

Imitation: A Common Sense Approach

by
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As in many areas of education, the "skill" of writing has been elevated to the status of "art," which it rightfully should be. However, this has often been to the detriment of children. Equating "good" with "creative" and "creative" with "good," many teachers, schools and curriculum publishers have taken an approach to teaching which more or less follows a "hands off" method of instruction. They seek to allow children to "express" themselves on paper without interfering with their freedom and creativity. Although well-intentioned, the "non-instruction" which results from this approach has little chance of helping the child develop confidence and competence in writing, proving particularly unhelpful for the reluctant writer, who most desperately needs to learn basic skills.

In a typical junior high school classroom, it is not uncommon to see students writing in their "journals," with teachers obediently respecting their "right" to write whatever they wish without criticism or correction; but what is the result of this? Arguably, it is a valuable activity to "freely" express ideas in words on paper, but one must again ask, what are the students really learning? Is this truly the best use of their time during those important formative years?

And what of the child who doesn't have the maturity to reflect on his experiences, feelings and thoughts about the events of life: Must his opportunity to learn to write become dependent on his ability to think of ideas? How do we teach thinking? How should we teach writing?

Actually, how do we learn to think? Often thought comes to us through "inner speech," as we hear ourselves "talking" in our head. Very young children will talk to themselves to make sense of the things they see and do. Our thoughts mature as the language patterns we learn as toddlers expand to encompass more complex concepts and their relationships. Without question, some people think more abstractly (thus the existence of the "right-brain" stereotype), but logical reasoning generally evolves from "thinking it through" with inner speech.

The storage of solid language patterns in the brain is of utmost importance for the development of excellent speaking and writing skills. How is this done? Obviously, by imitation! In the same way that as young children, we say what we hear, as young students, we should write what we read.

This idea is not new. From the old-school "copybooks" to the increasingly popular "Benjamin Franklin" method, imitation has been a common sense approach to teaching for centuries. Memorizing great chunks of Latin oratory, students in ancient Rome used imitation to master the skill of rhetoric. Only in the last 20-30 years has the great god of "creativity" in art upstaged the tradition of imitation in building a foundation of skills. Did Leonardo da Vinci advise his students to "express themselves" on canvas? No, he had them copy his Mona Lisa, and there are dozens of Mona Lisa imitations today to prove it. Did the great cellist Pablo Casals suggest that his students choose their own bowings, fingerings and dynamics in the Bach partitas they played? No, Casals had them imitate his style with absolute precision, and only when every nuance of their performance was absolutely identical to his, did

he say, "Now you know enough to do it differently than me." Why teach writing any differently?

Throughout the U.S. and Canada, schools and administrators, parents and legislatures are concerned about the poor showing of students on writing assessments. They are perplexed. New curriculums, revised textbooks and increased classroom technology have not improved results over the past two decades. It seems confusing, but why should we be surprised?

Being so much a product of their environment, the children themselves will prove the efficacy of the teaching method they have endured. Recently, education and language arts experts have been scrambling to devise rubrics, models and processes, strategies and applications to help children quickly develop the abilities they currently seem to lack. Although these various state standards have been moderately successful in helping teachers specify the capabilities children should have, they have done little to assist the teachers in nurturing these skills in their students. Perhaps a look to compare the methods of the present with those of past is in order.

The State of California Language Arts Content Standards, Grade 4, Section 2.0, which is termed Writing Applications (genres & their characteristics), suggests that by the end of fourth grade, students should be able to:

2.1. - write narratives on incidents that:

- (1) relate ideas, observations, and/or memories
- (2) provide a context to enable the reader to imagine the world of the event or experience.
- (3) use concrete sensory details
- (4) provide insight into why this incident is memorable.

How many adults could do that, let alone teach a child to do so? Very few. The only method of effectively teaching this would be by example. Reading a sample or two would not be enough. For almost all ten year old children, it would be best for them to first practice on someone else's narrative (preferably a well done autobiographical excerpt), taking key words from key ideas and re-writing that person's experience (perhaps several times with several samples), before they would even begin to internalize the nature of "concrete sensory details," or intuitively know how to "provide a context to enable the reader to imagine the world of the event." Very, very few children could meet this "writing standard" using one of their own memories or experiences without having had the opportunity to first read and write about incidents in the lives of others which already fulfill these requirements.

Perhaps it will take another decade of frustration with assessments and standards until we realize that what is now being done in schools does not work as well as the common sense methods that were used centuries ago. Writing is indeed an "art," and should be taught as art has classically been taught, with step-by-step guidance, continuous practice, and plenty of opportunity for imitation.

