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***Why Can't Our Kids Write Well?
A Coach's View***

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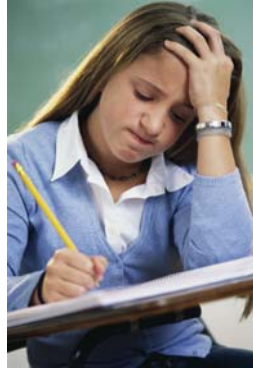
Why Can't Our Kids Write Well?
A Coach's View
By Sally Jessup

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The Dilemma We Face

A friend of mine, who is a principal in a nearby district, gave me a call and said, "Our state writing



scores are awful. I don't know why. I've given my staff all kinds of training..." She went on to list most of the latest, greatest approaches to writing instruction, all of them powerful tools in a skilled teacher's writing arsenal. "But nothing has had the effect it should have had on our students' writing scores. We have an extended faculty meeting next month. Would you come over and work with my staff to see if you can find out what we need to do to fix this?"

A month later, I stood in front of a group of forty-five faculty members and asked them four questions. First, I asked, "How many of you love to read?" Hands went up around the room. Some grade levels, in a desire not to be out done, raised both hands and gave their team members high fives. Others called out how many outside books their students were reading. Everyone, at every grade,

was excited and eager to share their classes' reading achievements and describe in great detail what they were doing to ensure that their students loved to read.

As a reading specialist, I was delighted with their response. "Wonderful!" I told them. "I can tell you spend a lot of time on reading."

"Yes, we do," they all agreed.

"Great!" I reiterated going on to ask my second question, "How much time do you spend on writing?"

Their answers ranged from ten minutes a day to about forty minutes a week. Then someone wondered, "Why? How much time should we spend?"

"The National Writing Commission says most of us spend three hours or less a week on writing when we should be spending about five to six hours a week on it."

"They have to be kidding. If we did that, we would have to give up something and we can't. There just isn't enough time in

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the day for that much writing,” the staff insisted.

“Well some of that writing is supposed to happen at home...” I explained.

“That wouldn't work either. We already give our kids homework,” they pointed out.



“So time is an issue...” I replied knowing that it always is when it comes to writing. Still, “American education

will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts the power of language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Yet, although many models of effective writing instruction exist...both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years” (National Commission on Writing 2006). This is unfortunate because student writing will never get better unless we overcome the problem of time. “Writing instruction must include ample in-class and out-of-class opportunities for writing and (it

should include writing for a variety of purposes and audiences” (Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee November 2004). All of this requires a commitment on the part of classroom teachers, principals, and curriculum directors to dedicate instructional time to writing. Yet, this isn't happening. “Writing, education's second “R,” has become the neglected element of American school reform” (National Commission on Writing 2006).

As if to underscore this fact, one teacher added, “It takes a lot of time to teach our students to read and it is important that they learn how to do it.”

“It sure is,” I agreed. “And I am glad that you love to read and that you want your students to love it, too.” They all smiled, so I asked them my third question. “I know you love to read, but how many of you love to write, too?”

A silence fell on the room and a tentative hand went up. “You mean write for pleasure—for the fun of it?” I nodded. In response, two people raised their hands and one of those two only slightly.

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I have asked this question over and over again as I have worked with various schools around the country and the response is usually the same. Most teachers love to read, but they do not like to write. The reason is simple.

When most of us learned how to write, it was in a formulaic, teacher and textbook directed way that gave us little feel for what it was to be a writer. We learned to write the “perfect sentence” which lead to the “perfect

paragraph” which lead

to the “quintessential five paragraph theme”, but

we never learned how to meet our own needs as a writer. Most of us never learned that “writing extends far beyond mastering grammar and punctuation.

The ability to diagram a sentence does not make a good writer. There are many students capable of identifying every part of speech who are barely able to produce a piece of prose...While

exercises in descriptive, creative, and narrative writing help develop students' skills, writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and



make valid and accurate distinctions...Above all, as students and young adults begin a lifetime of learning, they will find that writing is liberating, satisfying, even joyful.

Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning” (National Commission on Writing 2003).

Knowing that, I took a deep breath and went on, “So most of you like to read better than you like to write...” They looked at each other and nodded in agreement and I continued, “But we

want our students to love writing as much as you love reading.



