

Marching into the Millenium:

Or, What We've Always Suspected is True About Writing
is Still True in the Year 2000

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On September 28th, 1999, the national report card on our children's writing proficiency released results that are "hardly inspiring"—three quarters of the students tested in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades scored only on a "basic" skills level, leading Miguel Llanos of MSNBC to summarize that "only one of four students writes at a 'proficient' level or above." Further in this national report, Gary Phillips, in charge of the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, states that these results are significant "because how well students write at the end of the 20th century is an indicator of how well they will be able to communicate and reason in the beginning of the 21st century" (Llanos).

With such disturbing statistics in mind, the question then is how does

one approach teaching writing successfully to this new generation? Three pertinent facts arose within this report that led me to believe in what our school is currently doing. Students did better if they indeed wrote drafts and planned ahead, if they had teachers who communicated with them about their writing, and if they used computers when they wrote (Llanos). Even before I knew of these facts, my colleagues and I suspected many of them to be true about writers. This led me to propose some new approaches to writing in our school.

This year I was able to convince our reluctant administrators that our school was desperately in need of a writing lab. (I am aware that many schools already have such a place where students can go to work on the writing process.) Our school had a particular need for such a place because it is an all-male, college-preparatory high school. Larry Hedges in a recent University of Chicago study points out that girls continually do better in the area of writing. He concluded that "males are, on average, at a rather profound disadvantage in the performance of



this basic skill" (Pollack 234). The current national test corroborates this statement; females did outperform males at all grade levels and in all states tested. Our English department has been continually frustrated by the boys' writing, and after I distributed a survey to the faculty, most faculty also indicated frustration with fundamental writing skills. Most of the frustration lay with the students' grammatical and mechanical errors, but almost an equal amount of frustration lay with their writing incomplete sentences and their lack of development. Clearly, a plan of action was needed.

The English department's basic frustration revolved around continually correcting the same errors year to year when we knew that our colleagues or we ourselves had taught correct usage and/or reviewed these repeat mistakes. There seemed to be little carry-over from year to year. The boy in ninth grade who kept punctuating the title of a novel by using quotation marks was the boy in eleventh grade who made the same error. Although this seems relatively minor in the area of writing, these little odds and ends details kept cropping up and frustrating teachers again and again. We are currently redesigning our writing benchmarks to meet this challenge and to hold our students more accountable for their learning.

Two standards that are already in place are the "gross mechanical error" rule for formal papers and teachers' not accepting late formal papers when a lead time for the process of such papers has been given. The gross mechanical error rule states that English teachers will stop grading a paper and return that paper to its writer upon the fourth egregious and most basic error. The student then must meet with the teacher for tutoring and discussion about the paper, he must rewrite and resubmit the paper by an agreed-upon date, and that paper can now receive no higher than a B minus.

A general standard is that no paper should have sentence fragments, run-on sentences, or spelling errors, particularly because of spell check systems on computers. What we hope to do from year to year is add to this list according to the course content. Say if we stress the proper punctuation of a novel title in freshman year, then eventually this error will become yet another gross mechanical error. Because this is a college-preparatory academy, students generally care about their grades, so this rule holds them accountable.

Another standard for the English department is that no late papers are accepted if a paper has been taken through its proper process. This rule is again for formal, computer-generated writing, usually of

an expository nature. Again, using the grade to hold the students accountable works because a zero for a paper that counts more in the student's overall average is usually not an option for a student. Perhaps it seems a bit harsh to some teachers, but we are a very traditional school with a traditional grading system, so these two practices are successful.

Success in writing, then, has become my mantra this year, especially because I am now in charge of the writing

lab, The Write Place. Up to this year, we have not had a writing lab. Last year I used to work in the computer lab, correcting papers or composing on the computer. Whenever I was in the lab, students would bombard me with questions regarding writing. Often I got little work done myself as I helped students with their writing. And so, the computer teacher and I thought it was time to set up a writing lab. I submitted a proposal for such, and the administration agreed to begin The Write Place. This has been a welcome change for me, for after twenty-four years in the classroom, I am allowed to read and research using professional journals, online sites, and books on writing.

