Choice in the Writing Class: How Do Students Decide What to Write and How to Write It?

by
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One night, as I was reading piles of portfolios at the end of fourth quarter, I started to comment to my husband about interesting trends I was noticing. For instance, far more males than females chose to write essays about contemporary social problems (such as environmental pollution, or gays in the military). While ninth graders wrote about the difficulty of finding a topic, this was almost never the topic choice of an older student. Intrigued, I wound up listing the topic of every paper I evaluated before I handed the portfolios back to the students. Out of the five or six papers they had written, they had chosen two to be considered for a grade. There were 196 different pieces of evaluated writing produced by 98 students, with equal numbers of males and females.

So this study of factors influencing choice of topic and form of discourse was not designed; it happened. At the end of my first year of using portfolios in the writing class and as a result of the evolution in my adaptation of this procedure, I found myself with data that called for analysis. I wondered why students made the choices they did and if there were any perceivable patterns in their choices.

Donald Graves (1975) monitored the topic choices of 69 seven-year-old children. His study found that boys wrote more about themes involving physical death, murder mysteries, war, fires and the activities of men and boys beyond home and school. Girls' writing centered on themes about the family, the classroom, and holidays. Their characters were less aggressive and more limited geographically and girls were more capable of writing objectively about themselves. I wondered if gender would play as strong a role in the choices of my high school students in 1993. I also wanted to find out if there were significant differences among the three different grade levels I taught in terms of the choices they made. Finally, I wondered what effect previous emphases in the curriculum had on students when they were free to select their own subject matter and form of discourse in the writing they did for their English class. I believe that these questions have important implications for curriculum design and for sensitivity to changing gender roles in our society.

During the 1992/93 school year I taught five high school English classes — two ninth grade, one eleventh, and two twelfth. The students attend a private, non-sectarian, bilingual (English-Spanish) pre-kindergarten to grade 12 school in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. While most students are Puerto Rican, a significant number come from the U.S. or from foreign countries because there is a large university in the community as well as several international companies. Most students are middle class economically and most parents have at least a high school education.
Many are college-educated. I mention these factors because they provide sociological background which must have played a part, at least indirectly, in the writing decisions made by my students.

One reason I decided to do this study was that I had recently read Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* (1987) and had been influenced by her enthusiasm for giving students choice in what they write; her approach coincided with my own belief in student-centered classes. I decided to devote most writing days to free choice topics. I reserved a couple of required assignments for each class such as "Introduction to Research." For the free choice writing, the general guidelines were: "You can write on any topic you like in any form you choose as long as it is not intended to be offensive or obscene." Students were advised not to write anything that they could not read aloud in class.

Most students welcomed the chance to write on what interested them. When some ninth graders protested that they would not be able to think of topics, I gave them the standard response: "Then write about not being able to think of a topic." As second semester progressed, the students became comfortable with the free choice procedure, and they trusted me to accept their decisions concerning what to write about and how to write it.

As I examined the wide-ranging list of topic choices in the fourth quarter portfolios, I looked for naturally occurring categories. Ultimately I decided on two sets of classifications, one for content and one for form of discourse. Each piece of writing was then categorized twice, first put into one of eight content categories:

- **Personal Experience**: Papers discussing events in the student's life;
- **Philosophical Questions**: Papers discussing questions of values and metaphysics;
- **Personal Relationships**: Papers dealing with relationships with close friends and family;
- **Contemporary Comment/World**: Papers discussing national and global problems;
- **Contemporary Comment/Daily Life**: Papers discussing problems close to the students' daily lives;
- **Action/Violence**: Adventure, crime and chase stories;
- **Opposite Sex/Love** and
- **About Writing**.

Then, each piece was categorized in terms of form of discourse: *Fiction, Poetry, Informative Essay, and Humorous Essay*.

Whenever any set of data is classified, there is a possibility of overlap, and judgment decisions must be made. For example, when I had to choose between putting a piece of writing into Personal Experience or Daily Life, I considered what I thought the author's intention to be. If he or she wanted to use a personal experience to illustrate a larger point made in a commentary about daily life, I put the piece in the Daily Life category. If the intent was simply to tell about an event that happened, then I put the piece in the Personal Experience category. So "Cafeteria Problems" went into the Contemporary Comment/Daily Life group because the writer was using this topic as an example of the trials of student life. On the other hand, "A Boring Class" was not discussing the problem of classes being boring; the paper simply described the experience of the author in sitting through one long dull class.

The categories are descriptions of what I found. I did not have a set of predetermined categories into which I fit the data. For instance, there is no drama in the "Forms of Discourse" because not one student chose a piece of writing in the dramatic form to be evaluated. Essay is divided into "informative" and "humorous" because it was apparent that many students set out to be funny not informative, and the comic approach controlled their choice of vocabulary, tone, and style.

An essay written on "Fear of Baldness" might, in some cases, be serious, but with phrases like "It's not death, it's not nuclear cataclysm, and no it's not reruns of The Love Boat," it clearly falls into the area of humor. There were no overtly persuasive essays, so that category does not appear.

