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# From Practice to Policy to Practice

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In September 2002, the College Board established The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges in an effort to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing. The commission, chaired by Bob Kerrey, president of the New School (<http://www.newschool.edu/>) and former governor and senator from Kansas, is composed of influential public figures, among them, practicing educators, including classroom teachers, authors, directors of professional associations, researchers, and university chancellors and presidents. As a member of the Advisory Panel to the commission, I am pleased to be part of the commission's work to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing.<sup>1</sup> In this article I want to draw attention to a particular phase of that work—the work that led to the commission's fourth report *Writing and School Reform*—because that work offers me a particularly rich case in point to argue for one of my strongly held convictions: Just as research-based educational theory and effective instructional practice are bi-directional, so too are sound educational policy and effective instructional practice. It is commonly understood that sound policy guides educational practice beneficially. What is less well understood, what the work that led to *Writing and School Reform* demonstrates, is that effective practice can inform educational policy-making equally beneficially.

## From Policy Recommendations to Practice

In 2003, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges issued its first

1 All reports published by the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges may be found on the commission's web-site (<http://www.writingcommission.org>).

report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*. The product of two years of research and deliberation, *The Neglected "R"* was intended to signal the fact that although a great deal is known about how to teach writing effectively, a coherent agenda and supportive conditions for doing so are few and far between. In an effort to begin to develop that agenda and create those conditions the commission advanced five recommendations in the report:

1. That the nation's leaders place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda, and that policymakers at the state and local levels provide the resources required to improve writing.
2. That state and local education agencies work with writing specialists to develop strategies for increasing the amount of time students spend writing.
3. That governors, legislators, local school boards and companies specializing in testing ensure that assessment of writing is fair and authentic.
4. That the private sector work with curriculum specialists, assessment experts, and state and local educational agencies to apply emerging technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing.
5. That state and local educational agencies provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers to help improve classroom practice.

In 2004, the commission convened five hearings in regions across the United States to gain advice about how to accomplish the recommendations advanced in *The Neglected "R,"* In those hearings, leaders from all corners of the education community came together to think and talk about how American students might best use writing to learn and to learn to write in ways that will serve them usefully as individuals, citizens, and workers in the

foreseeable future. Among the participants in each of the hearings were an intentional mix of educators at all levels of instruction, fulfilling a range of roles, among them: K-12 school teachers, principals, curriculum coordinators, and superintendents; state department of education officers; two-year-college, four-year college, and university faculty, program directors, department heads, deans, provosts, and presidents; elected officers and staff members of foundations and associations.

### **From Practice to Policy Recommendations**

During the hearings, those of us serving on the commission's advisory panel listened for generative counsel on how to make possible for all students the sound—even rich—opportunities to learn to write in school that are currently available only to some students. To gain this counsel, we prompted hearing conversations in two ways. First, we asked participants—themselves highly successful readers and writers—to write briefly about and then discuss experiences they associated with their literacy learning. Second, we invited participants to view and discuss brief video clips of outstanding writing instruction in classrooms from a range of instructional levels and geographic areas. These clips featured

- a first-grader who introduced us to her classroom library where books she and her classmates “published” works are shelved side-by-side titles generally available for purchase;
- a “bilingual” seven-year-old’s multi-media composition, “complete with pictures, voice-over, and music, explaining how much she values her family, her community, and her visits to her extended family in El Salvador”;
- secondary school students’ from “New Mexico (where uranium is mined) and South Carolina (when it is processed)” collaborative study and written exchange of information about the impact of uranium mining and processing on their home communities;
- a Tlingit high school student’s written and oral history of her grandmother’s and her own Alaskan Native people’s life experience;
- a “trilingual” high school student who

described the challenge of communicating on-line with other students in Spanish, “a process complicated for him in that he had to process both English and Spanish through” his first language, Albanian. (*Writing and School Reform 8*)

When we asked hearings’ participants to recall and reflect on experiences they associated with their literacy learning and to observe and reflect on examples of effective literacy instruction, our purpose was to ground conversations in actual, rather than hypothetical, instances of literacy teaching and learning. In their discussions, based upon their own experiences and the examples they viewed, participants observed and related to effective literacy learning and teaching instructional practices that

- invite students to bring languages, experiences, images from their home communities into the classroom to be used as resources in the service of students learning new content and competencies;
- position students and their teachers as co-inquirers and co-learners thereby allowing teachers to model for students how to inquire, study, and learn;
- ask students to use writing to collect, analyze, synthesize, and communicate information and opinions;
- ask students to draft, compose, and revise a variety of writings for a variety of audiences, purposes, and occasions;
- ask students to use all the language arts (listening, speaking, reading, writing, thinking) all at once and altogether in the service of learning and sharing their developing ideas;
- ask students to make some of their writing public beyond the classroom, and in so doing to have the opportunity to see how literacy works in the world and to take responsibility for it. (*Writing School and Reform 10*)

