REAL WORLD MEETS WRITING PROCESS

A Successful Workplace Writing Program for High School Students

For the past two summers, in addition to running Writing Project Summer Institutes for teachers, Boston Writing Project Co-director Denise Burden and I have taught in a workplace writing program for high school students. Sponsored jointly by the New England Life Insurance Company and Boston’s Private Industry Council, the program places twenty-five tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students and recent graduates of Boston’s Jeremiah Burke High School in summer jobs at New England Life. As part of their work experience, the students receive one-and-one-half hours of writing instruction every Monday through Thursday afternoons for four weeks.

Planning the Program

The program has been in existence for a number of years. However two years ago representatives of the Burke and New England Life contacted the BWP and asked us to revise the curriculum for the program and to serve as instructors on a pilot basis. Denise and I agreed because we saw this as an opportunity to work on the border between the urban high school classroom and the “real world” of work, the world for which the high school curriculum was preparing students.

Denise and I were well aware that writing instruction in high schools, particularly in urban high schools, has been repeatedly criticized in recent years. We were also aware that the business community in major American cities has begun to look seriously at projections for the labor force for the next ten to fifteen years and to wonder not only where the next generation of workers is going to come from, but how well their high school education will prepare them to perform the more complex jobs that large companies increasingly require. Thus school-business coalitions are arising in major cities throughout the country, based on the common realization that a strong school system benefits the whole community, particularly major employers. There is also a common concern that the quality of education high school students are currently receiving needs improvement, particularly in basic communication skills.

Reviewing the existing curriculum with the high school and business partners, we found that the program’s basic approach was a very sound one, based on their stated belief that “writing frequently and in a variety of modes will improve students’ abilities to express themselves and to communicate more effectively.” During discussion, we asked both partners to identify specific instructional areas which they thought were important, and also asked them why they felt the program needed changing.

In response to the first question, they stressed the importance of “real world” types of writing, which they defined as memos, business letters, note taking, outlining, and descriptions of “how to” processes such as answering the telephone and changing a typewriter ribbon. In addition, the high school partner wanted students to receive summer instruction which would reinforce traditional academic skills in modes such as narrative and persuasive essays, autobiography and biography, critical analysis, and personal goals statements for college applications.

In response to the second question, dissatisfaction centered in two main areas: 1) though the ambitious curriculum looked good on paper, there were real difficulties in getting students to take the course seriously and to do any substantive amount of writing during the four week summer program; thus there was a big gap between what they were trying to cover and what actually was covered in the course; 2) there seemed to be little relationship between the two types of writing assignments, “real world” writing dictated by the perceived demands of the workplace and “school writing” dictated by the Boston Public Schools curriculum guide. Students had voiced the complaint that there was no connection between their summer job and their writing course, and the program planners from the Burke and New England Life were also concerned that the course was trying to bring together two different worlds: autobiography, persuasive essays, and critical analysis on the one hand, phone messages and “how to” descriptions on the other.

Denise and I felt that the overall goals of the curriculum were good ones, particularly the emphasis on frequent and varied writing, but we felt (continued on page 12)
that both the balance of assignments and specific activities needed to be changed in order to reach those goals. We felt particularly that any curriculum which did not begin by engaging students and helping them to achieve fluency was futile, and that with so much to cover and only four weeks to cover it, each writing activity had to serve multiple purposes within the overall design. We redesigned the curriculum to include personal narrative, daily journal writing, poetry, descriptive writing, culturally-based writing, and peer editing in combination with research, interviews, and writing assignments based on the on-the-job writing done by the students and their New England Life job-site supervisors.

Teaching the Program

We began the course by building a strong base of various types of personal writing. This insured that every student was able to achieve fluency and to begin becoming comfortable and confident as a writer. (Since Denise and I planned the course together and were in close touch throughout the four weeks, I will continue to use we to describe our activity. In terms of actual teaching, only one of us was present at a time: she taught the first two weeks of the course, I taught the second two.)

For the first two weeks, students wrote name poems, family stories, personal memories, letters, descriptions, culturally-based narratives, and daily journal entries. Since the class ranged from sixteen-year-old sophomores to nineteen-year-old college freshmen, personal writing allowed younger, less confident writers to start on an equal footing with older, more accomplished classmates. Since not every activity worked for every student, variety gave each student a chance to connect with at least one piece of writing. We collected the journals at the end of each week, made brief written responses over the weekend, and returned them at Monday's class. This allowed us to get acquainted with the students quickly and our responses proved to be a key element in unlocking fluency for a number of our students.

Making sure that everyone wrote was important, because we had decided that the class goal would be to produce a publication of our best work to be distributed both at the high school and at the company. We announced repeatedly from the first day of the course that each student would be expected to contribute at least one piece of work to this as-yet unnamed anthology, to be put together in class on the last day.

