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Write First: Putting Writing before Reading is an Effective Approach to Teaching and Learning

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**Write First:
Putting Writing before Reading is an Effective Approach to Teaching and Learning**

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Abstract

The phrase “reading and writing” reflects the implicit assumption that reading comes first and that writing must follow. First graders can “write” all the words they can say, albeit in their own manner and using invented spelling. Encouraging this kind of writing gives children control over letters and texts, giving them an understanding that they need ultimately for reading. The word *learning* itself tends to promote reading over writing because we often assume learning refers to input, not output, that it’s a matter of putting other people’s ideas inside us. Writing is more caught up with meaning making, however, and encourages students to break out of their characteristically passive stance in school and in learning. “Reading tends to imply ‘Sit still and pay attention’, whereas writing tends to imply ‘Get in there and do something.’” It’s not the case that putting writing first--output before input--will encourage rampant individualism. Reading and writing are joined, in fact, at the hip. Students will put more care into reading when they have had more of a chance to write.

The title of this article--“Writing and Reading”--violates the habitual rhythm of our tongues. We usually say “reading and writing,” so it sounds as though I’m putting the cart before the horse. But I call *writing* the horse. Nothing can be read unless it was first written.

Consider this scene. First graders in their classroom are writing stories--or rather drawing pictures and writing pieces of their stories underneath each picture. Here’s part of one story:

- A picture with two human figures. Text: “Me and Mommy drove to Star Market.”
- An obscure picture of two shapes intersecting. Text: “I opened the car door and it bumped the car next to us.”
- A picture of two human figures with lots of bubbles coming out of one of their faces. Text: “The man shouted at Mommy.”

I standardized the text. What the student actually wrote for the first picture was this: “me an mommmy wn to staa maaktt.” Besides the spelling problems, the letters vary wildly in size and wander around the picture; there are often no spaces between words (see Calkins, 1983). Nevertheless, every word is there, and the child can read it back to you word for word (as long as you don’t wait too long to ask). A teacher or parent who gets to know that child and his or her tricks of spelling can pretty reliably read the writing.

Teachers or parent helpers often compile these pictures and type the text in standard “grown-up” spelling, then bind the pages together with a hard cover to make a book. Students “write” multiple books during the year, which the teacher puts in a prominent spot in the classroom library. Students learn to read by reading their own and one another’s books. This scene is happening in many kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade classrooms around the United

States. I'd call it the most far-reaching change in education--in our very conception of literacy--that has happened in centuries.

First graders are not well positioned for reading: They can read only the words they have learned to read or sound out--a fairly small lexicon. But they are beautifully positioned for writing: They can *write* all the words they can *say*. Even younger children who don't know the alphabet can write if they have seen other people write: they just scribble, scribble, scribble--but with meaning, and they can "read" their "writing" back to you. All that's needed is to invite them to use invented spelling or kid spelling, whatever letters come easily.

Once this door is opened, teachers find that it helps teach reading. The process of writing helps children comprehend written language and control letters and texts, an understanding that they need for reading. Children no longer think of books as something impersonal--like arithmetic workbooks--written by a corporate, faceless "they." They realize that books are the products of people like themselves trying to communicate with other people like themselves.

Donald Graves and several others deserve enormous credit for this discovery: Very young children can write *before* they can read, can write *more* than they can read, and can write *more easily* than they can read--because they can write *anything they can say* (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Sowers, 1982). Why did it take us so long to discover this root, brute fact? Plenty of children down through the ages must have scribbled meaningful writing before they could read or spell; plenty of grown-ups must have noticed. But somehow no one *really* noticed. Or else they noticed and called it aberrant or wrong.

Input or Output?

We could blame our blindness on the phrase "reading and writing," but that phrase--and the sequence it implies--merely encapsulates a deep cultural construction embedded in everyday language. Literally, the word *literacy* means power over letters--that is, over both writing and reading. But used casually (and in government policy and legislation), literacy tends to mean *reading*, not writing. The words *academic*, *professor*, and even *teacher* tend to connote a reader and critic more than a writer, so deeply has the dominance of reading infected our ways of thinking.

