Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Process in Writing about Literature

When teaching writing, English teachers have discovered a large range of strategies and activities for integrating students' personal knowledge and experience into writing assignments. In one sense the "content" for a great deal of our students' writing is their experiential knowledge. From accounts of our successes as chronicled in professional journals, it seems clear that as we have taught such writing we have learned a great deal about how students learn to integrate new ideas and experiences into their own thinking. In fact, our common sense and practical knowledge of how writing fosters thoughtful reflection and reformulation of what one knows has brought us to suggest to our colleagues in other subject areas that increased writing may lead to learning across the curriculum (Tchudi, 1986). Moreover, in this period of reform which has called for the development of students' higher-order thinking skills, English teachers, who understand the powerful and pervasive effects of the composing process, have been asked to make a significant contribution to the school reform environment.

As we, in the English classroom, contemplate our roles in reforming secondary education, we must also consider whether or not our own house is in order. For instance, when we shift our attention away from students' experiences to the experiences of reading literature we seem less secure about student ownership over the ideas for discussion and writing—we often become just as concerned as our colleagues in other subject areas about content coverage and about holding our students accountable for learning specific bits of information. Consider how we often plan our curriculum: personal writing tasks that call for the writer's interpretations of experience run alongside a very traditional, text-centered approach to literature that requires a single, correct interpretation. In our view, this represents a rather fundamental set of tensions in our dual roles as teachers of writing and as teachers of literature. Moreover, when we consider that process approaches are often employed as frameworks for writing about literature within a tradition of teaching students about their cultural heritage, it becomes clear that we have not thought deeply about the curricular relationships between writing instruction and reading literature. For instance, "interpretation" has a very different meaning when we assign writing to aid students in developing their own understanding of a literary text compared to occasions when we use writing to test recall of knowledge about literary themes and authors.

These were some of our concerns when we studied how three secondary school English teachers teach writing about literature, and when we worked collaboratively with the teachers to develop writing-to-learn strategies to support their instructional goals in teaching literature (Newell, MacAdam, & Spears-Bunton, 1987). We would like here to extract some of the more compelling issues that evolved from the study. Specifically, we want to explore how the teachers interpreted their experiences, including both successes and disappointments, with implementing strategies that we assumed might deepen their students' literary understanding. As we will see, this way of interrelating writing and reading represents English teachers with a range of troubling dilemmas, and more, points to some rather subtle yet complex problems for our profession to solve.

Recognizing the Need to Integrate Writing Process and Literary Understanding

What proof, if any, do we have that our current conceptualizations of writing about literature may be fundamentally flawed? Perhaps the most extensive piece of evidence comes from the National Assessment of Educational Progress report entitled Reading, Thinking, and Writing (1981). After evaluating the quality of students' written responses to literature,
the authors of the report concluded “that students in all age groups (nine, thirteen, seventeen) might not be getting opportunities to engage in extended discourse that teaches them to explain and substantiate their inferences in the most basic ways” (p. 24). In other words, the reading and writing tasks we assign often do not require our students to think deeply and critically enough.

On the one hand, this finding is startling in light of the fact that, as English teachers, many of us were first attracted to the profession through our literary studies and through our own discoveries of how writing about literature can lead to deeper understanding of our literary experiences. On the other hand, as a profession, we have always struggled with the question of how the components of the English curriculum fit together. This seems particularly true of how we have employed writing in the service of literature instruction—to test knowledge about literature and to teach analytic skills; and how we have employed literature in the service of writing—as content for practicing writing techniques and as models of “good” text. These reading and writing relationships are not necessarily inappropriate. But, to a large extent, we have ignored the heuristic effects of writing in understanding literature.

A process orientation, with its focus on meaning construction activities, seems to have an affinity with the notion of writing as a way of reasoning and learning. Both assume an active writer who must integrate and reformulate ideas as the process unfolds. In this sense, learning is tentative and constructive rather than hurried and reproductive. Perhaps most important, a process-oriented view of writing seems most useful as a way to integrate scholarly positions on how learning occurs, including literary understanding (Rosenblatt, 1978), with the realities of the classroom. For example, given the restricted opportunities students have to make extended oral contributions during literary discussions, writing can become a powerful vehicle for initiating a personal response, receiving feedback from an interpretive community, and reformulating that response for a more public evaluation of interpretation.

