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Imitation: A Common-Sense Approach

By Andrew Pudewa

As in many areas of education, the skill of writing has been elevated to the status of art, which it rightfully should be. However, this has often been to the detriment of children. Equating good with creative and creative with good, many teachers, schools, and curriculum publishers have taken an approach to teaching which more or less follows a hands-off method of instruction. They seek to allow children to express themselves on paper without interfering with their freedom and creativity. Although well-intentioned, the “non-instruction” which results from this approach has little chance of helping the child develop confidence and competence in writing, proving particularly unhelpful for the reluctant writer, who most desperately needs to learn basic skills.

In a typical junior high school classroom, it is not uncommon to see students writing in their journals, with teachers obediently respecting their “right” to write whatever they wish without criticism or correction, but what is the result of this? Arguably, it is a valuable activity to freely express ideas in words on paper, but one must again ask: What are the students really learning? Is this truly the best use of their time during those important formative years?

And what of the child who doesn't have the maturity to reflect on his experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the events of life? Must his opportunity to learn to write become dependent on his ability to think of ideas? How do we teach thinking? How should we teach writing?

Actually, how do we learn to think? Often thought comes to us through inner speech, as we hear ourselves “talking” in our head. Very young children will talk to themselves to make sense of the things they see and do. Our thoughts mature as the language patterns we learn as toddlers expand to encompass more complex concepts and their relationships. Without question, some people think more abstractly (thus the existence of the right-brain stereotype), but logical reasoning generally evolves from “thinking it through” with inner speech.

The storage of solid language patterns in the brain is of utmost importance for the development of excellent speaking and writing skills. How is this done? Obviously, by imitation! In the same way that as young children, we say what we hear, as young

students, we should write what we read.

This idea is not new. From the old-school copybooks to the rediscovered, popular “Benjamin Franklin” method, imitation has been a common-sense approach to teaching for centuries. Memorizing great chunks of Latin oratory, students in ancient Rome used imitation to master the skill of rhetoric. But in the twentieth century, the great god of creativity in art majorly upstaged the tradition of imitation in building a foundation of skills. Did Leonardo da Vinci advise his students to “express themselves” on canvas? No, he had them copy his Mona Lisa, and there are dozens of Mona Lisa imitations today to prove it. Did the great ’cellist Pablo Casals suggest that his students choose their own bowings, fingerings, and dynamics in the Bach partitas they played? No, Casals had them imitate his style with absolute precision, and only when every nuance of their performance was absolutely identical to his, did he say, “Now you know enough to do it differently than I.” Why teach writing any differently?

Throughout the U.S. and Canada, schools and administrators, parents and legislatures are concerned about the poor showing of students on writing assessments. They are perplexed. New curricula, revised textbooks, and increased classroom technology have not improved results during the past three decades. It seems confusing, but why should we be surprised?

Being so much a product of their environment, the students themselves prove the efficacy of the teaching method they have endured. Intermittently, education and language arts experts have been devising rubrics, models and processes, strategies and applications to help students quickly develop the abilities they currently seem to lack. Although these various state standards have been moderately successful in helping teachers specify the capabilities children should have, they have done little to assist the teachers in nurturing these skills in their students. Perhaps a look to contrast the methods of the present with those of past is in order.

Almost thirty years ago The State of California Language Arts Content Standards, Grade 4, Section 2.0, termed Writing Applications (genres and their characteristics), suggested that by the end of fourth grade, students should write narratives on incidents that

1. relate ideas, observations, and/or memories
2. provide a context to enable the reader to imagine the world of the event or experience
3. use concrete sensory details
4. provide insight into why this incident is memorable

How many adults can do that, let alone teach a child to do so? Very few. The only method of effectively teaching this would be by example. Reading a sample or two would not be enough. For almost all ten-year-old students, it would be best for them to first practice on someone else’s narrative (preferably a well-done autobiographical excerpt), taking key words from key ideas and rewriting that person’s experience (perhaps several

times with several samples), before they would even begin to internalize the nature of “concrete sensory details” or intuitively know how to “provide a context to enable the reader to imagine the world of the event.” Very, very few students could meet this “writing standard” using one of their own memories or experiences without having had the opportunity to first read and write about incidents in the lives of others which already fulfill these requirements.

States like California have implemented and re-implemented writing “standards” for three decades or more. However, writing skills of students have been in steady decline for this same time period. Perhaps it will take yet another decade of frustration with newer assessments and standards until we realize that the common-sense methods that were used centuries ago remain the methods that bear fruit. Writing is indeed an art and should be taught as art has classically been taught, with step-by-step guidance, continuous practice, and plenty of opportunity for imitation.