For those of us who are teachers of language arts, these observations are not surprising ones. What is significant, if not surprising, about them is that they speak for well-

understood principles of literacy learning and use, supported by an extensive body of research that emerged from all corners of the academy in the second half of the twentieth century, from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, classics, communication studies, cultural studies, economics, history, linguistics, psychology, and sociology, to name a few.<sup>2</sup> And they speak for well-understood principles of literacy teaching and learning that have been developing in the field of English education since the middle of the last century.

Those of us in the field of English education often point to the 1966 Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching of English held at Dartmouth College as an occasion that led in the United States to the roots of the teaching that participants attributed to the effective literacy instruction they remembered and observed in writing commission hearings. The view of language and literacy learning that took hold in the field of English education in the United States after the Dartmouth Seminar replaced a view of instruction in the English language arts that focused on product with a view that focused on process and a view of the language learner as passive with a view of the language learner as active.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the Dartmouth Conference and for two decades thereafter, research into the teaching of the English language arts shifted from an emphasis on the expertise of teachers, teachers' movements through parts of classroom lessons, and the development of teacher-proof instructional materials to an emphasis on how individual learners use language to make meaning and accomplish goals. Pedagogies developed that asked students to read texts silently for sustained periods of time and to write

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2 For illustrative chapters and bibliographies of this research, see Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry Kroll, and Mike Rose (Eds.) *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. NY: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2001 and Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry Kroll, and Mike Rose (Eds.) *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*. 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. NY: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990.

3 For this view of language and literacy learning, see John Dixon's reflections on the Dartmouth Conference: Dixon, John. *Growth through English*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Oxford Univ. Press for the National Association for the Teaching of English, NCTE, and MLA, 1975.

about their reading in personal journals. These pedagogies also asked students to choose their own writing topics and to write to discover, explore, and revise their ideas and understandings about those topics. Extending and building upon this research in the last decades of the twentieth century, research and teaching in the English language arts shifted from an emphasis on students' uses of language to develop their own ideas and to acquire self-knowledge to learners' uses of language to explore and negotiate meanings in view of one another, in earshot of one another. Pedagogies developed that asked an increasingly diverse group of students to read in community, to write in collaboration, to construct a public space in which they might talk and write, listen and read in order to better understand and communicate with one another for the common good.

As the emphasis on using language to explore the personal shifted in English education scholarship to an emphasis on exploring the social, as a focus on the student as meaning maker and the teacher as facilitator shifted to an emphasis on students and teachers as partners in meaning making, the classroom has been redefined as a site for conversation, for sharing of diverse views and perspectives, for entertaining diverse meanings, for negotiating common ones. Pedagogies have been designed to bring teachers and their students into conversation with one another and to engage teachers and students in conversations already underway, conversations alive and well in students' and teachers' cultural communities, conversations alive and well in disciplines and fields of study. These pedagogies assume that goals for teaching and learning and effective methods of instruction to be culturally sensitive ones. They assume that high standards for learning do not translate into uniform demonstrations of learning. Many acknowledge the potential of the English language arts curriculum to advance social justice and equity. Some invite students and teachers to study the ways that social systems such as race privilege, gender dominance, class divisions, corporate interests work in the society in which they live.

In most cases, English language arts educators who have developed or written about the pedagogies that emerged and developed after Dartmouth argue for active, critical learning that begins with students' prior knowledge and experience, is inquiry-oriented, asks students not only to learn

subject-matter but also to shape knowledge by using customary and creative methods of inquiry that require critical thinking, creative expression, and that result in public demonstrations of learning that are appropriate to the learners involved and the materials being studied. These educators' reform agenda are not radical in that they do not propose to throw out the Enlightenment baby with the bathwater. Instead these educators recommend that individuals with disparate understandings come together in what Jay Robinson, calls "habitable spaces" (Fleischer and Schaafsma xx) to learn how to conduct the kinds of conversations with potential to advance human understanding and enable humane interaction. In creating such spaces, these educators argue, it is possible for students to learn the kinds of literacy upon which a democracy depends.

