

Writing Across the Hidden Curriculum

In this essay, William Strong introduces us to Kim, a teacher education student and a “poster child” victim of—as well as facilitator for—the “hidden curriculum.” This curriculum, according to Strong, is an unstated collection of assumptions, such as “Writing in school is something you do to get a grade,” that is shared by many teachers and students. Strong argues that teachers who adopt writing-to-learn strategies “will discover a powerful antidote to the mind-numbing effects of writing’s hidden curriculum.”

WILLIAM STRONG

First we shape our institutions, and then they shape us.—Winston Churchill

It's just before class, with my teacher education students shuffling toward their desks, when Kim corners me. Her voice has a nervous edge as she asks whether last week's literacy autobiographies have been corrected.

“Well, yes and no,” I reply. “The essays are coming back today, but, no, I don't think I've been correcting them.”

“Isn't that your job?”

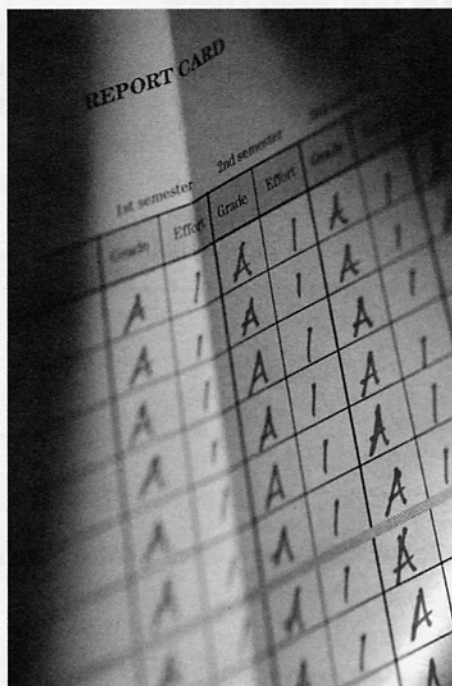
I shrug. “I try to respond to what you've said and how you've said it because I see honest response as part of good teaching. But merely correcting a paper you won't revise is a little like manicuring a corpse. What's the point?”

Kim looks perplexed. “So what did I get?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, like gradewise.”

“Well, that depends.”



“On what?” Kim asks.

“On whether you decide to work on your paper some more. That's up to you. We're writing to learn, but also writing to communicate. So you decide whether you've written what you intended as

effectively as you can.” I pause to lighten things up. “Of course, there's no extra charge if you'd like to talk it over.”

Kim shifts her weight and doesn't smile. “But I thought I was done.”

I pull up my Paul Valery quote: “Writing is never finished, only abandoned.”

“Hmmm.” She knits her brow.

“You know, with luck, some of your students will use revision to explore and develop their ideas. For others, getting by will be the goal.”

“Look, all I want is a good grade out of this class.”

“I understand that. But you can also learn in the process.”

“I don't get it,” Kim says.

“Okay, first read my responses and then ask yourself whether you agree with my ideas—and whether my suggestions might help your text. Fair enough?”

“In other words, I have to do more work on it.”

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"That's really up to you—seriously."

"What's the point?"

"My job is to make sure you assess your own writing and get your money's worth for your hard-earned tuition."

"Uh-huh, sure."

"The idea is to write for insight."

"I really don't get it," she says again.

Resistance to Writing

Kim may seem like an extreme example of the teacher education student who doesn't "get it" in lots of ways. But she (or he) does inhabit preservice and inservice classes all across the land, even those that use writing as a tool for learning—a means of making knowledge personal, connected, and accessible to self—as well as a tool for communicating with others.

The point of my literacy autobiography assignment was to prompt reflection, but Kim didn't like the idea that writing could make her an open book, one that others might read. She resisted writing-to-learn activities and had plenty of questions as we got into the actual drafting and revising work: How long does it have to be? Why write about your experience if you already know what it is? Do spelling and punctuation count? Why waste time in response groups? Yet, despite her foot-dragging, Kim could also be deference personified, the archetypal brown-noser. Laughing loudly at my lame jokes, she mouthed platitudes to deflect attention from her limited grasp of topics at hand. For these and other reasons, I had trouble picturing her as a knowledgeable and dynamic teacher, one I'd want working with my own children.