Because English teachers have used a process approach to writing instruction, we might assume that the application of this methodology to the study of literature is rather simple and direct. However, as teachers, we know that many factors, including our previous successes and failures, influence how we adapt new strategies into our teaching repertoires. Furthermore, while we might understand writing as a process, teaching literature as a process poses new challenges. To what extent do we allow for students’ interpretations when their arguments differ from our expectations? How do we respond to their arguments when they seem to overlook major aspects of the text or when they are unaware of the critical interpretations that inform our own responses? These questions become especially problematic when we have limited time and energy to reflect on them and then to act on the basis of reflection.

As we begin to build new agendas around the notion of the integration of writing and literature, knowledge of teachers’ central concerns and the conditions they encounter in school settings will become most critical if we are to be effective in changing our present assumptions concerning the relationships between writing pedagogy and the reading of literature.

The Study

Literary theorists such as Rosenblatt (1978) and Fish (1980) have marshalled strong arguments for viewing literary understanding as an evolution from what readers have personally lived through during their reading to what they take from testing their initial hypotheses within an interpretive community. Writing about those interpretations may contribute to this process of coming to terms with literary texts. Yet questions remain: Is there a place for writing as an exploration into whatever the text may hold for our students? To what extent can we apply what we have learned about the heuristic powers of writing to foster learning in literature classrooms?

As we began our study we realized that because of factors in teaching, such as limited time for writing, concerns for coverage of literary works, and lack of experience with and knowledge about using writing to aid literary understanding, teachers might resist such a change. By “resist” we are referring to discrepancies between theoretical views of writing and learning and the practical knowledge teachers have about curriculum, about students, and about the demands of school systems and testing. As Swanson-Owens points out, discrepancies do not mean instructional errors by teachers, but “places where the implementation process runs the risk of breaking down” (1986, p. 72).

During our five-month study we collected data in three overlapping stages. During stage one, we interviewed the teachers about their concerns with teaching writing and literature, about the writing tasks they assigned to coincide with literature instruction, and about the organization of their curriculums. During the second stage we observed one of their classrooms about once a week for several months and the teachers kept teaching logs to record when, how, and why they used writing with literature. Finally, for a period of two months, we conducted planning meetings with the teachers focusing on their instructional goals and how writing-to-learn strategies might be used to further those goals. This required us to work collaboratively with the teachers, drawing on their experiences with teaching and our theoretical and practical sense of the role of writing-to-learn instruction. The final stage of the project proved to be most interesting for

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what we learned about how teachers interpret theory and its role in shaping practice.

The Teachers’ Concerns

During the interview sessions, the three teachers revealed strong beliefs about the value of literature, but their beliefs took three different forms. Joan Cummings, an eleventh grade Advanced Placement teacher, subscribed to the notion that literature was to be studied as a body of knowledge about “the most important ideas and knowledge of our civilization.” Liz Bennett, who taught ninth-grade English in an inner city junior high school, wanted to make sure that her students received “at least one more chance to read and enjoy literature and to use literature to understand their own lives.” Mark Swenson, who asked us to focus our observations on his academic-level tenth graders, had read about Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading literature. Largely of his own volition, he had begun to “do what I can do to make that (esthetic reading) possible for the students, even if it seems impossible at times.” Given these three varying attitudes and beliefs about literary education, the teachers employed our suggestions for writing and reasoning about literature in different ways. We found the teachers to be sincerely concerned about their students’ responses, but at times unwilling or unable to use those responses to aid understanding of the texts they introduced in the classrooms.

Understanding Teachers’ Implementation Processes

To explore how and why the teachers might implement our teaching suggestions, our interviews with them also examined their perceptions of the role of the writing process approach in fostering their students’ thinking and reasoning about the literature in their curriculums. Cummings, who felt compelled to prepare her advanced placement students for the “AP” tests in literary interpretation, was quite poignantly in downplaying the role of process strategies in her pedagogy.

I don’t stress writing process all the way through. I put a model of the process on the board at the beginning (of the school year) and that’s it. Process takes time, and I have lots to cover. It’s not worth the time to keep fussing about it with these (advanced) kids.