That’s our challenge. How can we make that happen?”

One teacher replied, “We don’t know. That’s why you are here.”

I laughed and went on to my fourth question, “Then let me ask you this—

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how many of you feel comfortable with the writing process...feel at ease sharing your own writing with your students...know what to do during writing conferences...understand how to get peer revision going..." At each question, only one or two hands went up—again, nothing new—nothing unusual, but that nothing is at the heart of the problem—not just for this school, but for all schools that find themselves in a similar situation.

What the Experts Say

According to the Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of the Teachers of Writing by the CCC Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English, "to provide effective instruction in writing for learners at any age and at all academic levels, teachers need, first of all, experience in writing..."

(Conference on College Composition and Communication. 1982). It would seem to be a given that "writing teachers should themselves be writers. Through experiencing the struggles and joys of writing, teachers learn that their students will need guidance and support throughout the writing process, not

merely comments on the written product. Furthermore, writing teachers who write know that effective comments do not focus on pointing out errors, but go on to the more productive task of encouraging revision, which will help student writers to develop their ideas and to achieve greater clarity and honesty" (Commission on Composition, National Council of Teachers of English 1985), but very few of us learned to write using the writing process nor did we learn how to teach it to our students.



"To provide effective instruction in writing for learners at any age and at all academic levels, teachers need, first of all, experience in writing..." (Conference on College Composition and Communication. 1982).

In fact, "teachers typically receive little instruction in how to teach writing. Only a handful of states require courses in writing for certification, even for elementary school teachers. And very few high school instructors in disciplines

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such as history, science, or mathematics are exposed to courses in how to teach writing (even though the content standards in those disciplines may require it, so)...no matter how hard they work, these instructors, lacking any real understanding of what good writing is or looks like, are often ill equipped to teach it” (National Commission on Writing 2006) as a process even though, “the major...finding from the research on teaching writing is that student achievement is higher when the teaching approach emphasizes writing as a **process** rather than writing as a **product**” (Parson 1985; Holdzkom, et al. 1982; Hillocks 1984, 1986; Wesdorp 1983; Amiran and Mann 1982; Keech and Thomas 1979; ERIC Clearinghouse 1984 in Cotton, Kathleen 1988).

To overcome this hurdle, districts across the country have sought to find the one perfect writing program or model that their teachers can use to teach students how to write well, but, as past history has proven, no program or model can replace the role that a highly qualified teacher of writing plays in helping students to achieve this goal. This is true because “genuine teaching and

learning are intensely personal, not scripted...Research confirms that learning is always academically rigorous and relevant—and individualized in the sense that it connects students with adults in work designed to meet young people’s academic and developmental needs” (National Commission on Writing 2006). This is especially true with learning to write.

If teachers rely too much on any one program or model in a step by step approach, it inevitably leads them to focus their attention on their students’ papers and not on their students as writers. “As Parson (1985) points out, in (this) traditional product-oriented approach, form and correctness are the major concerns. The teacher provides drill work on specific skills, makes many of the major writing decisions for the students (topic, form, length, etc.) and serves as the sole audience/judge. Learning involves following rules, conforming to formulae, and achieving technical mastery of formal conventions and modes. Students work alone on their writing assignments, and while trying to figure out what they want to say, are reminded of such technical matters as

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using topic sentences and avoiding writing sentence fragments and run-ons” (Parson 1985 in Cotton, Kathleen 1988).

While students focus on these areas, they have very little opportunity to think like a writer or to analyze the choices authors make as they get a text ready for a real audience. Everything they do is textbook and teacher-centered. While this may sound familiar to many of us from our own days as students, it is not an effective way to teach students to be proficient writers who love writing. If it was, more of us would be avid writers ourselves, so what is the answer?