I read her paper with interest. Aside from its technical flaws, the writing was

detached and cool, describing with smugness how she'd eased through secondary schools without writing a single essay. Her strategy was to trade math skills for the writing talents of others. She'd dictate a few key points to friends, who'd do "the dirty work" that she'd recopy or download. When it came to reports and term papers, the issue for Kim was not so much ethics as efficacy, a division of labor. Through cunning, she suggested, it was easy to "beat the system." Fakery made sense because it reduced the workload. "So who wrote *this* paper?" I asked in the margin, forcing a smile.

The Game of School

Kim's cynicism was a pebble in my shoe. She seemed to view all teachers (me included) as faceless functionaries in a long, weary line of grade dispensers—persons who held up hoops for her on-cue jumping. Also, she seemed to regard schooling as a game, the goal being to outwit those in positions of authority. Left unanswered was the question of why—given her core beliefs about the fraudulent nature of the enterprise—she'd even *want* to teach—or how she'd treat learners in her own classroom.

In papers written by Kim's colleagues, I was reminded that grades really matter. Some described being sacrificed on the bloodstained altar of grammatical correctness by insensitive, sadistic teachers. Others lamented how they hadn't gotten top grades, despite having worked "really hard" on writing, even spending time in the library. I nodded sympathetically but began to wonder about grade inflation fueled by student expectations. Ironically, many of the student-as-victim complaints were compromised by stumbles in expression. To assist development, I gave advice on conventions and

encouraged writers to smooth out the language before submitting a final draft.

But Kim was unique in the richly detailed perversity of her attitudes. She saw efforts to invite personal meaning-making as "bogus." She saw writing-to-learn activities as ways to keep kids in line, a kind of no-nonsense behavior management tool. She saw grades as "the whole point of school, the only reason students show up." As I later heard her voice these ideas in my office, her expectations about teacher and student roles also became clear. The teacher's task was simply to assign, correct, and grade writing; and the student's job was to "psyche out" the teacher and write to specifications. She wanted me to lead in certain traditional ways so that she could follow in others.

Reviewing my comments and suggestions, it amazed and unsettled Kim that her grade might be open-ended, with opportunities for revision extended over time, or that I might raise questions or discuss alternatives but not tell her what to do. Most of all, being asked to use the "I" pronoun and think on her own prompted anxiety. Her coping strategy was to ask, over and over, "Is this good enough? So what do you want?"

The Hidden Curriculum of Writing

As I now work with teachers in the schools, I'm forced to conclude that Kim and students like her are products of a kind of hidden curriculum of writing, one that she had learned well and that many students act upon every day. This curriculum isn't found in national standards, in state frameworks, or in colorful scope-and-sequence charts. Rather, it is a curriculum of outcomes, and it results from the way we use (or abuse) writing in middle schools and high schools. Ask

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yourself—or your students—whether these statements ring true.

1. Writing in school is something you do to get a grade; school is something you do to get a diploma or certificate.
2. The main purpose of writing in school is to tell the teacher what the teacher already knows, not to explore a topic or idea.
3. A second main purpose of school writing is to provide diversionary busywork (or “time filler”) so that the class is occupied.
4. A third main purpose of school writing is to serve as a management threat to students or as actual punishment for misbehavior.
5. The central intellectual activity in school writing is to guess what the teacher wants, not to figure out what’s worth saying or how to say it most effectively.
6. Information about required length is essential in school writing in order for you to pad appropriately or to minimize the possibility of doing extra work.
7. Successful school writing takes no chances with ideas, thereby avoiding the risk of saying something interesting, important, or thought-provoking.
8. Good school writing uses a stilted, objective, and artificial voice—preferably heavy with ponderous words and vague abstractions.
9. The best school writing uses a safe, conventional approach (short sentences, formula paragraphs, and mindless banalities) so that errors are minimized.
10. Any type of personal writing (or writing on which one claims to have

worked hard) automatically deserves a high grade, regardless of its other features.