My point in rehearsing history is this: In 2004, when participants in writing commission hearings discussed their memories of learning to read and write and considered the video clips of outstanding literacy teaching that they viewed together, they drew attention to the rationale for those practices—the more than half a century of scholarship in English education—that guided literacy educators' development of those practices. Furthermore, because the views expressed in the 2004 hearings shaped the report *Writing and School Reform* that the National Commission on Writing submitted to the United States Congress, state governors, university presidents, and superintendents of large school districts, in effect, the report circulated widely and authoritatively our profession's best understanding of literacy teaching and learning. And because our profession's best understanding of literacy teaching and learning rests on convictions about learning and schools that call into question many of the means currently in place for the purpose of improving the quality of schooling, the report argues for a vision of school reform that rests on the kind of teaching practices

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developed and supported by research and theory and developed in our field.

### **A Bi-directional Conception of Policy and Practice Benefits Both**

In her important book, *Teachers Organizing for Change*, Cathy Fleischer describes an occasion when testimony about effective literacy instruction, offered by practicing teachers before a state board of education, was received with disinterest, if not dismissal. She goes on to tell us that the same testimony offered to the same board by parents was received with interest and approval. The lesson Fleischer took from this set of events was that we teachers need to partner with others apart from the profession to argue effectively in public policy venues for the kind of teaching that English language arts theory and research recommend. That lesson learned, Fleischer began the study that has led her to share with the profession generative examples—including those she presents in *Teachers Organizing for Change*—of how teachers can partner with others, particularly parents, to ensure rich learning opportunities for students.

My work in a variety of public policy venues, including as a member of the advisory panel to the National Commission of Writing, supports and extends the lesson Fleischer took from her experience: Our work and our students' learning opportunities benefit when we teachers sit down with others, in the case of the National Commission on Writing, with other professional educators who work in a variety of roles and agencies, to explore and discuss instructional practices recommended by theory and research in English education. Just as teachers' and parents' voices are strengthened when they resonate with one another, professional educators' voices in chorus speak more persuasively than the voice of any one group of us speaks alone.

With reference to my work with the National

Commission on Writing, I am able to illustrate another lesson I have learned in public policy work: The manner in which “hearings” about the practice of education are conducted, like the manner in which classrooms are conducted, bears significantly on the wisdom expressed in those hearings and the policy that develops as a result of them. Usually in such hearings, experts are called upon to summarize research findings or to offer personal experiences in support of policy recommendations they wish to advance. Although summaries of research findings lend support to experts’ claims and opinions, they do not usually communicate the human dynamics of teaching and learning and the individual differences that are the realities of real classroom interactions. Furthermore, although examples of individuals’ personal experience are often compelling to hear, they are usually understood as “merely anecdotal” support for claims and opinions and seldom regarded as compelling evidence for shaping public policy. As a result, for the most part, it is seldom the case that summarized research findings and accounts of personal experience provide policy-makers the understanding they need to make policy in education that is both sound and effective.

Because participants in the Writing Commission hearings were invited to write about and discuss experiences they associated with their own learning to write, their personal experiences became collective experience to be examined and reviewed for common themes as well as anomalous cases. As a result, these shared experiences became more than “merely anecdotal” evidence for claims and opinions expressed in the hearings. They became bodies of “local” knowledge that across the hearings became a corpus of common knowledge. Furthermore, because discussions of teaching practice in Writing Commission hearings were not referenced to research conducted at a distance from hearing rooms but grounded in actual instances of research-based writing instruction that hearings participants examined together, participants were able to use the relevant research that advisory panel members and they themselves brought to bear in these discussions to interpret and account for the particular examples of literacy teaching and learning they observed together.

What I observed in Writing Commission hearings was the wisdom that surfaced about effective teaching and authentic learning when those gathered discuss actual cases of teaching and learning rather than summarized or hypothetical ones. My observations lead me to this conclusion: If policy is to guide sound writing instruction, those charged with developing that policy do well to begin their work by examining actual instances of practice that they recognize as accomplishing their values for literacy instruction rather than with abstracted goals for literacy instruction. In his classic essay, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” Clifford Geertz makes my point this way: “Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don’t make much sense or hold much interest apart from them” (25). That is, when hearings’ participants accounted for why the instruction they experienced and observed was effective, in effect, they named the goals they hold for literacy instruction. Based on their analyses and interpretations of their experiences and observations—not on hypothetical or summarized experiences and observations—they called for policy and practice that make sense to practitioners and policy makers alike. Perhaps that is why *Writing and School Reform*, the report that emerged from the 2004 Writing Commission hearings, has been so well received by both educational practitioners and policy makers.

### **Traveling the Two-way Street between Policy and Practice**

Since the hearings it sponsored in 2004, the National Commission on Writing has continued (1) to conduct and publish studies that call publicly for effective twenty-first century literacy instruction, (2) to advance practice-based inquiry in literacy studies, and (3) to work with partners to these ends (29). The commission’s commitment to work in partnerships and to support practice-based inquiry in the service of influencing policy and practice for their mutual benefit make me particularly pleased to be part of its efforts.

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