Looking at the Data



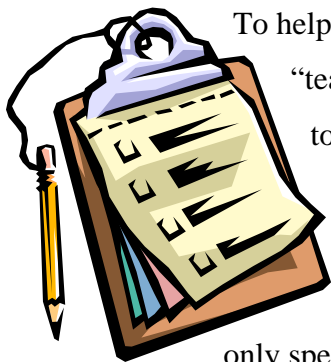
Research shows that “students learn to write by writing. Guidance in the writing process and discussion of the students' own work should be the central means of writing instruction. Students should be encouraged to comment on each other's writing, as well as (receive) frequent, prompt, individualized attention from

the teacher...Textbooks and other instructional resources should be of secondary importance” (Commission on Composition, National Council of Teachers of English 1985). In fact, the National Commission on Writing found that “standardization and scripting of instruction threaten to undermine (effective) writing...” (National Commission on Writing 2006), so textbooks must be seen as only a resource that is meant to be used in a flexible way. They can not teach students how to write well—only a highly qualified writing teacher can do that.

It takes a competent teacher of writing to help students learn how to be proficient users of the writing process since “to say that writing is a process is decidedly not to say that it should—or can—be turned into a formulaic set of steps” (Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee 2004) like some textbooks have done where prewriting happens on Monday, drafting on Tuesday, revision on Wednesday, editing on Thursday, and publishing on Friday. Instead, the writing process is a recursive process as State Content Standards, Benchmarks,

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and Grade Level Content Expectations from across the nation reflect. “Because the various steps within the process are independent and overlapping, you move through them not like a train on a track but more like you bounce on a trampoline coming back to earth again and again to pick up more momentum and with each rebound launching yourself a bit higher” (Spandel 2005). Thus, the process is complex and requires “experienced writers (to) shift between different operations according to (the) tasks and circumstances” (Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee 2004) that motivate them to write. So to be successful writers, students need to learn how identify their purpose and audience, and then learn how to use the writing process in a flexible, recursive way, so that they can meet their own goals.



To help students do this, “teachers should attend to the process that students might follow to produce texts—and not only specify criteria for evaluating finished products, in form or

content. Students should become comfortable with pre-writing techniques, multiple strategies for developing and organizing a message, a variety of strategies for revising and editing, and strategies for preparing products for public audiences and for deadlines...(In addition), writing instruction must provide opportunities for students to identify the processes that work best for themselves as they move from one writing situation to another” (Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee 2004).

The last point is the most important. We have to remember we are here, as educators, to help student writers learn what techniques and strategies work best for them on an individual basis.



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Therefore, we cannot focus all of our efforts on following a pacing chart or on

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moving our writing classes lockstep through a set of prescribed activities because individual students within the same class will have highly individualized needs and we have to provide support to them as they learn how to meet these needs. It is the only way our students will learn to be proficient writers. If we follow a product-oriented approach, our students may learn how to follow a formula, but that will not help them be proficient writers.

I realize that this statement may sound strange since most of us learned to write by following a formula, but following a formula does not make a writer a great writer nor does it produce engaging text. “The latest findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Report)...support (this) conclusion. These findings indicate that most students (in the United States) have mastered writing basics, but few are able to create (the) precise, engaging, coherent prose” (National Assessment of Educational Progress 1998 in National Commission on Writing 2006) of a proficient writer. Therefore, if we want to help our students become truly

proficient writers, we must learn how to differentiate what we are doing in our writing classrooms. “Genuine (writing improvement and) reform requires personalization of instruction” (National Commission on Writing 2006) and personalized instruction requires highly qualified teachers of writing who are effective writers—writers who not only use, but also enjoy using the writing process.

As Regie Routman says, “Until students ‘hear’ our (writing) voice, it is difficult for their own voice to emerge. Our own writing topics need not be intensely personal; they just need to be important and true. We all have stories about our families, our hobbies, our friends, our neighbors, adventures we have experienced, that we can share with honesty and sentiment (with our students). We need to ‘come out’ as writers and tell those stories” (Routman 2000). So students need teachers who can and do model the writing process.

In *Creating Writers through Six Trait Writing* Vicki Spandel explains, “When teachers say, ‘I *use* the writing process,’ what they really mean, quite often, is ‘I *describe* the writing process to my

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students.' Describing achieves almost nothing. If we do not model the steps, students do not really understand what to do. You are modeling process for your students if you are doing these things..." (Spandel 2005) She goes on to list all the ways experienced writers model the writing process as they share their writing with their students. This is an essential step in the Six Traits of Writing, Writing Workshop, and all the other effective writing models. "Reading about it is helpful but it doesn't take us where we need to be as teachers. We need to *write*...Being writers ourselves teaches us the writing process from the inside out. This is a big step toward making the writing process successful in our classrooms" (Spandel 2005).

