

Chapter 11
Language, Learning, and
Interaction:
A Framework for Improving the
Teaching of Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is above all else a means of communication, one of the many forms of interaction that we have developed in our exchanges with one another. Occasions for writing can be analyzed in terms of their characteristics as communication events—the roles of the participants, the topics discussed, and the forms and conventions that mediate what takes place.

If we construe writing in this way, our various studies of writing in school contexts suggest that most such writing events are flawed in some rather fundamental ways. In this chapter, we will use the results from the study to highlight the most instructionally inhibiting of those flaws, and will suggest an alternative view of the role of teacher and student.

The Failure of Interaction

The studies we have been reporting in this volume focussed on situations where we expected to find instruction at its best. The 15 students whose growth and development we traced attended a school selected for its advantages: a well trained and dedicated teaching staff, a highly academic orientation, and a supportive community. The textbooks whose lessons we analyzed were among the most popular in the nation, chosen for use presumably because they offered the most helpful materials. The individual content-area teachers whose classrooms we sought out and studied were chosen because writing activities seemed to play an unusually extensive and positive role within their classrooms. Yet as we look back over our analyses, the most consistent interpretation is that there is a systematic and pervasive failure in the quality of the instructional interaction between teacher and student.

Some aspects of this failure are obvious and easy to document. An earlier

report from this study (Applebee, 1981) described typical patterns of instruction in American high schools. In that report, we found that most writing assignments were truncated, involving little more than the presentation of a topic, a length, and a due date. Instruction, to the extent that it occurred at all, occurred after the writing was complete, in the extensive comments and editing that teachers offered in response to students' work. Though English teachers differed in their emphases from teachers of other subject areas, all used their writing assignments as a way to evaluate previous learning, whether of English skills or of the information and concepts presented in other subjects. Partly as a result of this emphasis, much of the writing that students were asked to do was totally framed by language provided as part of the instruction. Rather than construct text, students were more often asked simply to complete it, by supplying missing items of information that would in turn demonstrate their learning. Word- and sentence-level skills were exercised in most tasks (occurring indeed in some 42% of class time), but text-level skills, the kinds needed to construct a coherent paragraph, were needed much less often (some 3% of the time in class or for homework).

The studies reported in the current volume present a more complex picture. We continued to find many instructional situations that fit the national pattern; the textbook analyses in particular reinforced our earlier description of emphases and approaches, but so did much of the writing that our case-study students were completing. As had been the case in the national samples, their writing for school was narrow in scope and emphasis, driven by the need to demonstrate their mastery of subject-area material. They too wrote relatively infrequently, engaged at best trivially in a composing process, and saw little point or relevance in many of the tasks they were asked to do. Yet much of this pattern of activities was emerging out of instructional contexts that appeared on the surface to be more promising, that indeed appeared to be based on exactly the sorts of approaches we might most enthusiastically recommend.

All teachers in our earlier, as well as present, study meant to "teach" and wanted their students to "learn." Some used more dynamic instructional approaches focussing on process, while others were more concerned with presentation and form. However, in some real way, most of their attempts fell short of being effective; the writing experiences became relatively trivial exercises in which students polished content or form the teacher had selected as the focus of instruction. Absent in almost all instances was a reason for writing—beyond simple obedience.

The exceptions to this pattern can help us understand the causes. One exception that we have explored in some detail is the writing that took place in Nelson's social studies classroom (see Chapter 10). Much of the writing in his classroom assumed that the students might indeed have something of interest to share with Nelson and with other students. These interests gave purpose and direction to their writing, and in turn the students reported a new found involve-

ment and control in exploring their own ideas and seeing them grow. Their sense that they were shaping their own work was markedly different from the reactions of students in most classrooms.

If we compare the reactions of Nelson's students with those of others we have studied, one of the most important differences turns out to be the roles adopted by teacher and student within the general framework of the writing event. Though Nelson is very much a teacher, controlling the syllabus and the activities that form the context for the writing that occurs, his students are allowed to take an active role in determining what will be said. Just as happens in most out-of-school contexts of communication, the meaning that develops is negotiated among all participants, teacher and student alike. In contrast, the more typical writing assignment that serves primarily to evaluate student performance is one-sided: rather than a negotiation of meaning, the teacher's purposes are preemptive. To perform adequately in such contexts, the student must follow the pattern provided (whether of content or of form); any further exploration must take place outside of the central parameters of the assignment.