11. Features of writing such as intelligence, quality of development, clarity, and logical support are merely the “subjective opinions” of the teacher.
12. Feedback from the teacher (responses, suggestions, questions) are really corrections in disguise, and their purpose is to justify the grade.

Of course, the *official* goals for writing are quite different from those above. We use jargon like “assessing comprehension” and “developing critical thinking” to explain instructional uses of writing. But despite our noble aims, the hidden curriculum of writing often gets taught in subtle and powerful ways—for example, when students are routinely assigned low-level worksheets, when objective exams are the assessments of choice, and when misbehaving students are given written reports as punishment.

Roots of the Hidden Curriculum

I want to be clear at the outset that my purpose in describing Kim is not to “blame the victim” as so often happens in discussions of classroom practice. Instead, I use this real case-in-point to ask why so many secondary teachers continue to view writing as a tool for testing and class control rather than as a means of learning.

Let’s begin with the obvious. Some academic writing *is* a test, and skill in passing tests has great utility. The stakes are high—for students, teachers, and administrators—in today’s tense environment of performance standards. None of this is likely to change any time soon. Recognizing that students need to be savvy about essay exams, many of us teach

to the test with the best of intentions, advising students to use five-paragraph formats. Of course, if we restrict writing to such scaffolds—and insist that students always “keep it simple”—we may also communicate a darker message: that form matters more than content and that school writing aims to prove to some dim-witted reader that one can make three perfunctory points framed by an introduction and conclusion.

Further, if we’re honest with ourselves, we’ll probably confess that we too have been well-schooled in the hidden curriculum. As learners, haven’t we all asked the “what-do-you-want” question? Yes, there may be differences between our middle school geography report copied from an encyclopedia and Kim’s paper on capital punishment downloaded from the Internet for English 1A, but was either of us really writing to learn? How about the essay exam we wrote without doing the required reading? Or the patchwork of quotations that was dutifully submitted when a college paper came due? Indeed, Kim may remind us of ourselves not so long ago—reluctant to confront our ignorance and uncertain about our skills. Discovering ideas may be exciting, but it can also be intimidating.

A hidden curriculum refers to messages that students read “between the lines.” Take grading practices. As in the past, most teachers use tests instrumentally—that is, as tools to motivate reading or to prompt the learning of skills and content. And many of us—though we won’t admit to it publicly—continue to use quizzes, tests, and other academic work to control or manage student behavior. For example, when students act out or become unruly, they may get extra homework or busywork (such as preparing a 500-word

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report or looking up definitions). The teacher couples an aversive aspect of schooling with the threat of a low grade to force misbehaving kids to “shape up.”

After such lessons, we shouldn’t be surprised when learners develop bad attitudes toward writing or vocabulary learning. Students are not stupid, and punishing activities are ones they’ll long remember.

In secondary school culture, and also in the culture at large, we think of grades as a given condition, a little like the air we breathe. Grades *matter*—whether we are students, teachers, parents, or coaches worried about player eligibility. Like Kim, we may act as if grades are “the whole point of school, the only reason students show up,” even as we disassociate ourselves from her cynical perspective. We may not be certain about what grades represent or whether they bear any connection to learning, but we still regard them as the mortar of Western civilization. The idea that *all* writing gets a grade—and that one writes mainly to get a grade—comes from our shared experience in school. We understand, as students, that learning requires risks, and that risks lead to mistakes, and that mistakes often result in low grades. So, we learn to play it safe. The grades that follow writing bring elation or anguish, relief or resentment, indifference or confusion. But these powerful emotions are tangential to our learning, which occurs—if it occurs at all—during writing.