Within Cummings’ academic approach to literature, with its emphasis on close textual analysis and broad coverage of the literary canon, a process approach seems inappropriate. She perceived her primary role as instructing students on strategies for “getting it all down and in correct form and content immediately rather than waiting for inspiration.” From Cummings’ perspective our writing-to-learn strategies simply delayed what her students could do or, in any case, should do immediately. “Writing, if it’s free, free-focused, or otherwise, just leads the kids astray. They have to get a point right away or they just don’t make the grade.” While we wondered whether or not Cummings’ students were honestly and personally confronting the texts she assigned, her objections to our suggestions seem logical and consistent in light of her instructional goals.

On the other hand, Bennett and Swenson were more open to the use of writing process strategies as part of literary study. Both teachers were skeptical of close textual analysis to begin with, regardless of their students’ academic achievements. Swenson remarked that “literature is not a subject matter. It’s people writing about experiences they want to share with other people.” Bennett’s resistance to what she described as a “professor’s view of literature rather than kids” was clearly articulated when she admitted that, “Even if I did assign lit. crit. papers, and even if the kids did them okay, what would that mean to them...and to me?” She saw literature as a point of departure for establishing a context for her students to talk about their lives. In fact, we often observed lessons in which literature was treated exclusively as an opportunity for students to write about their own experiences rather than as artistic explorations of experience in its own right.

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Beyond simply describing the teachers’ definitions of literature and writing and examining the bases of their beliefs, we also observed their implementation of writing tasks as part of literature instruction. While we noted vast differences in the beliefs of Cummings and the other two teachers, we also recognized that the most process-oriented teachers suffered to some degree the constraints of tradition and the conditions of their instruction. Simply put, we found the teachers to be sincerely concerned about their students’ responses, but at times unwilling or unable to use those responses to aid understanding of the texts they introduced in the classrooms.

Swenson, who experimented willingly with writing to encourage students’ interpretations, admitted that “objective” tests were necessary to evaluate whether the students “really got it or still were just thinking about it.” A discussion of his testing strategies revealed a separation between objective test items to measure knowledge about literature, such as authors, themes, and characters, and essay questions to examine his
students’ understanding of specific works. Both Bennett and Swenson distinguished between personal writing tasks to interest and encourage students in the study of literature and more formal tasks which had to be teacher-controlled “if students are going to survive academically.” In the final analysis, even Bennett and Swenson felt that the writing their students produced as a result of our exploratory strategies was inadequate as an indicator of literary understanding as institutionalized by their schools. This feeling was particularly acute when they considered the disadvantages their students might face in other classrooms with other “more academically oriented teachers.” Quite often in our discussions, Swenson and Bennett expressed concern that a language and learning orientation requires a great deal of time—“time we often don’t have when there’s so much at stake.”

Some Implications for the Role of Writing in Literary Education

Let us return to the major issues with which we began this discussion, specifically, how recent developments in process-oriented writing instruction may coincide with changing concerns for literature instruction, and, concomitantly, how new conceptions of literary response might inform our attempts to teach writing about literature. Finally, we will discuss some of the complexities underlying teacher change that emerged from our project.

English teachers have willingly and quite ably accepted the responsibility to develop a set of curricular relationships between writing and literature. The roots of these relationships began with our earliest attempts to define English as a subject area for the schools and continue to run deeply into our definitions of “English” (Applebee, 1974). However, the traditions often arose from the work and experiences of academics rather than observations of how students learn. Consequently, teachers told students about “the meaning” of the text, and, in turn, students wrote formal papers to report what they were told. But now recent discussions of constructive, meaning-making processes of reading and writing pose significant arguments for considering not only what we, as teachers of literature or literary critics say about texts, but also our students’ role in shaping and defending their own literary interpretations. If we are willing to take seriously what we have garnered from our student-centered, process-oriented writing instruction, we may need to transform, or at least modify, our traditional, text-centered approaches to literature. To do so requires us to consider what we value about literature and about our students’ literary response, and to develop a pedagogy in line with those concerns.