THE PURPOSES FOR SCHOOL WRITING

We have come to see the nature of the communicative situation as the fundamental factor shaping the success of instruction. When there is room for students to develop purposes of their own within the context of their school writing, teachers have a natural opportunity to provide structured help where such assistance is needed. When the tasks have a clear and overall purpose, the usefulness of any separate activity the students engage in can be judged in terms of what it contributes to the whole task, and evaluation of how well the students "did" can be based on what each set out to accomplish in the first place. The focus, from start to end, for students and teacher, is on the development and elaboration of meaning within the context of the instructional event. No matter how well intended, when the meaning is preempted by the teacher rather than more naturally negotiated, the structure of the interaction inevitably breaks down and the instructional goals are subverted.

We will use two examples to illustrate in more detail how the best intentioned of approaches breaks down when the teacher's goals leave too little scope for the students to develop their own purposes. Consider first Emily, writing an essay on *All Quiet on the Western Front* for her 12th-grade English class. The assignment itself was typical of many she completed that year, and reflected, at least on the surface, the teacher's efforts to adopt a process-oriented approach to writing instruction. The assignment began by giving Emily considerable choice in what she would write about. Rather than simply presenting a topic, the teacher offered nine "questions and ideas regarding the book." These suggestions ranged from the broad ("Select an idea developed in the book and show how that idea is presented and how it contributes to the book as a whole") to the very specific

("Discuss Paul's attitude toward the death of two or three other characters and relate them to his philosophy of war"). Emily chose a third option: "Paul Baumer uses such adjectives as 'superfluous,' 'lost,' 'crude,' and 'insensible' to describe himself and his comrades. Explain and discuss the reasons for their change from the 'Iron Youth' to alienated and hopeless 'automata.'"

To lead the students through the task, Emily's teacher organized it around a series of stages: (a) the development of a focussed thesis; (b) elaboration of the thesis in an opening paragraph; (c) a rough draft of the whole; (d) peer response; and (e) a final, graded essay. The concern with writing process is evident in several aspects of this assignment, including the attempt to provide some choice of topic, the division of the writing itself into several stages, and the careful inclusion of peer response along the way (complete with a response guide to insure that the comments would be constructive).

Yet the teacher's concern with process rides somewhat uncomfortably with the goals which drive this writing episode. There are two explicitly stated: (a) "to write an organized essay that reveals your knowledge and understanding of an aspect of the book"; and (b) "to practice certain writing techniques." The latter reflected the concern with "an organized essay," and included developing a thesis statement, supporting that thesis with specific evidence from the book, and writing an appropriate conclusion. These are formal concerns, and in this context the steps in the writing process become little more than opportunities to check that the form has been properly executed. Content is peripheral, though not irrelevant; in the course of executing the proper form, the students are also expected to "reveal" their "knowledge and understanding" of the book they have studied. (The wording, though casual, is itself revealing; the emphasis is on demonstrating previous learning, not on extending understanding of the book in the process of exploring new themes.)

Emily has considerable difficulty with this assignment, for it forces her to sharpen her thesis in isolation from the process of developing an argument to support it. Her first attempt at a thesis statement is simple: "The war changed the youth of Germany from Iron Youth to unquestioning automata." The teacher's response tried to carry the argument further, as well as to provide a more general strategy for sharpening a thesis:

So what? What, then, is Remarque saying? This is always a useful question to apply to a potential thesis . . .

In moving to the second part of the assignment, Emily simply abandoned her thesis without trying to answer the question her teacher has posed. She heads her draft "The change from Iron Youth to automata," and struggles through six versions of her first sentence before finally focussing on the changes the war had brought to the lives of German youth, leading them either to die or to become automata as "the only way to be to survive."

The teacher's response to this paragraph is again concerned with providing Emily with appropriate strategies for examining the form of her writing; this time she asks:

Does the material in your paragraph really show the assertion in the topic sentence to be true? Have you given any specific examples? Rewrite.