From this analysis, one conclusion seems inescapable—that grades often interfere with our efforts to use writing as a tool for learning. Why? Because learners focus on “psychoing out the teacher” and “writing to

specifications,” as Kim put it; and because teachers focus on grading the mountainous stacks of student work instead of merely sampling the texts for evidence of

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learning—feedback that might inform tomorrow’s instruction.

Thus, our traditional ideas about grading deliver a double whammy to writing-to-learn activities. If the teacher is the sole audience—and if students view writing only in terms of grades—they’ll tend to adopt strategies of pleasing the teacher and playing it safe rather than exploring ideas, raising questions, and making personal connections. Moreover, if teachers see their job as grading all the scraps of writing produced by all classes—an onerous task, to be sure—they won’t assign any writing-to-learn activities. Here is Strong’s First Law: If the amount kids write is limited by what teachers have time to grade, there’s no way they’ll write enough to learn curriculum content.

Clearly, the hidden curriculum of writing shapes behavior. For Kim, it meant a single-minded fixation on grades and an unwillingness (or inability) to think on her own. Because she had never used a journal or learning log to think about subject matter, her reasoning skills were impoverished; and because she’d never written for purposes other than a grade, her strategies for self-awareness and self-discovery were almost nonexistent. Closed

and fearful—and crippled by writing anxiety and her conception of teacher and student roles—she seemed profoundly disadvantaged as both a learner and future teacher.

As my poster child for fakery, Kim personifies the insidious effects of writing’s hidden curriculum. At the root of such pathology, I believe, are adversarial roles for teacher and student.

School is seen as a game, and the score is kept with grades. Fakery is valued and personal insight devalued. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Writing Without Grades

I’m now certain that Kim had too few teachers like my good friend Bob Tierney, a legendary biology teacher and coach from the San Francisco Bay Area who was a kind of bomb thrower in the guerilla war against the hidden curriculum. “When you get a teaching certificate,” Bob liked to say, “you get an unlimited supply of points.”

Writing to learn was a continual, ongoing activity in Bob’s classes. Kids used drawing and writing to put biology concepts into terms that made personal sense, then *shared* these notes during small group discussions and labs—in effect, teaching one another through high-engagement activities. Most of them loved learning in this way. Yes, they got points—lots and lots of points—for their participation; but, no, Bob didn’t grade the writing. His aim, in a nutshell, was to make learning a discovery experience. As students made discoveries about biology, Bob made discoveries about how to assist their learning. For example, he pulled questions from their learning logs to

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focus his follow-up teaching. This dialogue generated additional writing.

Bob's basic strategy was to outsmart his students. Their overarching goal, he knew, was to get him doing all the intellectual work while they doodled on the backs of notebooks. One tried-and-true way to accommodate the student agenda was to first assign biology homework and then—when they didn't do it—tell kids what they should have learned. So Bob sometimes took a different approach. He let the students interrogate him. And just for the fun of it, he often gave obviously wrong answers.

"That isn't right!" his students would say, scrambling for their books.

"What do you know!" Bob would have to concede. "I stand corrected again."

Bob used writing-to-learn strategies in all kinds of ways—to open class, to explore concepts during class, to summarize learning at the end of class, and to anticipate reading for tomorrow's class. Students often swapped papers and responded in dialogue fashion to each other's ideas. All of this written work was ungraded, but points did provide an incentive for staying on task. Each check mark in his grade book was worth a set amount—say, ten points—but Bob would sometimes offer double points for special learning log activities—or even, on rare occasions, triple points.

"No kidding?" Bob's students would ask. "Triple points?"

"This is important material," Bob would reply.

"Wow—triple points!"

As a management strategy, Bob had students keep their spiral-bound learning logs in the classroom, using separate color-coded boxes for each class. At the end of a period, kids didn't close their notebooks but instead left them folded open to the current day's work and

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deposited them in the box. Each log entry had the date and the student's name at the top. Of course, having the logs already open saved Bob time. He could "check" a stack in minutes. And he could use "sticky notes" to flag entries of special interest, ones he wanted to use as a bridge to follow-up teaching. The logs offered Bob a window on each student's knowledge construction site.

