, is a rationalized treatment of linguistic forms which are problematic for the Creole speaker; it is useful for teaching our Creole-speaking students. If the writing teacher, however, does not relate the linguistic forms to their use in the process of writing, correcting them will not lead to an improvement in the writing. The tendency is for the teacher to give the traditional response, correcting students' language errors without much comment on what the student is thinking and trying to communicate. What the teacher then communicates to the student is a valuing of language correctness above content or appropriateness.

If the teacher is able to establish that the student can explore and develop his own writing processes in which the content takes precedence over linguistic form; in which rhetorical form is generated from various types of procedural knowledge underlying manipulation of content and genre; in which an awareness of the reader underlies stylistic choices, and in which the crucial, but later stage of editing linguistic forms must occur before a finished piece is achieved, then perhaps student writing will improve. My own observation in schools suggests that this is the case. Nevertheless, very little student editing goes on. A heavy reliance on the teacher is the norm. The teacher, in turn, rarely provides students with criteria for making judgements about their own and their peers' work, thus continuing their state of dependence on the teacher.

The onus is on the teacher to organize the entry of the students into a community of writers whose processes lead them to acceptable finished products. Students recognize that they are writers, particularly when they look at their work published on a bulletin board, in a school newspaper, or in a booklet which their peers and teachers read.

Much research tells us that positive comments and unthreatening responses to writing allow students to feel comfortable writing, and to explore their minds without much fear of making mistakes. That is why an ongoing kind of assessment; intervention in their writing process, aids learning and ensures that students will retain feedback received while writing, rather than that given to a finished product. This is quite different from current practices which socialize students to hand in their papers without revision or editing and ensure that teachers will always have masses of exercise books to mark. Thus do teachers retain the last word on the quality of student work.

The words we use in responding to student writing are, as Raimes points out, very varied: Noting errors, commenting on form or content (text specific), or emoting and praising. Much of our written response to students' texts is inconsistent, arbitrary and often contradictory (Zamel, 1955). If there is no further writing activity from the student after receiving the teacher's response, improvement will not occur, but if the teacher identifies a task for the student to undertake, change and improvement may occur.

## The Relationship of Writing to the Other Language Modes

Writing and reading go hand in hand with listening and speaking. The best kinds of lessons usually include all of the language modes. There is no point in making too much of a case for writing in a context where reading has already been sharply singled out. Better that all of the language modes be seen as contributing to the enhancement of each other.

It is likely, however, that writing has a special relationship to reading in the heavily oral context of the Caribbean. Students who have not been exposed to books, who have not formed a reading habit, who cannot even read very well, can be motivated to read through writing. When student writing is shared with classmates or when their writing is published in some way, students are motivated to read. I certainly found it gratifying to see students in a senior comprehensive school rushing to read their own and their classmates' writing which had been posted on a bulletin board. Reading and writing impact on and interact with each other:

Knowing who will be your reader (audience) influences the style, the simplicity or complexity of your work, the amount of details needed, the choice of content/ideas and organizational features... While writers compose print, readers compose or reconstruct meanings from text as they read. Writers revise what they have written, while readers revise meanings in the light of new information encountered. Readers also evaluate as they read. Knowledge and understanding of text structures in written discourses such as description, narration, exposition, and argument and knowledge of paragraph types such as comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and chronological arrangement assist both readers and writers, readers in negotiating text for constructing meaning and writers in producing text. (Narinesingh and Watts, 1992, pp. 32-33).

There are other considerations as well which link writing and reading. The cognitive processes in composing and comprehending, for example, are very similar. It is not surprising then, that teaching them together can be an integrative and reinforcing learning experience. This does not contradict Hillocks' report that models do not help to improve writing,

for as he points out, knowing forms and rhetorical devices is quite different from generating ideas, and operating upon them by "drawing inferences, creating relationships, or abstracting large bodies of ideas" (Hillocks, 1986, p. 228).

The relationships between reading and writing are significant. While we may, as in this article, take a special look at one of the language modes, it would be counter-productive to teach any one of them as a separate entity. As important as it may be for the primary school pupil to read, for example, it would seem unwise to single out reading skills for treatment apart from the other languaging skills, as is done presently in the separate syllabuses for reading and language arts at the primary level.

### **Some Implications of the Above Observations for the Teaching of Writing**

Clearly we need some revamping in the teaching of writing by English teachers and other curriculum teachers as well. Unless schematic and conventional aspects of writing are made explicit to our students, they will continue to struggle to translate their ideas onto the page. Making writing techniques (form) explicit, however, has to happen in the context of the writing process, which means that teachers must devise ways of intervening in the students' writing process. The writer, the content and the reader must be given much more attention in teaching writing. Imitating examination conditions, even being bound by school timetables and the length of classes are not likely to facilitate learning to write. Teachers and teacher educators need to rethink the teaching of writing. It will require that (a) teachers be updated, and (b) classroom research into the teaching and learning of writing be undertaken.

### **Recommendations**

1. In-service teacher workshops such as the one recently organized for primary school teachers of writing at the Instructional Resource Centre in Couva on Saturdays. It explicated what we know about the teaching of writing, explored the teachers' own writing processes, introduced ways of intervening in students' writing processes, and suggested useful strategies for teaching writing and organizing the classroom. A similar experience ought to be organized for secondary school teachers.

2. Research: Borely (1973) and Winer (1986) have provided us with useful lists of errors common to our Creole-speaking students; Pollard (1986, 1989), with points on rhetorical differences in style between the Creole and Standard. Most good teachers keep lists of errors and attempt to analyze rhetorical and organizational problems. These efforts stem from teachers' long standing concerns with form.

What appears most urgent now in moving to other areas of writing development (writer, content and reader) is classroom research which could describe contextual features of classrooms and successful teaching and learning strategies. Teachers themselves, overworked and overstressed as they are, are best placed to do this kind of research. As I have tried to suggest, the Diploma in Education programme has produced some useful teacher research on writing, and was doing so at a time when teacher research was unheard of in other parts of the world. The constraints of time and the nature of the diploma programme, however, minimize the validity and significance of such research.

Teachers in other parts of the world have formed themselves into groups and are busy doing significant classroom research, both on their own and in conjunction with research institutions. If there could be some long-term support for teacher research, it may well provide the kinds of insights which would help in improving the teaching of writing, and improving student writing. It may also offer renewed vigour and motivation to those teachers who engage in such research.

These two activities, then, inservice teacher workshops and teacher research culminating in publication and dissemination, could reinvigorate writing in our schools.

### Finally

We do not write and read primarily in order to ensure that this nation's employers can count on a competent, competitive work force. We write and read in order to know each other's responses, to connect ourselves more fully with the human world, and to strengthen the habit of truth-telling in our midst. (Benjamin DeMott, 1990, p. 6)

In spite of the remarkable number of demands placed on the teacher of writing and in spite of the considerable knowledge he requires, teachers continue to use rather simplistic, unintegrated and outdated strategies for teaching writing. In spite of the teachers, some students learn how to write. When teachers are more aware of the significance of the writer, the reader, and the content to the writing process, and when they are confident about intervening in the writing process, it is likely that more and more students will learn to write because they have been well taught, and not in spite of the teacher.

#### Note

1. In the course of this article, a number of curriculum studies by teachers on the Diploma in Education programme are mentioned. I do not attempt to explicate their findings for reasons I give in the recommendations, that is, that time and the requirements of the programme do not enable teachers to produce fully validated findings. Nevertheless, their work is instructive and loaded with important data.

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**Unpublished Curriculum Studies**  
**(Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Diploma in Education**  
**The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine)**

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