The questions are of course rhetorical, though the advice they contain is probably more appropriate to an essay as a whole than to an opening paragraph. Emily's solution is in fact to ignore the advice, emerging in her draft of the essay as a whole with an even more general opening paragraph, about war rather than about Germany: "War, no matter what role a person plays in it, changes everyone in some way. . . . In the book *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Maria Remarque showed the situations and changes the youth of Germany had to adapt to in World War I." This solution seems to satisfy her teacher, whose only reaction to the paragraph is some sentence-level editing.

Before the teacher read the final draft, however, there was one more stage in the process: a peer editing session, guided by an essay-evaluation worksheet. The worksheet was carefully constructed to reflect the teacher's goals. Its six items asked the reader to identify the writer's thesis and accompanying evidence, to suggest ways to strengthen the evidence presented, to comment on organization, to give at least one specific suggestion for improvement, and to end by saying "something encouraging." In reacting to Emily's work, her classmate Maya also had trouble finding her thesis ("not totally clear . . ."), though Emily's evidence was easy to isolate. In keeping with their teacher's emphases, Maya's advice focusses on form: "The essay is pretty organized, but there are too many ideas in the thesis paragraph, and it gets jumbled."

Emily's response to the whole sequence is a mixture of irritation and frustration, stemming in large part from the demands to know "where the essay is going" before she has had a chance to work through the material:

In an English essay . . . I have to think in advance, and that's something I don't like doing. I like to have some surprise in my writing.

It would be easy to read Emily's comments as a rejection of having to think carefully about what she will write, a plea for undisciplined and undefended argument. But our experience with her writing makes it clear that this is not the case. Her writing for other classes, where formal features of the writing receive less direct emphasis, is often particularly thoughtful and well written. Her difficulties with the structure of this assignment seem to come from the need to be consciously aware of formal constraints at the same time that she is discovering her content:

As long as I don't know where I'm going, I'm OK. But as soon as I have something in my head, I begin to doubt where I am now.

The discovery part of writing is something she enjoys, but in her English essays she feels constantly pulled back because her teacher's goals for their writing do not leave her any scope to develop her own thoughts.

Because Emily seemed to have so much trouble in writing about *All Quiet on the Western Front*, we asked her what she would have written if her teacher had simply asked her to write three pages about the book. Her reaction was surprisingly close to the options her teacher had offered:

I'd just say what the book was about. I'd talk about the changes Paul goes through. And I'd talk about why Remarque wrote the book.

Emily recognized how close this was to the teacher's task, but insisted that there was a fundamental difference: she would be in control of where the essay was going, and the form would derive from what she felt it important to say. From the perspective we have adopted, her role within the interaction would have shifted to allow a more balanced negotiation of meaning, instead of depending entirely upon the teacher's prescription.

This example reminds us that language events are driven by their purposes, not simply by their forms. We cannot reform instruction simply by changing classroom activities, without attention to the purposes those activities serve. Emily's teacher was familiar with recent recommendations for more process-oriented instruction, and was making a conscious and careful effort to incorporate these recommendations into her teaching. But the changes she had made in her approaches were ultimately trivial; the focus in instruction remained on the formal devices of English essay writing, and those devices continued, as in less process-oriented classrooms, to obstruct her students' efforts to learn to write.

If Emily's classroom shows us how process-oriented instruction in English can go awry by ignoring the shared intentions underlying the writing activity, our second example illustrates similar difficulties in broadening the range of writing in content-area classrooms. Dan Phillips, whose 10th-grade biology classroom was the focus of the studies reported in Chapter 10, believes that writing about new material is an important part of his students' learning in science. Familiar with recent studies of the writing process, Phillips explicitly argues the value of leading students through a series of process-oriented activities, "without fear of the teacher-as-examiner."

Phillips' concerns find expression in two sets of activities that run throughout the school year. To help students sort through and make sense of new experiences in science, he emphasizes learning logs in which they record their reactions and tentative explorations. To help them learn to shape their discussions of science concepts toward a broader audience, he provides essay-writing assign-

ments structured around a series of process-oriented steps: (a) selection of a topic; (b) exploration of the topic through listing of ideas and free-writing; (c) sharing of drafts in peer-response groups; (d) formative rather than evaluative response from the teacher; and (e) submission of a final draft for a grade.