As you may already have guessed, the brighter kids in Bob's classes were the first to see that points mattered little when everybody had amassed roughly the same total number, all earned through active participation. But by then it was too late since they had already been hooked into the fun of writing to learn. What they had learned about biology truly *felt* good—and this showed up in end-of-semester assessments. Generally speaking, writing-to-learn activities enabled students to better understand concepts, and this understanding made the material more memorable.

But although the anecdotal evidence was compelling, Bob wanted proof that writing was having positive effects on

student learning. In an action research study with matched groups of kids, he tested the writing-to-learn method against traditional methods of instruction and found that, as a group, students who wrote regularly learned every bit as much as their control group counterparts—but, in addition, retained what they had learned in delayed posttests of biology content.

Bob's study, published by the National Writing Project, has helped many skeptics see the instructional potential of writing. His work reminds us of the root sense of the

word *education*—"drawing out" student understanding—in contrast with hidden curriculum's emphasis on "stuffing in" information.

Undermining the Hidden Curriculum

With the image of Bob Tierney's class in mind, let's now consider some practical writing-to-learn exercises—brief, functional, and usually ungraded. These may occur in students' response journals or learning logs, but they may also occur as stand-alone activities. Many teachers use writing-to-learn to prompt large-group discussion, with students first sharing their writing with a partner or small group, or as a springboard into more formal writing tasks.

Writing-to-learn exercises personalize learning by inviting active knowledge construction. For example, if kids assume the persona of "Dear Abby" or "Dr. Phil" to offer advice on solving a story problem in math, they are usually eager to share their chatty texts with one another. Or if students write a letter from one literary character's viewpoint—that of *Huckleberry Finn's* Jim, for example—that

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character is certain to come alive. Or if students assume the role of a historical figure—Harry Truman deciding whether to use atomic bombs in 1945—a moral dilemma will be viscerally experienced.

Imaginative formats can make writing-to-learn fun. For example, students might keep the diary of a character as they read a novel or play. They might create a book jacket for their “Healthy Lifestyle Guide.” They might do an imagined interview with the author of their marketing text. They might write a scene (or alternative ending) for a political event. They might also do cartoons, prophecies, horoscopes, telegrams, obituaries and epitaphs, rap lyrics, posters, collages and mobiles, editorials, newspaper stories, email interchanges, business memos, or historical “you are there” scenes.

But while these alternative writing-to-learn formats may motivate student learning, they also need to be linked to real educational aims. What mental processes do we hope to stimulate and develop? Here are some thinking processes worth attending to as well as a few content area illustrations. Of course, the processes can be adapted across all subject matter areas.

Assessing. Find out what students already know (or don’t know) about a topic, theme, or issue. For example, “Tomorrow we start a new unit called ‘The Holocaust.’ Write what you already know about this topic.”

Predicting. Encourage students to consider what may happen next. For example, “Now that you’ve seen the lab demonstration of what happens under condition X, write about what you predict will happen under condition Y.”

Recording. Ask students to jot down their observations and reactions. For example, “Using notes from the debate, what are your impressions of the styles of the two speakers? Write about each speaker’s strengths.”

Questioning. Have students take active questioning roles. For example, “Write down three questions you would like to ask the author of this text. What are you unsure about in your reading? What would like to know more about?”

Responding. Invite students to make journal entries about in-class or out-of-class reading. For example, “What do you imagine the Palestinian leaders will do in response to this emerging situation? Give reasons for your views.”

Personalizing. Ask students to make personal connections to a text or issue. For example, “The problem of obesity in the U.S. population is now front-page news. In writing, express what you see as the main causes of this problem.”

Defining. Have students create definitions based upon their discussion, reading, or inquiry. For example, “Now that you’ve sorted the responses to your questionnaire, how would you define ‘Good English’? Create a definition.”

