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Teaching Writing to Adolescents

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

IN THEIR ANALYSIS OF THE STATE of writing instruction in the United States, Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer (2006) share this “disturbing” finding: “. . . students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length” (p. ii). Further, despite some increase in attention to writing, students’ performance on the NAEP test have been “remarkably” stable over time and not very good. The National Commission of Writing notes that few students are able to write “precise, engaging, and coherent” prose. In fact, only 27% of White students, 8% of African American students, and 13% of Latino/a students scored at or above proficient on the 2002 NAEP writing assessment.

Best Practices for Teaching Writing

It seems clear that things need to change, and, fortunately, there is widespread agreement on the nature of that change. The National Commission on Writing reports that there was “broad consensus” among panel members that effective writing instruction

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- call[s] on students to draft, compose, and revise a variety of writings for a variety of audiences, purposes, and occasions
- require[s] students to use all the language arts all at once and all together in the service of sharing ideas
- encourages students to make their writing public beyond the classroom, so as to gain a better understanding of how literacy works in the world.

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Edge does all of these things. Each unit provides a variety of opportunities to compose extended texts, in addition to a culminating writing project. A look at the features of those projects demonstrates how *Edge*’s instruction is in line with what we know about best practices.

1. Connect In-School and Out-of-School Literacies

The National Commission on Writing calls for curricula to build bridges between students’ in-school and out-of-school lives. *Edge* does so. Each writing project begins by asking students to “Connect Writing to Your Life.” This section of the projects is designed to help students recognize that many of the abilities required by writing are ones they demonstrate in their everyday lives.

As the father of two teenage daughters, I’ve always been struck by how odd it is that report after report finds that high school students have difficulty

writing argumentative papers when it seems that all my kids ever do is argue with me. They just don't seem to transfer their extensive experience with oral argumentation to written argument. The Connect Writing to Your Life feature invites them to make that crucial connection.

2. Teachers as Co-Inquirers, not Examiners

The National Commission on Writing calls for teachers to be co-inquirers with their students. However, according to Applebee's (1981) classic study of writing in the secondary school, the bulk of the writing that students do is to teachers as examiners. Embedding the writing that students do in units built around Essential Questions demonstrates to students that they are not writing to parrot what their teacher has said. One of the participants in Jeff Wilhelm and my study of the literate lives of young men both in and out of school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, 2006) said to us:

“I can't stand writing if I've been put on a line and if I walk outside of it something happens. I like to be able to just kind of go off in my own little rampage of self-expression.”

Each unit writing project in *Edge* casts students in the role of authors who have a contribution to make to the on-going classroom conversation. Of course, teachers will want to assess that writing, but it won't be on the basis of whether it provides the single correct answer for which the teacher is looking.

3. Emphasize Developing Knowledge

The National Commission on Writing calls for students to collect and analyze information. Each writing project provides opportunity for doing so. The research of George Hillocks, Jr., establishes why doing so is so important. Hillocks (1986a, 1986b, 1995) points out that a crucial component of writing—developing procedures for generating content—is largely neglected in schools. But it's not neglected in *Edge*. Students are asked to do

interviews, memory probes, and a variety of other kinds of more traditional research.

4. Write for a Variety of Audiences and Purposes

The National Commission on Writing calls on students to compose a variety of kinds of texts for a variety of audiences and purposes. *Edge* provides the opportunity to compose a wide variety of different kinds of writing: position papers, persuasive essays, memoirs, short stories, and on and on. Some of these are formal projects in which students are helped to plan, draft, and revise their work, but others are part of unit projects, with peers or the public as an audience, or are responses to literature, purely for the student's own reflection. Composing such a wide variety of texts is extremely important because it helps students to consider how to transfer what they have learned from doing one kind of writing to their work on other kinds of writing.

As Haskell (2000) points out, the evidence on how well transfer is achieved paints a pretty bleak picture. He puts it this way:

Despite the importance of transfer of learning, research findings over the past nine decades clearly show that as individuals, and as educational institutions, we have failed to achieve transfer of learning on any significant level. (p. xiii)

To remedy this problem, he calls for teachers to cultivate a spirit of transfer. The writing projects in *Edge* work to develop this spirit of transfer by providing a similar structure for each writing task. Each project takes students through prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing. Different projects may teach students to use different tools; for example, the prewriting sections of different projects teach students how to use lists, graphic organizers, outlines, and charts in their prewriting. However, crucial conceptual understandings are reinforced in all projects: the importance of planning, the need to develop one's

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ideas, the significance of analyzing one's audience, the difference between revision and proofreading, and so on.

5. Integrate the Language Arts

The National Commission on Writing calls on students to employ all of the language arts in service of sharing their ideas. In *Edge* they do so. At the beginning of every unit, students are invited to participate in a unit project to explore the Essential Question. These projects vary widely, across print and non-print end projects, from Podcasts, documentaries, and television shows to magazines and ad campaigns. Smagorinsky's research (cf., 1997; Smagorinsky, & Coppock, 1995; Smagorinsky, Zoss, & Reed, 2006) has documented the rich critical engagements that can be fostered by composing non-traditional texts. Moreover, the writing projects themselves call for students to employ other language arts. Students talk in peer editing groups and do interviews. They use visual planning tools like webs as well as multimedia texts.

6. Make Writing Public

Finally, the National Commission on Writing encourages students to make their writing public. Each project provides a variety of suggestions to enable students to do just that.

7. Marry Meaning with Mechanics

One subject on which the National Commission's delineation of best practices is silent is correctness. Although the Commission rightly argues that good writing is much, much more than correct writing, throughout the report the Commission does recognize that writing correctly does matter. We strongly agree. Therefore, even as *Edge* helps students learn to share complex thinking through engaging prose, it helps them learn the correctness conventions they need to keep their audience focused on their ideas and not on their errors.

Many studies have clearly established that teaching grammar and usage through skill and drill approaches that are isolated from students' writing is ineffective (cf. Hillocks, 1986a, Hillocks & Smith, 2003; Smith, Cheville, & Hillocks, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2007). Such isolated grammatical instruction not only doesn't help students, it actually hurts them, both because it takes instructional time away from more effective instructional approaches

and because it sours their attitude toward their English classes.

Edge embeds instruction in correctness into the work that students are doing on their own writing. Each writing project has several focal correctness areas. For example, the instruction on autobiographical narratives includes instruction on capitalization, punctuating quotations, homonym confusion, and sentence completion. Students are given instruction and practice and are then provided with an immediate opportunity to apply what they learned to their own writing.

Think about the students for whom this series is intended. Many of them will be plagued by a wide variety of correctness problems. And these problems will have persisted despite the fact that those students have been in school for years. A scattershot approach that tries to focus on every error in every paper is sure to be frustrating both to teachers and to students. It won't improve writing, but, as research on writing apprehension (cf. Hillocks, 1986a) suggests, it might shut students' writing down. Marrying meaning with mechanics is sure to be more effective.

Conclusion

In short, *Edge* provides instruction that will help students become more competent and compelling writers, abilities that are crucially important both in and out of school. ❖

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skills, and dispositions experienced readers and writers need as well as what motivates adolescents' reading and writing outside school. He uses these analyses to think about how to design more effective curricula and instruction. In Dr. Smith's latest book with co-author Jeffrey Wilhelm, *Getting It Right: Fresh Approaches to Teaching Grammar, Usage, and Correctness* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), he explores ways of helping students achieve correctness, while also maintaining confidence and communicating important ideas.

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