Though Phillips' approaches are firmly grounded in the current literature on writing instruction, our analyses suggest that in his classroom, too, the best of intentions have gone somewhat awry. Rather than embracing the opportunity to explore what they are learning, Phillips' students concentrate on getting the answers right. As we heard Jenny, a tenth grader, explain in Chapter 10, "It's easier to paraphrase things from the book than to write from observation notes."

Jenny's comment points toward the problem in the approaches Phillips has adopted: the work he assigns has a right and wrong version, and the rewards he gives, the grades at the end of it all, reward correct performance. In that context, the simplest and safest approach is to *find* the right answer in the textbook (or in the notes of the best students), rather than to *discover* it through the steps of a writing process. To the students, much that Phillips' wants them to do on their own belabors the obvious, as Susan pointed out in discussing prewriting activities:

Phillips wants us to write something down and then to write down the first thing that comes to our mind. Me, I just organize it right away.

To the extent that she can "organize it right away," of course, Susan's approach is a reasonable one. Phillips would claim, and we would agree, that most of the time the organization she achieves is a passive one, reflecting the structures ready at hand in the textbook rather than her own knowledge and understanding. But those structures ready at hand are enough for successful performance; the answers will be right, and will be rewarded with a grade. The labors recorded in the students' learning logs and exploratory writing, on the other hand, are filed away unacknowledged.

Knowing where the rewards will ultimately be, the students twist even these assignments toward their own ends. In the samples we collected from Phillips' classroom, fully 85% of the writing assumed a teacher in the role of examiner, even when it was written in response to assignments meant to be supportive and flexible. Implemented to help students understand the material they are drawing from their textbooks, Phillips' assignments are co-opted by that content, in much the same way that Emily's work in English was co-opted by her teacher's concern with the proper form for students' essays. The driving purpose for the activity remains the teacher's, leaving the students with too little room to develop their own ideas.

At the core of effective instructional interaction there is a shared exchange of ideas between teacher and student—and a more balanced role for all participants. Though the teacher will usually initiate classroom activities, these activities should provide scope for the students' to develop their own purposes, rather than

simply to demonstrate their knowledge and skill within the teacher's preemptive framework. When students are allowed scope to develop their own purposes, there is little room for activities that emphasize practice of new skills in isolation from broader purposes; nor is there room for drill in new concepts or information drawn from a content-area curriculum. We must turn instead to a different model of effective instruction, one that is adapted more clearly to the nature of instruction as a communicative event.

SUPPORT OF STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL SCAFFOLDING

Young children learn language in the process of using it in supportive contexts. Adults rarely set out to teach their children new linguistic structures through drill and practice. Rather they listen to them, ask appropriate questions about what they are saying, and expand upon their children's beginnings to build a fuller meaning. These various activities of the adult language-user provide a variety of supports for the language tasks being undertaken by the child, and this process can itself be taken as a model for the instructional interaction of the classroom. The teacher's role becomes one of providing instructional support or *scaffolding* (Applebee and Langer, 1983; Bruner, 1978; Cazden, 1980) that will allow the student to undertake new and more difficult tasks. These tasks are purposeful for the student because they grow out of what the student wants to do, but cannot do without the teacher's help.

With Vygotsky (1962, 1978), we believe that individuals gain access to the store of cultural knowledge through the social process of interaction, and during that process gradually make that knowledge their own. From this perspective, the role of instructional scaffolding is to provide students with appropriate models and strategies for addressing new problems; these are in turn internalized by the students, providing them with the resources to eventually undertake similar tasks on their own.

Such processes are at work in any instructional situation, whether or not its emphases are compatible with those we have been discussing. Five-paragraph themes, the "funnel" organization of individual paragraphs, an emphasis on "vivid verbs" or "colorful adjectives"—when students define good writing against such criteria of form rather than of meaning it is because they have internalized their teachers' models of what matters. When they rely on lectures or textbooks for the arguments they make, rather than formulating their own analyses and opinions, they are again internalizing the principles underlying what their teachers have set for them to do.

We can organize our instruction around this process of internalization, helping students learn to complete on their own the kinds of tasks which, at first, they can only approach collaboratively. As this happens, we must be sure that our instructional approaches reflect their new competence, rather than allowing our-

selves to become complacent with methods that "worked." Good scaffolds, erected to support students efforts, must be dissolved when they are no longer needed. Once the pattern has been internalized, our "help" may simply be an intrusion.