Perhaps most salient in both our talks with the three teachers and our observations of their classrooms were the differing notions of literary understanding. If we plot teachers’ notions of what counts as knowing literature in a school context on a continuum, we might place knowing about literature (au-

thors, literary periods, themes, and characters) on one end and knowing how to comprehend literary texts on the other. Where teachers’ beliefs fall on the continuum shapes, to a large degree, how writing and reading might be integrated in their teaching. For instance, because Cummings saw literature as a body of knowledge to be learned, writing became an assessment tool assigned only at the end of presentations of her accumulated knowledge concerning the texts under study. Swenson, on the other hand, used writing as an extension of the explorations that began in class with reading and talking about literature. Rather than considering whether a process orientation is appropriate for teaching literature, the more fundamental issue is what teachers consider to be important about literary education and how writing tasks might support those beliefs.

Swenson’s concern for evaluating and testing his students’ literary knowledge raises a related issue—is it appropriate to distinguish knowledge about literature from our concern for aiding students’ comprehension of literary discourse? Perhaps we do better to integrate the two. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that, as teachers, our focus must be on literary understanding, that is, the extent to which students clarify and enrich their experiences with literary texts. In this context, information about themes, historical background, and literary techniques become relevant as tools for interpretation. For example, to explain how we understand a work and how its language has shaped our responses, terms such as “flat” and “round” characters or “plot” and “subplot” become concepts for reasoning about our readings, and then, in turn, for communicating our interpretations to an interested audience. Again the focus must be on students’ active construction of meaning rather than passive recitation of information about literature that often fills our objective tests. In this sense, knowledge has a very different role in literature classes than in other subject areas. Literary knowledge is a dynamic process of integrating the experience documented in the text with the reader’s own knowledge and experience. Furthermore, writing seems most useful in both fostering and evaluating the quality of the transactions between reader and text.

Finally, as we consider teacher change, we must understand the nature of institutional and professional constraints they encounter. While all three teachers in our study had acquired
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good reputations as effective teachers, Cummings, whose work had been distinguished by her district's teacher of the year award, received considerably more support for her teaching—little wonder that she resisted our recommendations for change in her use of writing. During our project, Swenson and Bennett, on the other hand, often reported that they were glad to have an opportunity to consider how they taught writing and literature, but they were also frustrated by their belief that their attempts at change would ultimately make little difference to their students and many of their colleagues. Moreover, they were aware that as their students moved on to the next grade level, the teachers might complain about their new students' lack of knowledge of what they considered the "basics" of literature. As Swenson pointed out, "Every year I hear things like, 'I don't believe my students still don't know the difference between a metaphor and a simile.'" His concern was that this type of knowledge trivializes the experience of reading literature in which he and his students had invested so much time and effort. We are again reminded of the need for well-organized and well-supported efforts of teachers, administrators, and parents if teacher change is to be genuine and lasting. In Swenson's judgment, what he accomplished as an individual teacher seemed lost in the larger scheme of what his colleagues believed to be important.

Perhaps most disturbing was the teachers' lack of professional knowledge of the new conceptualizations of reading and writing. At the time of the study, Cummings and Swenson held master's degrees and Bennett was midway through her course work for such a degree. While all three had taken a seminar in literature instruction, they reported little or no previous course work in either writing or literature pedagogy. Furthermore, their perception of their course work in literature was that it focused mainly on "accumulating facts and information about literature, not how people learn to read it." Obviously, universities have to share the responsibility for improving literature instruction, but this will not be easy given the traditions that have given shape to the structure of English as a discipline (Scholes, 1985).

Much of what I have proposed here is not new. The arguments about the use of writing to enhance learning and the difficulties of teacher change are well known to teachers affiliated with the National Writing Project. What we seem to have overlooked, however, is that when teaching writing, we have allowed students' ownership of their own experiences, but when teaching literature and writing about literature, we have been less inclined to do so. Often the literary analyses we assign demand a final, published product rather than a more tentative statement to begin with, and then, later, a clarification of literary response. Our point in this discussion is simply that, as we turn to concerns with literary education, we cannot ignore the compelling evidence that we have garnered from our research and from our classroom experiences concerning the role of the writing process in fostering learning that is ongoing and cumulative, and the central role of student ownership in that process. Furthermore, understanding and responding to the need to reform our own teaching using sound principles makes us even more worthy and able leaders in the larger effort to reform schooling.

References


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