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A Principled Revolution in the Teaching of Writing

Despite calls to action, writing pedagogy in the English classroom remains outdated, and caustic partisanship among theorists may be to blame. The author proposes a "principled approach" to the teaching of writing, combining the best elements of verified instructional methods to generate six components ensuring student growth.

Revolutions typically begin with a call to action. For readers of *English Journal,* one significant call to action within recent memory would certainly be Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer's "A Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High Schools," an analysis of classroom practice in more than 3,000 US schools, which concluded that "if notions of good instruction have changed, for a variety of reasons the typical classroom does not provide much evidence of it" (24).

Such a grim assessment of the state of high school writing instruction should have been enough to move any English department to dramatic change. But will it? If history has anything to say, maybe not. While "Snapshot" is an important revelation of the gap between theory and practice, it is certainly not the first. Meta-analyses in 2007 and, prior to that, 1986 and 1963 (see Braddock et al.; Graham and Perin; Hillocks, *Research*) revealed a similar disconnect between what teachers do and what research suggests will "work" for student writers; in 1978, Elizabeth F. Haynes, sensing a lack of awareness of the research, prepared a summary of findings for teachers that have "a new sense of interest and excitement about improving their effectiveness in the teaching of written composition" (82). Twelve years prior to that, former NCTE president G. Robert Carlsen, writing just after publication of the groundbreaking Braddock Report, lamented that while a "minor revolution" had taken hold of methodologies in science and math classrooms, writing teachers had yet to "catch up" (364).

While it is clear that for some time, theorists and practitioners have been calling for change, what is not clear is why this change has not taken place. What accounts for this gap between research in the teaching of writing and students' daily classroom experiences? Theorists have offered a range of explanations: teachers' fear of theory (Scott 31); school environments inhospitable to change (Johnson et al.); inadequate teacher preparation programs (Smagorinsky and Whiting 22–30); the "entropy" of the profession (Kennedy 17).

While each of these explanations captures some of the challenges in the profession, I've also noticed that the tone of many reformers can be so polarizing that the teachers they aim to support are in fact turned away. Take as but one example the scholarly infighting between workshop-based and inquiry-based practitioners, the two movements that arguably affected our profession most significantly. Donald Graves, regarded as the father of workshop-based instruction, described the work of inquiry theorist George Hillocks Jr. as "sterile," "unreadable," and of "limited use in the classroom" (Hillocks, *Research* 94); Hillocks accused Graves of obscuring his research practices, drawing baseless conclusions, and removing teacher intervention unnecessarily (*Research* 94). Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels charged Hillocks with harboring a "personal prejudice against the National Writing Project" (19), an organization historically connected to the workshop-based approach. And when Hillocks's protégé Peter Smagorinsky suggested that teachers adopt a relative view of

writing philosophies, allowing classroom situations to shape what best practice means (20–21), Hillocks retorted that although he "loved Smagorinsky like a son . . . urging teachers to use these 'best' practices is probably silly if [teachers] do not know how to use them" ("A Response," 23, 29).

While it would in fact be "silly" to encourage teachers to use methods they don't understand, this rigid partisanship is extremely problematic, even counterproductive. People change when they interact with thinkers other than themselves, but teachers won't change at all if the rhetoric of tribalism isolates them rather than unites.

It is for this reason, then, that I agree with Smagorinsky that "principled practice," as opposed to "best practice," is a viable mechanism by which our profession may actually achieve the revolution we have aspired to. By *principled practice*, Smagorinsky refers to teachers taking into account the various forces, needs, and resources operating in the classroom; planning instruction from a platform of informed teacher knowledge; and engaging consistently in reflective practice with others. And since principled practice requires faithful adherence to the findings of educational research, it "invests a great deal of authority and responsibility in the teacher" while precluding an "anything goes" approach (Smagorinsky 20).

