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A Swing Towards Sanity

By Andrew Pudewa

Every once in a while, something happens which restores hope that the world is not completely insane. When this occurs in the field of education, it is particularly pleasing. When it occurs twice in one day, ecstasy may ensue.

And so it happened that not long ago I clicked on a link to an article by two University of Southern California faculty members, William Tierney and Stefani Relles, guest columnists on the Washington Post Higher Education blog page. Naturally I was skeptical, but their two main points quickly caught me. The first was that 42% of students entering public universities in California require remedial writing instruction (also noting that nationwide, only 17% of those enrolled in remedial English actually graduate). The second was that something can be done about it—namely, better instruction. Now it was becoming suspenseful, so I continued to read as these educators explained four strategies to teach writing more effectively.

- 1) Set specific goals. The authors make an obvious but important observation: “If somehow students discover they are not good writers, they have no idea what they need to do to improve.” Their advice is to teach skills— rather than teach to the test—since “abstract test scores” don’t help students know if they are underprepared for college. (Models, methods, and checklists anyone?)
- 2) Teach students how to revise. Condemning the typical “autopsy report” of teacher comments at the end of completed essays, these specialists point to the need for consistent and meaningful feedback which must then be implemented by the student by rewriting the composition. (I half-wondered if they had been listening to my talk, “The Four Deadly Errors”!)
- 3) Teach summarizing, not analyzing. Rightly, Tierney and Relles point out that “critical thinking in and of itself is not a precursor to good writing.” Writing is about putting ideas into words, which “crucially involves the ability to summarize material, a more concrete and therefore more teachable skill.” (I wonder if my coworkers heard an audible shout of “Yes!” coming from my office.) My experience affirms their statement: “If students are able to summarize what they have read, they can better grasp how to put together their own arguments.” If only high school teachers understood this!
- 4) Require more and longer writing. Among several reasons stated, the most enjoyable was this: “Longer papers would make the last-minute, overnight writing session tougher to pull off, if not impossible, and help students develop complex arguments.” When they recommended “manageable writing tasks with successive deadlines,” I thought that surely they must have attended one of my seminars!

Their article ends with a statement I've reiterated so many times: "Adopting [these suggestions] would mean focusing on writing as process rather than product, an unsettling break for those accustomed to exams and assignments." Indeed, somewhere on the campus of USC is an alcove of sanity, even wisdom.

However, the day's delights were not yet over. A book arrived—one I had ordered simply because of the title, *Why Johnny Can't Write*, with the subtitle, *How to Improve Writing Skills* (1990). Actually, Amazon recommended it for me, presumably based on my browsing history. Again, I was skeptical, but curious. An hour after receiving it, I was reading underlined sections on dog-eared pages to anyone who would listen to me.

Authors Myra Linden and Arthur Whimbey begin the book by briefly reviewing the sad state of reading and writing abilities of high school students of their era. Continuing their critique of the status quo, they claim that the best methods of teaching writing have been eclipsed by two equally ineffective innovations: an excessive reliance on the teaching of grammar, and the emphasis on creativity in the writing process. The bulk of the book explains the authors' preferred methods of improving skills: sentence combining and text reconstruction.

Well-documented and compelling, *Why Johnny Can't Write* oozes insight and wisdom. While it would be tempting to try and quote the whole book, I must limit myself to some of their most incisive observations about the problem of invention, which is the task of coming up with content, prewriting, brainstorming, idea webbing—whatever you want to call it:

There are two problems with all invention strategies. First, none works well. Finding things to write about remains a difficulty for many students and therefore a hindrance in using the process approach. The desperateness of this situation is seen in this example of instruction teachers commonly give students: "If your topic for this paper is education and you don't know where to begin, for ten minutes try writing nonstop everything that comes into your mind when you hear the word education. Keep writing, even if you have to keep stating, 'I don't know what to write.'"

The second problem with invention strategies is that they all take time away from actually learning to write. The more elaborate strategies take more time. While students are trying to think of ideas, they are not learning the writing skills...[that] they need in order to express and convey their ideas.

Linden and Whimbey go on to explain how the most recent National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) research shows that freewriting and journaling have only modest benefits for writing skills; of all the instruction methods examined, the only one less useful than freewriting was the grammar-only approach. They then explain how practice in sentence combining and text reconstruction optimizes students' time by building both basic writing ability and inherent language understanding.

While Benjamin Franklin is given as an example of one great writer who practiced "imitation in writing" (sound familiar?), other authors such as Jack London, Somerset Maugham, and even Malcolm X used similar methods of practice by text reconstruction. The strategies explained in *Why Johnny Can't Write* very closely mirror the note-taking and summarizing foundational to our structural models. The sentence-combining exercises are similar to using a checklist to enforce practice of different stylistic

techniques. Though much more could be said, the bottom line is that this book contains research which precisely supports what we do at IEW. The two teachers who wrote it know what works and what doesn't. It is a refreshing bit of common sense.

And such were the blessings of that day— two reflections of reason in the crazy world of modern education, clarity within the haze, affirmation that we aren't alone. While we are still questioned by the entrenched modernist on one side and dismissed by the occasional journalist on the other, we know our program works, and we have stacks of testimonials to prove it. But we aren't alone; others like Tierney and Relles, Linden and Whimbey are with us. In fact, perhaps this is the beginning of a trend in the teaching of writing, a swing towards sanity. I hope so.

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