I also operate the lab and am available to students who wish to

be in the lab, working on our computers, three open periods of the day and until 4:00 each evening. Students can drop by the lab if they have a study hall or free time from class, they can sign up on a weekly basis for a particular meeting time,

or their teachers can require that they come to the lab for special help. If a teacher makes a request, then he/she sends the students with a pass, outlining the kind of help needed by the student. I then work with the student and send the

teacher a report back, informing the teacher of the work done and accomplished.

Students need one-on-one time in the area of writing, and the lab affords them the opportunity to have this time. Also, I am able to design special classes for both teachers and students and offer them periodically throughout the year. So far I have developed and taught a class, Writing Across the Curriculum I, providing ideas for "quick writes" for the classroom. I have discovered that being the traditional school that we are, our teachers often still fall into the lecture/taking notes syndrome. The teachers that attended the seminar felt that these writing tips would help them do something different in the class, perhaps ending the class by distribut-

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ing note cards and having the students write a few sentences about their learning. Giving the students some fluency in writing by having them actually write is key for them, establishing a comfort level with the written word.

The second class that I presented was for both teachers and students. The class, Creative Writing I, was about poetry and word choice. It included discussions about writers being good observers of life and then collecting such observations in a notebook, using a haiku or variation on the haiku. We did some further exercises with imagery and figurative language, using Samuel Coleridge's idea that poetry consists of the best words in the best order. I also had them listen to a recording of Jack Kerouac's nontraditional haikus, "Blues and Haikus," featuring the music of Al Cohn and Zoot Sims. They were then asked to collect such poetic observations for another time.

A follow-up to this will be hosting some poetry slams after school to hear their observations and original works. Students will "turn on" to writing if their writing can be heard and shared. My plan is then to continue to offer various types of classes/seminars throughout the year, thus the reason I give them numbers after their titles. Other ideas in mind are presenting classes on writing in the sciences, technical

writing, writing letters and college essays, writing and researching, conquering the comma, and more creative writing classes. I gleaned such ideas from a survey I distributed at the beginning of the year wherein my colleagues gave me ideas for classes in which they would have an interest.

Such classes have manifest benefits. They allow a dialogue to be established about writing without judgments made in the form of grades. The classes for both teachers and students allow the teachers to interact with the students as students. Creative writing classes and readings allow writing to be shared among students of different grade levels and among the teachers as well. They provide a relaxed environment in which to discuss writing. And, they are fun! I have certainly enjoyed designing and offering the classes so far.

What's next for the 21st century? Perhaps a creative writing class online. The writing lab director is also afforded many opportunities to interact with the students concerning their writing and speaking habits. I have established a word of the day for the whole school. The word, along with announcements concerning publishing opportunities and upcoming writing lab classes, is posted on a prominent bulletin board. The word of the day has proven to be quite popular; stu-

dents, teachers, and staff have come up to me and used the word or made a joke about the word. It heartens me to hear the maintenance man yelling to another maintenance man, asking him if the cafeteria looks opulent enough or when a student tells me he hopes he never becomes a pariah. This is learning in action.

Publishing opportunities are another part of the writing lab's offerings. So many times as a classroom English teacher I would receive in the mail or read in professional journals about writing contests

or other publishing opportunities offered for students, and I, inevitably, would run out of time and not announce them, pin them up on a bulletin board and forget about them, or forget about them entirely amid the hurly-burly of classroom life. So, the writing lab is now a clearing house for such announcements across the curriculum. I not only post and announce these opportunities for writing, but I help the students with the manuscript style and with sending these away by the deadline.

Students need to write above and beyond what is expected in the classroom. They need to see their work published from time to time.

Another unique opportunity I have here is to help students with speeches. Our school requires that all seniors deliver a three-five minute speech to the whole school during a daily formation. (We are also a military school.) Speeches,

as well as daily student announcements, are often riddled with grammatical error. The classic error is, e.g., "If you are interested in this team, see me or Bill" or "See Bill or myself."