To illustrate how students can learn new strategies by completing writing tasks which allow them to develop their own purposes, let us look at Sherri, a 10th grader struggling with an essay for an advanced-placement American history course. Sherri had written many successful summaries and essays, but lacked a clear model of an analytic research paper. Faced with the task of analyzing Susan B. Anthony's influence in furthering the goal of women's rights, she did not know how much opinion she could include, and was concerned that she would sound too biased. Even after having completed extensive research (complete with 30 index cards of references and quotations), she was unconvinced that she could prove Anthony's "influence."

During a conference on her writing, Jim (a member of our research team) tried to help Sherri articulate the questions she could answer based on the information she had collected, and then to place an organization around those questions. The discussion helped her shape her ideas and organize her paper to convey her own emerging thesis. In the following selections from the conference, Sherri (S) and Jim (J) began by discussing the unfocused concerns that were preventing her from getting started. To move beyond this writer's block, Jim helped her to reflect on what she knew about her topic:

S: In the first paragraph, the more I think about what I'm writing the less I think it's a significant thing to write about. Is influence significant?

J: What do you mean by influence?

S: It's basically a matter of opinion. It's something that's great for English, but for research papers you're not supposed to have a matter of opinion. . . . For research papers, you're supposed to have cold facts.

J: Leaving influence aside for a while, what questions do you think you could answer based on the materials you've gathered?

S: Who was she and what did she do? What did other people think of her? What were her ideas?

After Sherri and Jim found that she knew a good deal about Susan B. Anthony, and that that information was organized around at least three major issues (Sherri posed the three important topics herself), Jim's task was to help Sherri think about her point, what she wanted to say in the paper:

J: Why don't you want to write the paper based on three questions?

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S: Because I want to make her important. Significant. My teacher told us not to make it just a biography.

J: What could you do to make her seem special?

[Sherri here listed several things Susan B. Anthony had done, including becoming a noted leader in the women's movement.]

J: What were things like when Susan B. Anthony began her career?

[Sherri has several points to make here, including some well chosen quotations from her notes.]

At this point Sherri was clear about her writing goals, but she was still not certain whether she knew enough. She was aware that she was unclear about how to establish "proof" of someone's importance:

J: Then you have a lot of material about what Susan B. Anthony did and what other people thought of what she did. What were things like when she finished her career? Were there any important changes for women?

[Sherri was less clear here. She kept leaping ahead to the current movement instead of staying within Susan B. Anthony's period.]

J: If you could show that specific things were different because of what Susan B. Anthony did, you might be able to prove some influence.

S: That's what I wanted to do, but again it seems like a lot of opinion.

J: If you stick as closely as you can to the facts you have on the index cards, you'll be backing up those opinions with facts.

By the end of this conference, Sherri was able to begin her paper.

While this is only one of many forms that instructional scaffolding can take, it is a clear example of how well staged questions can help the student think through the problems encountered in a specific writing task while also serving to model strategies that can be used in other similar situations. The support needs to be structured in a manner that reflects the steps that students need to go through to complete the tasks, rather than to work backwards from the logic of the final essay. Presented in this way, the students learn how to develop an argument on their own. Emily, struggling with her essay on *All Quiet on the Western Front*, did not have the benefit of such support for her own efforts, contending instead with the need to demonstrate skill in a particular organizational format. Neither did Phillips offer the kind of instructional support we are suggesting. Somehow,

in planning their instructional activities, both got sidetracked; Emily's teacher focussed almost entirely on form and Phillips almost entirely on subject-area information. In each case, the writer's "message" itself was overlooked.

Because writing is a communicative act, its very essence is the writer's message; that message embodies what the writer wishes to say to a particular audience for a particular purpose. Even as the content of the message comes together and begins to make sense in the mind of the writer, it does so within some organized form. The forms within which writers integrate their messages are internally logical and purposeful; they grow with the integrating ideas a writer expresses and become whole as the message has been logically conveyed. Although content and form are sometimes artificially separated for purposes of research, they do not occur separately in the mind of the writer—unless molded to do so as a result of inappropriate instruction. Such a separation, we found, was a major flaw in even the best of the writing instruction examined during the course of our studies.