During my years as a university composition instructor and high school teacher, I have worked
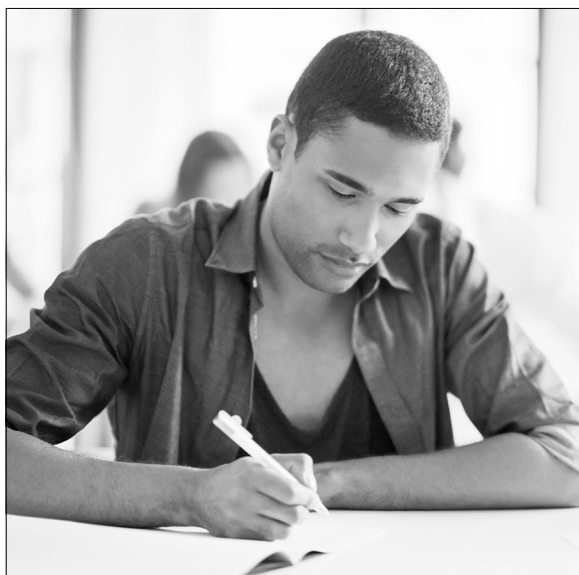
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to make principled practice the foundation of my teaching. To this end, my careful review of 60 years of research in the teaching of writing (N. Smith) has allowed me to identify six components of practice, together representing an approach that I believe Smagorinsky would call *principled*. Following these six components has helped me to authorize student voices, fulfill my moral imperative as a teacher, and capitalize on the potential of the classroom environment. Furthermore, these six components have helped me to advance beyond simply *knowing* theory to actually enacting it, so that a "revolution" of sorts, a principled revolution, has begun to transform my classroom space.

Component #1: Writers Need Process, Not Product

If it is true that "students . . . have on average just over three minutes of instruction related to explicit writing strategies" and that English teachers "almost always" emphasize the parts of an assignment rather than helping students generate ideas (Applebee and Langer 20), then it is imperative that teachers instead emphasize process over product.

Certainly, quantity of instructional time is important. Carol Jago recommends that administrators support more writing in the classroom (20), an important challenge when state standards frequently emphasize reading instruction to the exclusion of writing. And it's not just the amount of time but also the function of that time that makes a difference. Zemelman et al. observe that students benefit most when experiencing the entirety of the writing process, from planning and creating to revising and editing (140–41). Smagorinsky et al. additionally advise that substantive student interaction characterize each writing task (*Teaching Argument* 20–21).

A review of the instructional sequences recommended in any workshop-based or inquiry-based method can be staggering; the time demands are significant, and in my own experience, "time" has been the most frequently cited objection to either of these approaches. However, it is important for teachers and administrators to keep in mind that the "time-saving" approach favored instead—typically teacher lecture—is shown to "have little or no impact," even a "negative" effect, on the way that students write (Braddock 37–38; see also Graham and

Perin 467; Hillocks, *Research*, *Ways* 222). And as my colleague Stephen Heller observes, if teachers aim to "approach writing as a verb, rather than a noun" (12) and emphasize process over product, they are subsequently compelled to make room in their curriculum for frequent writing experiences.

Component #2: Writers Need Strategies, Not Formulas

Central to both workshop and inquiry paradigms is the understanding that students need strategies and heuristics, not formulas, to grow as writers; procedural knowledge, the knowledge of "how" to write, should drive instruction. Scholars have written at length about the pervasiveness of declarative knowledge—knowledge transmitted by teacher talk, rather than student discovery—embodied in formulaic writing, particularly the five-paragraph theme (see, for example, Nunnally 68). Both workshop-based and inquiry-based theorists call for teachers to focus on heuristics instead (see, for example, Zemelman et al. 50–51). Heuristics help students develop "flexible yet transferable tools for solving evolving problems and meeting challenges" (M. Smith et al. 182), making central to their classroom work "the process of inquiry and self-discovery [that] are the central part of the educational endeavor" (Carlsen 365).

Determining what problem-solving tools students need for a particular writing assignment is principled practice—but it isn't always easy. In my department, my colleagues and I use backwards design to develop our lesson plans: What do we want our students to write, and why? What skills are required, and how do students acquire those skills (Wiggins and McTighe 34)? In these efforts, we've benefited enormously from the work of Michael W. Smith and Thomas M. McCann, whose heuristics for evaluating narrator reliability (M. Smith) and mastering comparison and contrast (Smagorinsky et al., *Teaching Comparison*), respectively, have equipped our students to navigate, and respond to, challenging texts.

Component #3: Writers Need Scaffolded Teaching, Not Generic Instruction

Developing appropriate tools, or heuristics, cannot be done in a vacuum; this level of planning requires, first, knowledge of the students in the class,

derived from either individual writing conferences (for example, Atwell; Graves) or interest and skill inventories (Wilhelm). This knowledge allows the principled teacher to orchestrate activities and lessons that meet students' level of development and appeal to their passions and concerns.