**Topic Choice Related to Gender**

In terms of topic choice related to gender, several trends are apparent. However, we should remember that these conclusions are based only on the two papers per student which I evaluated.

Males wrote twice as many papers as females discussing philosophical questions such as the purpose of education, life after death, or analysis of evil (22.4% vs. 11.2%). Males were more than twice as likely to write about action or violence (8.2% vs. 3.1%), and they were also more likely to comment on world problems (10.2% vs. 6.1%).
Females wrote more than three times as many papers involving personal relationships as males did (21.4% vs. 6.1%), and they were somewhat more likely to write about personal experiences (27.6% vs. 21.4%), though this was a popular category for both genders. The genders wrote in more or less equal numbers about daily life occurrences (18.4% male vs. 17.3% female) and the opposite sex (11.2% for both). Only a small percentage of students of either gender (2%) chose papers About Writing to be evaluated, though this was a popular category for ninth graders in unevaluated papers.

Within the category of Personal Experience, 29% of the papers written by males concerned sports, compared with only 4% written by females. There were even two poems about basketball. Both boys and girls wrote about negative adventures such as muggings and car accidents and positive events such as parties and days at the beach.

While subjects like death, religion, education, and the purpose of life were discussed by both genders, males were more likely to challenge tradition and directly question the workings of religion and other institutions. One boy wrote a paper speculating on the existence of hell; another examined the ethics of both abortion and suicide. Girls tended to write about “desperate people,” or “spring rain,” or a “dried-up tree”—perhaps in an attempt to personalize or to speak metaphorically about philosophical issues. Chiseri-Strater (1986) found a similar tendency in examining the differences in choice of topics between men and women. The men in her study tended to write about abstract topics, whereas women were more likely to write about personal topics.

When talking about love and the opposite sex, both males and females wrote about ideal love and about rejection. Rejection was likely to be framed in a humorous, self-deprecating context. In “The Perfect Woman,” a boy pictured himself as always being rejected by beautiful women but continuing to see each new “perfect woman” as a fresh possibility. A girl wrote a response to his sad story in which she showed herself as always waiting to be asked to dance and thus being rejected by omission on the part of the guy looking for the perfect girl.

While many papers written by girls dealt with relationships involving family and close friends, this was an uncommon topic for boys. Males who did discuss personal relationships tended to stress the negative—“a bad day at home” or “family conflicts.”

Girls were not hesitant to write admiringly about their parents or to discuss close-friend relationships.

Males dominated the world commentary category, and the specific topics they chose were usually more broadly based than topics chosen by females (racial discrimination, the war in Bosnia, the future of NATO). Half of the six social commentary papers written by females dealt with sex or sexual abuse (loss of virginity/morals, abuse of Philippine women, priests and sexual abuse). The other three papers dealt with teenage suicide, the homeless, and the media. Again the females in the group tended to be concerned with more personal, closer-to-home issues than males did.

The preponderance of males in the Action/Violence category corresponds with results of a study of writing topics in grade one based on preference for animals. Olilla-Lloyd et. al. (1986) found that girls linked with animals that are weak, safe, and tame; while boys linked with animals that are strong, dangerous, or wild. Boys of high school age in the present study
wrote of gangsters, sharks, radioactive heroes, and vigilantes. The three girls who did choose violent subjects still remained personal as they wrote of rape or suicide or of a girl in a hospital who had been injured by girls in a gang. All three papers were written from the point of view of the victim, even in the case of the suicide where the bullet was pictured as the active agent of suicide.

**Topic and Form Choice Related to Grade**
While gender is associated with more differences in topic choice than grade level, there were a few areas where there were clear trends connected to age. The greatest number of the social commentary papers were written by twelfth grade males. Ninth grade males wrote a lot of papers concerning philosophical questions, and ninth grade females wrote the largest number of personal relationship papers. Ninth grade males accounted for most of the action/violence papers. The subject of college application was a common topic only for twelfth graders.

Form of discourse did not show the distinct patterns related to age or gender that topic choice did, but there were some areas of difference. Fiction was not as popular a form for twelfth graders as it was for ninth and eleventh graders, and poetry was more popular with the older students. Eleventh and twelfth graders made almost twice as many attempts at the humorous essay as ninth graders did. The informative essay was by far the most popular choice of form for all grade levels. There were no observed differences between males and females in terms of form of discourse.

**Conclusions and Questions**
The size of the sample group in this study was limited to 98 high school students from a select population (described earlier). My findings might not be replicated in a different sample group and are therefore only directly applicable to the group I studied. It would be interesting to compare results of similar studies conducted with different population groups in diverse settings. For the present I will comment on the patterns and trends apparent in the writing samples I received from my students in 1993.