Although support is needed whenever a specific task poses a problem, not every such experience leads to learning. Sometimes the student already knows how to accomplish the task and just needs some help getting started. At other times, the skills and strategies needed for successful completion of the task are too far removed from what the student can reasonably do alone. To be instructional, tasks must be appropriate to the skills the students bring to them; they should help students learn to use skills or strategies they cannot yet manage, but are almost ready to undertake on their own—tasks that are within what Vygotsky (1962, 1978) has called the students' "zone of proximal development."

Even after her particularly supportive conference, Sherri was unable to switch from the summary mode with which she was most familiar to the analytic forms that she felt she needed for her own more complex purposes in this essay. As is the case in many instructional activities, a number of supportive experiences may be necessary before a student will be able to do the task alone. The teacher must strike a balance here, between providing too little scaffolding for difficult tasks, and providing so much that the student has little opportunity to assume control.

In discussing the purposes that underlie classroom activities, we emphasized the need to base instructional interaction around more broadly construed goals than simply the desire to evaluate student learning. The role of the teacher must shift, from an evaluator of what has already been learned to a collaborator who can help the student accomplish more complicated or sophisticated purposes.

In earlier chapters, we have seen what happens when such a shift does not occur. Fundamentally, when the teacher adopts the role of evaluator rather than collaborator the whole purpose of the interaction shifts, for teacher and student alike. All of the linguistic conventions which govern well formed interactions take their focus around this altered purpose. Grice's (1975) analyses of the maxims governing well formed conversation, for example, require each participant to make a contribution that is as informative as, but not more informative

than, is required. Much that we have seen students do can be interpreted as a simple application of this maxim. In Phillips' classroom, what was "required" was, finally, the recitation of science information; students who went directly to their textbooks for a simple framework for presenting that information were adopting an efficient conversational strategy. (In fact, for that particular goal, their strategy was more efficient than the process-oriented alternative that Phillips preferred.) In other situations, students who present "well written" essays void of interest or commitment (the type of writing Macrorie, 1970, has called "English") are also following an efficient strategy; the mastery of form that they are demonstrating is indeed what is required.

CONCLUSION

We concluded the first report from this project with three recommendations for improving writing instruction: (a) more situations are needed in which writing can serve as a tool for learning rather than as a means to display acquired knowledge; (b) recent work on the nature of the composing process needs to be brought to the attention of a broader spectrum of teachers; and (c) school writing must be motivated by a need to communicate and must be valued as an expression of something the writer wants to say (Applebee, 1981).

From our present perspective, these recommendations seem not so much wrong as incomplete; they represent a response to the surface of the problem, and mix fundamental questions about the nature of learning with more superficial concerns with the structure of the task. In this chapter, we have tried to untangle some of these concerns, placing the roles of teacher and student in the center of our analysis, and using the notion of scaffolding to begin to explore the dimensions of effective instruction within the context of a more balanced interaction.

We can take our analysis of instructional scaffolding one step further, and posit a set of questions that can be used to examine the interactions that make a difference in student learning (Applebee and Langer, 1983). These questions apply to all aspects of instructional interaction, the language of textbooks and worksheets as well as the language of classrooms:

1. Does the task permit students to develop their own meanings rather than simply following the dictates of the teacher or text? Do they have room to take ownership for what they are doing?
2. Is the task sufficiently difficult to permit new learnings to occur, but not so difficult as to preclude new learnings?
3. Is the instructional support structured in a manner that models appropriate approaches to the task and leads to a natural sequence of thought and language?
4. Is the teacher's role collaborative rather than evaluative?

5. Is the external scaffolding removed as the student internalizes the patterns and approaches needed?

When bringing such questions to our analysis of teaching, the answers we find are not particularly encouraging. In most classrooms, the teacher's goals still preempt the students' purposes. Even in classrooms where there is a concerted effort to implement process-oriented activities, the emphasis in instruction usually remains firmly on the subject matter, as the teacher sees it, rather than on helping students extend their skills while grappling with problems that they have made their own. Although the answers will not come easily, by asking such questions we hope teachers will become more aware of how the kinds of instructional interactions they establish directly affect the nature of their students' learning.