After fluency and confidence had begun to be established for most of the class through personal writing, we began some basic peer editing activities to help students identify and revise their best work (students continued to develop new pieces while they were editing old ones). At the same time, we began the process of bridging the perceived gap between "school writing" and "job writing" by asking our students to identify and describe types of writing they saw going on daily around them, or that they did themselves on the job. Our students' first list had twelve items: memos, letters, telephone messages, dictation, proposals, brochures, pamphlets, rules or policies, summaries, newsletter articles, lists, reports, evaluations.

After discussion, the students were asked to spend two days observing and noting on-the-job writing in the course of their workday. At the end of this period, every student was able to identify at least one type of writing; some identified four or five. Here is the second list the students came up with: agreements, abstracts, order forms, mail forms, statistics, routine plan services, preliminary reviews, logs, pension records, requisitions, name searches, word processing, group compliance, law bulletin, policy forms, schedules, files, audits, underwriting, monthly reports, e.m.b., purchase orders, speed letters, display writing, evaluations, technical writing, special product testing, surveys, video scripts.

We tallied up the totals and found that our class of twenty-five had compiled a list of forty-two separate types of writing going on daily or weekly within New England Life. Significantly, only three of those types had been previously identified by either the high school or the business partner as "real world" writing.

As second and third steps, students composed a brief cover letter and questionnaire, then conducted oral and written interviews of their job site supervisors, asking them about the importance of writing to the supervisor's job and its effect on chances for promotion. The letter read:

Dear Supervisor,

As you know, I've been involved in a writing program for the past few weeks here at New England Life. One of the requirements is a written interview of my Supervisor. I would appreciate it if you would take a few minutes to jot down a very short answer to each of these questions.

There were five questions:

- Does your job require any writing?
- If so, were you trained to do the necessary writing?
- Are good writing skills needed for someone in your position?
- Would better writing skills improve your chances for promotion?
- Do you think that New England Life should offer writing courses for its employees?
Supervisors were also asked to fill out a writing checklist indicating which of thirteen forms of writing they did on their job. They also had the option of answering four additional questions:

- Which type of on-the-job writing do you like best? Why?
- Which type of on-the-job writing do you like least? Why?
- What is the last piece of job-related writing you completed?
- Are you writing anything at work now? If so, what is it?

As a final step, a subcommittee of students collated the answers and made a report to the class. The data and observations collected by the students revealed that about sixty percent of the supervisors felt that writing skills were essential for entrance into the company, but over eighty-five percent felt that strong communications skills, particularly writing, were important to promotion and often separated those who rose in the company from those who did not.

The data and observations gathered by the students demonstrated clearly that both the high school’s and the company’s definitions of writing were narrow and limited compared to the amount and types of writing which actually took place daily on the job.

As a finale to these activities, student volunteers role-played good and bad job interviews, while the rest of the class wrote responses to each role play, noting specific good and bad techniques, plus things that happened during the interview that they didn’t expect, and did expect. This proved to be quite an effective use of “writing to learn” because it forced the observers to concentrate and pick out specific points, then to form questions based on their observations for the discussion which followed. It was much better than just having them watch, and then ask questions. The few minutes of structured writing after each interview made a world of difference in the quality of discussion.

Conclusions and Observations.

From our point of view, the writing-in-the-workplace activities were successful for several reasons:

- they provided students with an accurate, first-hand picture of both the range of writing taking place daily in a large company, and the importance assigned to that writing by the people who were doing it. They gave a kind of credibility to writing-in-the-workplace that was a major goal of the course and was totally absent in most available types of published curriculum material, particularly skills-workbook approaches which purport to teach “real-life” writing skills.
- they provided transactional writing opportunities that were linked to the students’ own job experiences and flowed naturally from the personal, expressive writing they had been doing.
- they gave students new understanding and increased motivation and confidence to pursue many types of writing tasks. After they understood how broad and complex the definition of “real” writing was, they saw that from the writer’s point of view, lines between “real” writing and “school” writing were largely artificial.

On the other hand, for our students the exciting thing was definitely the publication. Students competed to come up with a suitable name for the anthology, and after two days of discussion, debate, and voting, the winning title was “Emotions.” Their personal writing was what they wanted in the anthology, and the prospect of seeing their writing in print acted like a magnet drawing them through the revision and editing process. When we finally assembled it on the last day of class, complete with a hot pink cover with the word “emotions” in seven different type faces, they showed a fierce commitment to last-minute editing that showed how much they cared about “looking right” in print.

As a culminating activity, the booklet itself was passed out at the awards ceremony for the program, held in late August at the New England Life offices. The acknowledgement of their work by the principal of Jeremiah Burke High School and the supervisors and program director from New England Life put the finishing touch on the program.

Denise and I felt that both types of writing activity were essential to the success of the program: personally based, expressive writing that was shared in groups, and outer-directed, transactional writing based on research, surveys, and interviews. Because both were based in aspects of the students’ own experience, there was a real relationship between the two that was centered in the writing. Thus the redesigned program eliminated both of the chief difficulties with the old program, lack of interest and fluency, and a sense that two antithetical kinds of writing tasks were being forcibly married in the curriculum.

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