Research supports this point of view; "students whose teachers have special training in writing instruction perform significantly better than those with untrained teachers" (Pritchard & Marshall, 1994).

You may be wondering what type of training we are talking about. The *Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing* by the National

Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication says, "Programs for the preparation and continuing education of teachers of English and language arts, at all levels, should include opportunities for prospective and active teachers (which means all of us who are in education for writing needs to happen in each and every classroom and at all grade levels):

- To write... in a variety of forms... in response to a variety of authentic...situations in which our work will be read and responded to by others...
- To read and respond to the writings of students, classmates, and colleagues, (by) making supportive comments that express respect for others' ideas and feelings and encourage writers to use writing as a means of personal, academic, and professional growth, (and by) asking probing questions that help writers see what they have not expressed clearly and convincingly...
- To become perceptive readers of our own writing, so that we can ask questions about, clarify, and reshape what we are trying to express...
- To study and teach writing as a process...
- To experience writing as a way of learning which engages us in intellectual operations...
- To learn to assess the progress of individual writers by responding to complete pieces of their writing and

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studying changes in their writing (over time)...

- To study research and other scholarly work in the humanistic discipline of the teaching of writing...
- To study writing in relation to other disciplines..."(Conference on College Composition and Communication 1982 full text online <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/write/107683.htm>)

In short, highly-qualified, well-trained, teachers of writing need to know what it means to be a writer. "As is the case with many other



things people do, getting better at writing requires doing it—a lot. (That is true for teachers as well as students.) This means actual writing, not merely listening to lectures about writing, doing grammar drills, or discussing readings. The more people write, the easier it gets and the more they are motivated to do it. Writers who write a lot learn more about the process because they have had more experience inside it. Writers learn from each session with their hands on a keyboard or around a pencil as they draft, rethink, revise, and draft again"

(Writing Study Group of the NCTE



"Writers learn from each session with their hands on a keyboard or around a pencil as they draft, rethink, revise, and draft again" (Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee November 2004).

The more experience teachers have as writers the easier it will be for them to teach their students how to be writers. When you think about it, it makes sense and it is supported by the research that describes effective classroom writing programs as including the following:

- "Opportunity for students in all grades to write frequently with delayed or "as needed" instruction in grammar.
- **Teachers writing with students.**
- Students learning to write for many audiences and in many modes, including those required for subjects other than English.
- Non-threatening evaluation of student writing with emphasis on **revision rather than correction**" (Emphasis added) (Goldberg 1983; Graves 1978; Howard 1984 in Holbrook 1984)

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This type of classroom instruction requires a learner-centered approach delivered by a teacher that thoroughly understands the writing process in the way only an insider can, so the question becomes: How do we transform this staff of forty-five reluctant writers and all the other staffs like them into the highly-qualify, confident writers that they need to be to meet their students' needs?

The Solution

Surprisingly, the answer is simple. We follow a process that we know works, the one put forward by the National Writing Project. "Basically, the model involves teachers in intensive summer institute programs which immerse them in activities which reflect writing as a process. They participate in daily writing activities and sharing/critiquing sessions...At the beginning of the school year, they begin implementation of a similar program in their classrooms which includes teachers participating in daily writing activities with their students (Neill 1982). As the year progresses, teachers participate in ongoing, voluntary staff development programs which include the following elements: (1) theory and research

findings regarding effective composition instruction; (2) a focus on practical applications of theory and research; (3) attention to specific skill development; (4) time and opportunity to build writing and teaching skills; (5) opportunities to observe in other teachers' classrooms and (6) the involvement and support of administrators"(Cotton 1988).

This program has been so effective in producing verifiable student achievement results that the National Commission on Writing listed it as one of the best resources in writing improvement in the nation and selected it as a partner saying that the National Commission "will work with the National Writing Project...to improve the teaching of writing" (National Writing Commission 2006) across the nation. "As the number of National Writing Project sites and similar programs continues to grow, research results continue to indicate that this approach to teacher training does... result in students becoming more capable writers (Alloway, et al. 1979; ERIC Clearinghouse 1984; Neill 1982 in Cotton 1988). Indeed, the approach has produced such positive outcomes that, as

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Goldberg writes, ‘the National Writing Project is arguably the most successful in-service effort in the history of teacher education’” (Goldberg 1983 in Cotton 1988) and as an alumnus of the project, I can personally attest to its effectiveness and strongly recommend it. It is the model we should follow as we focus our efforts on increasing student achievement because we know it works for both the students and the staff.

