

Trends

English

CHARLES SUHOR

New Light on Process Writing

A report from the Center for the Study of Writing (University of California-Berkeley and Carnegie-Mellon University) has shed new light on the writing process movement and added to a growing mainstream of status study research on writing instruction. *National Surveys of Successful Teachers of Writing and Their Students* (Freedman and McLeod 1988) compares the qualities of K-12 writing instruction identified as successful in the United States and the United Kingdom. The 48-page report makes telling references to other studies (e.g., Freedman 1987, A. Applebee et al. 1986, A. Applebee 1981, Bullock 1975) and suggests comparison to still others (e.g., Squire and R. Applebee 1966, Hillocks 1986).

As in the past, U.S. secondary teachers stress imaginative writing less than do British teachers. However, successful U.S. teachers are now demanding longer pieces of writing than they previously did and are assigning more writing than U.K. teachers. And despite the general finding that U.S. teachers are still far more "curriculum-centered," they place a high value on connecting students' personal experiences with the content under study.

The U.S. teachers' responses strongly reflect the influence of the thinking skills and writing process movements and the National Writing Project. These teachers hold that "teaching writing to force students to think for themselves" is of primary importance. They value many aspects of process-model instruction—for example, teacher response to students' work during the writing process, peer reaction, modeling and encouraging risk-taking, publishing student writing, and the like. The U.K. teachers make more frequent instructional use of professional writing models, a technique often neglected in process instruction—despite the fact that Hillocks' 1986 meta-analysis showed use

of such models to be powerful teaching tools. Successful teachers in both the U.S. and the U.K., unlike the general U.S. teacher sample in Applebee's 1981 study, stress writing as expression and place less emphasis on grading and mechanics. By contrast, the study found that students from both the U.S. and the U.K. value grades and teachers' written comments on their final versions.

The new report and Freedman's 1987 study (which forms the database for the center's U.S. schools) are among several recent indicators that the writing process movement is having an impact on student writing. In a National Assessment of Educational Progress report, Applebee and colleagues cautioned that the process movement is still young, as instructional movements go. In that study, students who used process techniques such as planning and revising were better writers, but evidence was lacking that teachers guided by process instruction models produced better writers. Hillocks' study implicitly supported many aspects of process instruction (for example, guided classroom interaction) but criticized "natural process" writing instruction—forms of free writing most popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which are only dubiously regarded as process model instruction at all.

The center's report and related studies can be viewed as a sign that

effective writing instruction in the U.S. is far more student-centered today than during the early '60s, when successful English programs were decidedly belletristic (Squire and R. Applebee 1966). More important, the report suggests that successful writing instruction in the U.S. and the U.K. today is dynamic and language-based and that attention to the writing process in the U.S. is associated with strong classroom interaction and a better quantity and quality of student writing. □

References

- Applebee, A. N. (1981) *A Study of Writing in the Secondary School*. Research Report No. 21. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Applebee, A. N., J. Langer, and I. Mullis. (1986) *The Writing Report Card: Writing Achievement in American Schools*. National Assessment of Educational Progress. Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service.
- Bullock, A. (1975) *A Language for Life*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Freedman, S. W. (1987) *Response to Student Writing*. Research Report No. 23. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Freedman, S.W., and A. McLeod. (1988) *National Survey of Successful Teachers of Writing and Their Students*. Technical Report No. 14. Berkeley, Calif.: Center for the Study of Writing.
- Hillocks, G. (1986) *Research on Written Composition*. Urbana, Ill.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and National Conference on Research in English.
- Squire, J. R., and R. K. Applebee. (1966) *A Study of English Programs in Selected High Schools Which Consistently Educate Outstanding Students in English*. Cooperative Research Project No. 1994. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois.

Charles Suhor is Deputy Executive Director, National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801.

Teachers are now demanding longer pieces of writing.

Copyright © 1989 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.