A principled teacher also recognizes that distinct tasks require distinct learning experiences. For example, to meet CCSS argumentation standards, the team of ninth-grade teachers at Stevenson High School adopted the lesson series in Hillocks's 2011 *Teaching Argument Writing: Supporting Claims with Relevant Evidence and Clear Reasoning*, using dialogic exchanges around increasingly complex texts to move students from supporting judgments about simple mystery pictures to composing sound literary analyses. Our memoir unit, however, required a completely different approach, so we patterned our days around workshops (see, for example, Kirby and Kirby) and conferences that helped students generate vivid stories worth telling. Both of these units are inherently engaging to students, ensuring not only that excitement runs high in the classroom but also that students master the skills inherent to argumentation and narration, ultimately empowering them to see themselves as autonomous, able learners.

Component #4: Writers Need Authorization, Not Suppression

Such scaffolding implies teacher design, and indeed, principled practitioners sequence classroom activities to maximize student responsibility and minimize teacher control, whether through highly organized workshop environments fueled by student choice (Atwell) or inquiry sequences that help students "expand their repertoire of problem-solving strategies and composing procedures" (Smagorinsky et al., *Dynamics* 32). Both of these principled approaches require the intentional designs of a teacher, who creates a developmentally appropriate series of tasks by which students can master a particular set of skills, then steps back to allow students to take the lead. For example, as part of a unit on marginalization, a colleague, Dawn Forde, invited me to help her design an activity in which our students prepared and researched roles as school staff and administrators, parents and community members, and then participated

in a simulated intervention meeting to find ways to help a group of (fictionalized) third graders who were being treated as outsiders. Not only did this simulation engage our students, who ran the entire intervention meeting over the span of two class periods, but also, as their subsequent essays made clear, it helped them relate in a profound way to the causes and consequences of marginalization. Additionally, they learned how to navigate between several perspectives, a skill they used while reading and writing about Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine,* a novel about Japanese internment camps told by multiple voices.

Component #5: Writers Need Social Interaction, Not Passive Compliance

Occasionally, teachers who learn that I've devoted entire class periods to structured class discussions like the one described above react with bewilderment, unsure of how I am able to "get anything done" when I allow for so much student talk. This reaction is not uncommon: Applebee and Langer found that teacher-led instruction was far more popular than collaborative student work; in such classrooms, "the teacher does all of the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information" (26). This description conjures a picture of silent, grim-faced student stenographers.

The picture conjured by principled practice is quite different: the classroom is buzzing with social engagement; as students discuss ideas, they push each other to higher levels of cognition. In fact, central to the workshop-based approach is talking, and that is why peer and student conferences are so successful: as students talk through their writing with others, they come to realizations they couldn't achieve on their own.

Such focus on learning through talking requires a high degree of teacher intentionality; students are not born knowing how to effectively engage in a collaborative learning process. In my classroom, I've learned to coach students in the discussion structures that diminish the typical "IRE" pattern (teacher initiates; student responds; teacher evaluates) and instead promote generative discourse (see, for example, McCann). I've also learned to restrain myself from becoming the "sage on the stage," a role I once (regrettably) relished but that

produced no tangible benefits for my students. The more challenging a text is, the harder it is for me, as a teacher, not to step in, make the connections for my students and explain to them what "the experts" think, rather than allowing them to figure it out for themselves and develop their own ways of knowing. For example, my ninth-grade students study Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a text potholed with perplexing passages and now thoroughly "understood," thanks to the work of scholars over the centuries. A series of teacher lectures could easily clear up confusion and provide critical insight as well, but my students' learning would be the poorer for it. Instead, when students first began reading the play, they engage in a series of translation puzzles provided by my colleague, Joseph Flanagan (see, for example, McCann and Flanagan), by which they develop their own procedure for decoding Shakespearean language. Once they have progressed further in the text, students participate in a series of debates: Does *The Tempest* suggest that absolute power corrupts absolutely, or that power brings about more good than evil? Do the characters love for selfish, or selfless, reasons? Is it possible in this play to delineate the heroes from the monsters? These debates occupy one week of class time, but the opportunity for students to engage in substantive talk like this proved immeasurable in terms of its impact on their growth as writers.

