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Writing for Real: The Social Power of Writing

The case made in *The Neglected R* is a compelling one. Of the Three R's, writing is often the skill relegated to last place in terms of priority, but it is really the most critical of skills. Writing is more than simply a means of communication. It is that very clearly, but what *The Neglected R* reminds us is that it is also a vehicle for thinking and how "students connect the dots of their knowledge."

The report by the *National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges* is clear in the five recommendations it makes for improving writing skills. Those recommendations include creating a specific national agenda, allotting time for increased instruction in writing, creating an effective system for measuring results, providing schools with the technology needed to implement the changes necessary, and instituting new training for teachers in best practices in writing instruction.

I certainly agree with the arguments made in the report and think the recommendations are valid. The ways we communicate in written form are diverse and changing. Practical reasons for increasing the focus on writing are cited in relation to the evolving employment landscape and the need for individuals to communicate effectively in work environments. The power of writing to help us evaluate and think through issues is highlighted effectively in the report as well. "Writing is thought on paper... [and] is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions."

Of the five recommendations, I feel support for teachers in the instruction of writing is the most critical factor. In order for students to make progress and learn to connect personally with their writing, instructional changes need to be made. Fundamental changes of this magnitude will only occur with directed efforts to help teachers in the classroom. Writing across the curriculum has long been advocated, but more professional development needs to be provided to make this a reality and something that every teacher, not just English teachers, see as his or her responsibility. In order to make that possible, specific and practical training for teachers to help them make connections to how writing can be embedded in their content areas is needed.

The recommendation that I think will pose the greatest challenge is assessment. The report makes it clear that the kind of writing our students need to learn can not be easily assessed by a multiple choice, machine-scorable system. In truth, students should not be assessed on single pieces of writing, but on a variety of work in order to get a broad sense of their skills. By nature, this sort of assessment is labor-intensive and difficult and something I think school systems will struggle to implement. Perhaps if the technology recommendations are realized, the burden of a more detailed assessment system might be lessened. I also worry that the kind of assessment proposed might be more subjective and would hope that systems would be put in place to have writing scored by multiple readers to reduce the likelihood of widely varying scores. Again, that also creates a burden of time and person power needed to score work. I think the recommendations in this area are important, but need thoughtful implementation.
I believe we as teachers can certainly advocate for increased prominence of writing in our schools. I believe that improving technology offers great promise for ways of composing, collaborating, and commenting by students and teachers. The ability to store work over time in a digital portfolio will provide an excellent tool for students and teachers to track growth and development of writing skills through online artifacts.

In moving on to the the readings of Cooper and Hyland, I struggled at first to understand the meaning of "genre" as it was being used in these works. My use of the word has always been as a way of cataloging types of writing by form. For example, in our 6th grade writing program, students work on a variety of pieces in different genres to build a portfolio. Personal narratives, persuasive essays, poetry, and process essays are all genres we teach and students include in their portfolios.

As I read deeper, I came to understand that the use of the word genre was more as a "process" for teaching these various types of writing. As Cooper states, genre pedagogy "establishes that genres are basically social actions and only incidentally textual forms." The idea is intriguing and I think offers many possibilities for teaching writing in new ways. Looking at genres by their cultural and social purpose rather than strictly by their structure can help writers find a sense of connection to their work. Certainly some of the steps included in the teaching cycle are things my colleagues and I already do, such as reading models and listing features of a form, but there are many ideas posed that are different from our usual process. The foundation that is established in a genre-based approach is much lengthier than what we typically do. Where I might share one or two examples of a personal narrative before asking students to begin the writing process, a teacher using a genre-based approach would provide more examples and have students collaboratively highlight the similarities to determine the shared qualities. Students writing their own pieces seems to come much later in the cycle.

I could imaging this process to be more engaging for students in that they can collaboratively discuss and list the features of a particular form and share the research they may do as they develop their own pieces. Where writing is more of an independent activity in our current classrooms, the genre-based approach seems to thrive on active sharing and collaboration.

I think similarities to what we do exist through our portfolio approach in 6th grade. Our students work to create a portfolio that they will share with their parents in a student-led writing conference at the end of the year. They write reflections of major pieces and use those to write a "Letter to the Reader" as an introduction to their body of work. The ability to reflect on choices and growth is a useful skill and one the students find difficult but rewarding.

In thinking about genres in a social and cultural sense, I am seeing many possibilities for expanding the kinds of writing students do as assignments. I think finding genres that are authentic and real for students will engage them in the process and encourage greater ownership. Genres they are familiar with are often connected to technology or the Internet. I love the idea of genre cycles where several pieces are written from different angles and perspectives around a central theme, like the "job seeking" linear sequence Hyland discusses. I also like the idea of taking a "old standard," like our persuasive essay, and having students write a cycle of pieces that all use persuasion in various ways. I also think I could use this approach with our current assignment to help students find topics that are more personal and real to them, currently one of our biggest challenges.

Lastly, the Zemelman chapter highlighted many features of best writing practices that I knew and also brought attention to areas where I may have fallen into the traditional rut. Best practices I feel we implement currently are providing choice and including the whole writing process when working on pieces. Areas that I feel need improvement are providing more "real" or "authentic" avenues for writing, providing wider audiences for work than just classmates and parents, and helping students determine areas for improvement and revision versus following teacher-recommended changes.
I loved the example of the fairy tale genre cycle done with the third grade class at Hendricks Academy. Our students currently study and write a fable, but I could see how approaching the genre in this way

could give students a stronger sense of the essential qualities in a particular form. In a way it is "showing not telling." Rather than the teacher telling students what the qualities of a fairy tale, or in my case a fable, are, the students can help determine those qualities by repeated exposure and discussion of quality texts.

All in all, I think the idea of genre pedagogy is worthwhile and I find it very interesting. I like the way it helps students make connections to the world and see how writing can serve wide and varied purposes. I believe it has the potential to emphasize the true power of writing on a larger social scale.