At the beginning of the year, when I was announcing the establishment of The Write Place, I threw out three

grammatical questions in regard to the typical pronoun errors made. Each student who answered correctly received a blue pencil, embossed in gold with the words, The Write Place. Now whenever those troublesome pronouns rear their ugly heads, students groan, call out a correction, and look for me in the crowd. Getting them to care about their language and correct usage is important.

It almost goes without saying that our students need to use technology more as they compose, revise, and edit. The computer technician and I are working closely together to learn more about what the computer can do to make writing

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an easier task for students. Again, teaching an all-male school student body means working with students who appreciate and learn well with a hands-on approach. What better hands-on than the computer with its interactive mouse, a keyboard, and a visual? They learn to cut and paste when they revise their work. The use of a split screen allows them to keep their thesis always in front of them as they type. Our computers have grammar check, spelling check, a thesaurus, and special editing features. Computers allow students to triple space for easy rough draft corrections. Students with visual problems may use computers with special larger print. Students can also convert their text to speech if they wish to hear the writing. Note markers are available on computers, letting students keep track of references and quotes. Students who work with school publications, the yearbook and the newspaper specifically, use the lab extensively for composition and for specific help from the director. Eventually, we will have Internet in the lab which will give students access to writing tools such as the Purdue Writing Lab online. Our goal is to have students feel comfortable composing on the computer.

All of our classrooms are not currently equipped with computers, so the lab is the place to be for hands-on writing with a technologi-

cal flair. Next year our school will be building a media center, a technological hot spot with Internet access, computers, color printers, and the like; the current computer lab will then be permanently The Write Place, a much needed center for learning about and doing writing.

Our school also helps students with their writing by providing them with a writing handbook. Five years ago, the English department wrote an official handbook for our school and gave them to all incoming freshmen. The handbook includes proofreaders' marks used by all teachers; a description of the writing process; an outline form for a typical expository essay format (handy for xeroxing during rough drafting); information about the writing lab; a mini-grammar handbook; a list of commonly misspelled words; a page for their own spelling errors; rules for manuscript style for all types of writing; sample title page and two sample papers; sample "Works Cited" page with reference to the MLA style web site; a scope and sequence for the teaching of research skills in the English classroom; and a holistic rubric for the grading of compositions, now adopted by the English department.

This handbook has proved invaluable in establishing standards and for informing both students and teachers about the writing expectations in the school. Students are re-

quired to keep the handbook all four years of school, with extras being sold in our school bookstore and with a copy being available on our school web site.

As educators we know that writing is difficult for students. Pe-

ter Forrestal in his essay "Punctuation" states:

—Students, as do professional writers, find writing hard work.

—Students don't carefully edit their work because they haven't been given enough time or they didn't consider it important to produce correct writing.

—Students can't be compelled to care about writing.

—Students will write well when it matters to them.

—Students will improve as writers if they write often and if they acquire the habit of revising their writing.

These statements are generally true about our student writers and even moreso with our student writers of the millennium. Anything that we as teachers can do to guide them down that rocky road of writing is welcome and necessary. Thus, firm expectations for writing; rules that help to set high standards in writing; a writing lab that offers extra tutoring, mentoring, publishing opportunities, and working with tech-

nology; a school environment that nurtures and fosters good written and spoken communication; and an accessible student writing handbook have all helped our school to teach writing in the 21st century.

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tional report about writing, but I am neither surprised nor discouraged. I have seen students' papers improve upon taking them through a process. Keeping the art of revision alive and lively is the challenge for the teacher of the 21st century. We must con-

tinue to share ideas about the writing process and, in particular, revision. In my area, the Minnesota Council offered a workshop by Barry Lane entitled, "Revision: How to teach it, learn it, love it!" His website for further lesson plans is www.discoverwriting.com. I attended this and will attend other workshops in this area.

I have also noticed an increased interest and awareness of writing because of our writing lab and all that it can offer. One of the things it offers? Computers. These marvelous tools help our students in so many ways. Yes, we still hand write from time to time and need to continue this basic skill, but what fluency and ease the computer allows us! Since the national test tells us

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that students do better with writing in a process, talking about writing, and using computers, these are the skills we need to stress or continue to stress as we look to the new millennium.

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