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Furthermore, inherent to a socially mediated approach is the understanding that students write for a larger audience than the "teacher-as-examiner"—the one that 80 percent of high school students write for today (Applebee and Langer 16–17). Students need audience feedback at all steps of the writing process: when they compose, they need an understanding of what audiences know and want to know; when they revise, they need to recognize the gap between the intended and actual effects of their writing; when they publish, they need to appreciate how writing inspires audiences to act (Atwell 489; Smagorinsky et al., *Teaching Argument* 94). After my tenth graders composed their final papers about J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* they spent an entire

classroom day reading their papers aloud to a small group of peers, who responded to each other's writing with questions, challenges, praise, and suggested revisions. While I could have "saved" a day of instruction by collecting and reviewing the papers myself, the power of hearing their peers' comments—many of those comments more demanding and insightful than the comments I would eventually make myself—created an exigency that students were far more eager to respond to than the earnestly scribbled marginalia of their instructor.

Component #6: Writers Need Reflection, Not Coverage

As a teacher who feels the press of time, I'm often eager to "cover more material" and move quickly from one unit to the next. But I cheat my students out of a valuable learning opportunity if I don't build into my curriculum regular opportunities for students to reflect on their reading and writing, speaking and listening. Reflection helps students monitor their own thinking, become conscious of their processes, and apply these processes to other situations. Thus, in workshop-based writing, students use reflective pieces to monitor their own growth and plan for future composition tasks (Atwell 277–28; Zemelman and Daniels 56). Likewise, an inquiry-based approach culminates in a reflective component, in which students recount not just *what* they did, but *how* they did it and why that worked (Hillocks, *Ways* 94–95; Smagorinsky et al., *Teaching Argument* 95). Such reflection, while cutting into the amount of material a teacher might "cover," ultimately maximizes the quality of learning a student might achieve.

After my ninth graders composed essays about the theme of obligation in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men,* they revised their writing, annotating their work to describe what they changed and how these changes improved the quality of their writing. In her first draft, Eleanor, like many young writers, struggled to construct a coherent argument. By contrast, the second draft is remarkably clear: an appropriate claim within a focused introduction, supported by a pattern of well-explained evidence. But what is important here is not so much that the writing has improved, but rather, that Eleanor understands why it has improved. Regarding her improved introduction, Eleanor writes, "I added

more common ground to make my points clear . . . I added a problem, and the nature, of the problem, [and] improved the claim." Later, in the body of the essay, she observes that she's selected "evidence from the whole book," provided a "more convincing warrant [*sic*]" to support her inference, and created "explination [*sic*] that relates [evidence] to the claim, instead of just explaining." Each aspect of her analysis reveals that she is internalizing the procedures of argumentation.

Allowing time for such reflection and analysis forced me to "cut" some assignments from my lesson plans, as students needed several days to both revise and reflect on their writing, but the level of insight that Eleanor—whose work was representative of her peers'—demonstrates justifies this expenditure. We hope that all students leave our classrooms with an enhanced level of wisdom about their choices as writers, and that this wisdom translates, ultimately, into greater proficiency, as it did for Eleanor, who scored a letter grade higher on her *To Kill a Mockingbird* essay this fall.

Old Truths, New Courage: Principled Past, Future Revolution

It should be a little chastising for us to realize that Applebee and Langer's recent findings are not revolutionary, but instead, the most recent installment in a historical series of appeals for improved writing instruction. In one of the earliest of these appeals, Carlsen wrote, "It is time that methods of teaching English again become a major concern within our profession" (364). More than 50 years later, it is clear that the time is well past for us to embrace what the research, comprehensively, reveals about what works best for student learners. Once we finally do so, we will be able to foment a long-awaited, but necessary, principled revolution in the teaching of writing. **(E)**

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Writing is also a complex cognitive activity. Research has demonstrated that students improve their writing ability when cognitive strategies are demonstrated for them in clear and explicit ways. Students learn the forms and functions of writing as they observe and participate in writing events directed by knowledgeable writers, particularly when these events are followed by opportunities for independent writing. Instruction that makes writing processes visible to students is key to improving their writing skills. Several excellent instructional frameworks for writing, including modeled, shared, interactive, guided, or independent writing, can provide strong support for students' successful writing based on the level and type of teacher support that is provided for students. During write-aloud, like think-aloud, teachers verbalize the internal dialog they use as they write a particular type of text, explicitly demonstrating metacognitive processes. Learn more in this strategy guide from ReadWriteThink.org. http://bit.ly/2kcoW9J