Lessons Learned

We need to help teachers see themselves as capable, effective writers who are proficient users of the writing process. We need to give them time to explore research and try out new strategies, to observe in each other’s classrooms, to team teach and peer coach, to develop common formative assessments for learning in all areas of writing and analyze the results of the assessments in grade level and/or content area teams. In short, we need to help them develop *Professional Learning Communities* with *Teachers as Writers* as its central focus.

The National Staff Development Council explains the process of developing

Professional Learning Communities by saying that “staff development that has as its goal high levels of learning for all students, teachers, and administrators requires a form of professional learning that is quite different from the workshop-driven approach. The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis...for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning” (NSDC).

To create a professional learning community with writing as its focus, we need to provide the staff with ongoing, job-embedded professional development including full staff in-services held during faculty meetings or at other convenient times where teachers are immersed in the writing process and peer conferencing as they actively engage Writers’ Workshop and the Six

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Traits of Writing. These sessions need to be supported by ongoing, onsite coaching because “research emphasizes that coaching is a prerequisite for the implementation of new skills or strategies” (Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987 in DuFour & Berkey 1995). Therefore, “providing teachers with ongoing support after the initial training is critical to the success of any innovation” (DuFour & Berkey 1995). This is especially true with the formation of *Professional Learning Communities* and the implementation of staff development/student achievement initiatives like *Teachers as Writers* that ask teachers to change long-standing instructional practices, so “leaders need to assist teachers in improving their classroom performance...” (Hord 1997 b) by providing coaching to support the instructional changes they are asking their staffs to make if they want the initiatives to succeed.

In addition, research says, “effective professional development to improve classroom teaching concentrates on high learning standards and on evidence of students’ learning. It mirrors the kinds of teaching and learning expected in



classrooms. It is driven fundamentally by the needs and interests of participants

themselves, enabling adult learners to expand on content knowledge and practice that is directly connected with the work of their students in the classroom” (Corcoran 1995; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995; Little 1988; Elmore 2002 in Annenberg 2004). This explains why the National Writing Project is so successful in raising student writing achievement. It provides teachers with the perfect combination of support. By following a similar model where we provide the support in an onsite program, we can realize similar success in our own schools and districts.

Of course, this approach involves the commitment of resources, but think of how many resources we as a nation, as state, as a district, as a school, have expended in the past on all the writing approaches that have not systemically raised student achievement. Isn't it time we asked ourselves: “Wouldn't it be more effective to spend the same

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resources on increasing teacher efficacy in writing?" We know how to do it and we know that it works. How do we know? Independent research done on the National Writing Project and similar projects tells us so, and so does first hand experience.

Remember those the forty-five teachers, the ones that sat in front of me and said they hated writing? At the end the second session of teachers as writers, I asked them again, "How many of you like to write?" Over half the hands went up. Three weeks later, I asked them the same question and most of their hands went up as they eagerly started talking



about their own writing and the writing their students were doing. As I listened to their comments, I smiled to myself knowing that, "writing competence builds confidence, which readily turns into creativity and fun, precisely what is most frequently absent from the policy discussions about today's schools. As a nation, we can barely begin to imagine

how powerful K–16 education might be if writing were put in its proper focus. Facility with writing opens (teachers and) students up to the pleasure of exercising their minds in ways that drilling on facts, details, and information never will. More than a way of knowing, writing is an act of discovery" (National Writing Commission 2006). As one teacher put it, "Writing is painting with words," and as another said, "Writing is learning who I am—who we are." Those types of insight

only happen when teachers are actively engaged in the writing process and they are



exactly the types of insights that are needed to move writing instruction from a product-based approach to a learner-centered approach that results in the type of student achievement and active engagement that we all need to see not only as a school community but as a nation that relies on effective communication for its continued excellence and even its survival in a increasingly complex modern world.

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