Applying. Invite students to apply what they have learned. For example, “Now that you’ve participated in today’s activity, take ten minutes to jot down the key points you need to remember for tomorrow’s quiz and next week’s project.”

Summarizing. Ask student to paraphrase, translate, or sum up a text or discussion. For example, “Write a letter to a good friend who was not in class today that sums up the key points of the lesson on osmosis.”

Analyzing. Direct students to think analytically about a text or their own writing. For example, “Now that you’ve read the policy statements of the candidates, create a Venn diagram that shows points of agreement and disagreement.”

Evaluating. Encourage students to make judgments about the worth or beauty of a text or event. For example, “Having heard the two composers, write about the one you regard as the *better* example of nineteenth-century romanticism.”

Finally, it’s worth remembering that ungraded writing-to-learn activities help students develop *fluency* in written expression. A central tenet of writing process instruction is that learners make progress in the skills of writing to the extent they use language functionally and purposefully. In other words, to get better at writing, students must write a great deal—probably far more than they now do in many schools.

Thinking Outside the Box

This essay’s headnote—“First we shape our institutions, and then they shape us”—suggests that traditions have great momentum. In education, most of us tend to teach as we have been taught. Thinking outside the box is rare; and rarer still is taking action outside the box.

Put another way, the basic structures of secondary schools have long resisted change. Although we now have whiteboards rather than chalkboards, handheld calculators rather than slide rules, and moveable desks rather than desks with wooden runners, such changes are mostly cosmetic. The desks often remain in rows, just as they did in yesteryear. And today’s drill-and-practice software packages, though delivered on

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sleek high-tech computers, are much like the workbooks used by earlier generations. In general, "old wine in new bottles" seems to sum up the situation.

Because of tradition, it seems part of the natural order that all writing deserves a grade. We rationalize, for example, that we don't want students practicing mistakes. And perhaps because of past experience, we worry that students will simply ignore our ungraded tasks. The possible loss of control may make us shudder.

But schools are the way they are because we make them that way. If the desks are in rows rather than a student-friendly U shape, it may be because we doubt our own powers to shape the environment for productive dialogue. And if we refuse to consider ungraded writing-to-learn activities like the ones above, it may be because we're reluctant to question our own practices or because we doubt our skills in implementing forward-thinking ideas. After all, it takes courage to teach.

My hope is that as we forego grading in favor of learning—using frequent writing-to-learn activities as our versatile tool—we'll discover a powerful antidote to the mind-numbing effects of writing's hidden curriculum.

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The Paradigm Shift

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and also be closer to realizing the shift from product to process in teaching and using writing in the classroom?

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for the National Writing Project and its 178 NWP sites to consider as they continue their vital work in shifting the writing paradigm from one of product to process:

- Develop special programs that target school board members, superintendents, assistant superintendents of instruction, curriculum coordinators, and site administrators to educate them about process writing, the power of writing-to-learn strategies across the curriculum, effective staff development, and the change process.
- Develop special programs that assist central office administrators, site administrators, and teachers to tie the implementation of a writing program to the evaluation process of all parties.
- Encourage writing project sites to recruit more district and school administrators to both their open and invitational summer institutes.
- Offer special sessions at the NWP Annual Meeting (led by NWP personnel and site administrators) to assist NWP directors and co-directors in developing strategies for getting their local school districts to buy into the need for the paradigm shift.
- In conjunction with the National School Board Association (NSBA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the NWP should consider issuing annual awards to school districts in which best practices in the

teaching of writing are evidenced throughout all of the districts' schools and classes.

Conclusion

A paradigm shift will not be made anytime soon without the full leadership, support, and resources of district and school administrators. No single group of individuals—be it teachers or administrators—has the power or the means to make this shift on its own; the change must be a collective effort, and without such an effort, we face a collective failure. Many thousands of teachers across the nation are leading the way; now it is time for school administrators to truly lead by joining in the effort.

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