Despite the sexual revolution, student topic choice in this private Puerto Rican high school revealed the same patterns uncovered in the Graves study done with seven-year-olds twenty years ago (1975). The old stereotypes of males being more comfortable with abstract thinking and of females being stronger in the interpersonal area are supported. It was surprising to me that so few girls, in comparison to the boys, chose to discuss large social issues (10.1% vs 6.2%) and philosophical questions (22.4% vs 11.2%). The predictable male preponderance to write about violence was borne out, (8.2% vs 3.1%), but only 2% of the papers written by twelfth graders (male or female) dealt with violent topics, so the fascination with violence decreased with age, at least in this group.

The data in this report suggest a number of questions. Should I simply accept male/female differences as entrenched, or should I try to adapt my teaching to lead boys to be more sensitive to the personal and near-at-hand? Boys as well as girls could talk about the emotions involved in leaving parents to go away to school or about the sensitive relationship with a grandparent. Should I encourage girls to be more abstract, more adventure-oriented, more risk-taking? Surely girls can discuss the war in Bosnia or the future of NATO. Should I invite students to write about the perceived interests or from the perceived point of view of the other gender, at least from time to time?

A health sciences teacher I know, in a sex education class, had the boys write on the adventures of the ovum on the way to being fertilized, while the girls wrote on the competitive exploits of the sperm. It was an instructive exercise. One of the ninth grade girls in the present group of students wrote a poem about rape from the point of view of the victim. Could a boy write such a poem? One of the boys captured the excitement of an athletic triumph. Surely girls can describe this kind of beauty. I do not think I can take away the stereotypical male/female responses; indeed, I do not want to do this. But perhaps I can encourage a widening of perceptions for both genders.

Next I looked at the forms of discourse. It is not surprising to me that the majority (55%) of students chose to write informative essays. The high school curriculum, especially outside the English class, generally treats this form of writing as most important. On the other hand, a significant portion of students (16%) in this sample chose to write poetry even though poetry had the same minimum length requirement as prose. Because they attend a pre-kindergarten to grade twelve school, many of the students had been in the
elementary level of this same school where the writing of poetry is begun at an early stage and is consistently treated positively at all levels of the curriculum.

Many dramatic oral exercises are part of the English curriculum in this high school. Students frequently act out parts in a play or make their own oral dramatizations of poetry or stories. However, little attention has been paid to extending dramatic activities into the written form. There are formal conventions connected with writing drama, and if students have not practiced these conventions, they may perceive the written dramatic form as tedious and difficult.

Many students attempted humor, possibly because their peers in editing groups appreciate this quality, so it is worth the considerable effort it takes to do comic writing. Thus their experience with sharing their writing with peers may have influenced the form in which they chose to write. If the teacher were their only audience, I believe they would have been less likely to be humorous, probably because the teacher is perceived as a grade-giver, not someone to entertain.

Without a specific cause to argue, it evidently did not occur to anyone to write a consciously persuasive essay. It would appear that effective persuasion is a skill which must be taught and practiced if I want my students to feel comfortable with it.

Certainly previous curriculum decisions had an effect on the choice of discourse form with these students. This curriculum has succeeded in giving students a sense of confidence about writing poetry. More attention should be paid to writing dialogue and using drama, not just fiction, to tell a story. The curriculum should also contain more instruction and practice in persuasive writing.

The element of choice in my writing classes proved to be liberating and motivating for both my students and me. Despite the fact that reading lots of portfolios in a short period of time remained difficult and time-consuming, the task was much less monotonous when everybody had a different topic, and some were writing stories, some poems, some essays, and still others were experimenting.

The taste of freedom engendered growth in the willingness of students to try new things. They became more open and adventurous in choosing topics as the process evolved. For example, one student wrote a story about a homosexual love triangle, and several wrote serious discussions of rape. A "C" student-athlete created a poem which beautifully captured the emotion and triumph of making an important free throw. A previously unmotivated ninth grader wrote a series of stories on deep sea diving, his real interest in life. A future "secretary of state" was able to explore political issues. A twelfth grader used her story about a nightmare to try to patch a rift among two groups of girls in her class. (She succeeded in bringing the problem to the surface and getting it talked about.) Students wrote responses to the writing of other students. I even received an unsolicited, detailed critique of my teaching style from a very confident ninth grader.

The choices the students made were also instructive in suggesting what they need to be taught. Next year I will continue to allow free choice in selection of topic and form, but I will also try to teach my students how to write dialogue and I'll experiment with finding controversial issues which they care about so that they can learn how to write persuasively. I'll find ways to encourage students to write from the viewpoint of the other gender. Perhaps at times I'll specify a form but leave the topic free, and at other times I'll specify a topic but leave the choice of form up to the student. As with most things, a balance is probably the optimum approach. Free choice leads to the discovery of when not to allow free choice. Pattern leads to monotony which leads to non-pattern which leads to some of the delightful surprises I have found upon opening my students' free choice portfolios this year. I look forward to more surprises. And finally, I'm going to continue to work on my procedural design in the use of portfolios. I still need to find a way to stagger the final evaluative reading of the portfolios so that my workload is not so overwhelming at the end of each quarter. If I solve that problem, I'll probably choose to write an article about it; then again, maybe I'll write a poem.

References

Choice in the Writing Class

continued from page 11


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