The word *learning* also tends to connote reading and input--not writing and output. Our very conception of learning favors reading over writing because the concepts of learning and reading draw on the same root metaphor. *Learning is input*: taking things in, putting things inside us. People think of listening and reading--not talking and writing--as the root activities in school. (An old tradition has not fully disappeared: Talking is the crime and writing the punishment.) If we stop to think about it, we realize that students learn from output--talking and writing. But we don't naturally think of learning as talking and writing. Notice, for example, how many teachers think of assessment or testing as measuring input, not output. Tests tend to ask, in effect, "How well have you learned others' ideas?"

When I ask people to describe a more writing-friendly model of assessment, they suggest questions like this: "How well can students build new thoughts out of what they have studied?" That's a good model--yet notice how it's still a covert test of input. We need to stretch our cultural habits to realize that we could also have tests that say, "What new ideas

can the student come up with?" Such a model seems to be an inadequate test of learning, yet it would, in fact, measure learning and reflect skills that students need for school, work, and life.

In most school and college courses, reading is more central than writing. There is usually only one writing course: some kind of "freshman writing." A sprinkling of creative writing or other advanced writing courses is available to comparatively few students. Departments other than English and journalism typically have no writing courses at all.

Of course, writing is assigned in many courses in many disciplines, although some students in large universities manage to avoid writing for their entire college career. But when writing is assigned, it traditionally serves reading: The student summarizes, interprets, explains, integrates, or makes comparisons among readings.

The Unexamined Dominance of Reading

Our sense of reading as the horse and of writing as the cart derives from the problematic banking metaphor of learning: the deep assumption that students are vessels to fill. But if we put the real horse forward and emphasize writing, we extricate ourselves from the banking trap and make use of a better metaphor: *Learning is the making of meaning*. This helps explain much that is otherwise paradoxical. For example, the more we write and talk, the more we have left to write and say. The greater the number of words that come out of us, the greater the number of words we find left inside. And when students feel empty--"I have nothing to say, nothing on my mind"--the cause is not insufficient input but insufficient output. Talking and writing put words and thoughts *into* students' heads. These facts are not paradoxical when we understand that learning consists of making new connections and thus new meanings.

When we stop privileging reading over writing and put the real horse--writing--in front, we stop privileging passivity over activity. I grant the usefulness of the currently fashionable formulations: that reading is "really writing" (actively creating meaning), and writing is "really reading" (passively finding what culture and history have inscribed in our heads). These formulations carry genuine and useful truth, but in the end, writing promotes more psychological and physical engagement than reading.

For example, reading tends to imply "Sit still and pay attention," whereas writing tends to imply "Get in there and *do* something." Reading means that the teacher and author chose the words; writing means that the student chose the words. Reading asks, "What did *they* have to say?" whereas writing asks, "What do *you* have to say?" Reading means consumption; writing means production. Putting reading first encourages passivity by locating agency and authority away from the student, keeping it in the teacher or institution, and it locks schools into sending students a pervasive message: Don't speak until spoken to, and don't write your own ideas until you prove you can reproduce correctly the ideas of others. When we make writing as important as reading, however, we help students break out of their characteristically passive stance in school and learning.

We also shouldn't overlook the importance of the physical dimension. Students are more awake and involved after they write than after they read. The next time a class discussion turns listless, stop and have everyone read a helpful piece of text. But notice how much more energized students become if--in the same situation--you ask them to write for a few minutes. Even with reading, the physical dimension is enlivening: The physical act of reading out loud--

especially if the student uses gestures--has a positive influence on the mental cognitive dimension.

Reading's dominance is also linked to a cultural fear: "We must put reading before writing--input before output--or else we'll invite romantic solipsism and rampant individualism. Students will disappear into cocoons of isolation." This fear rests on a model of individual development that most readers of this journal will recognize as misguided--a kind of parody of Freud and Piaget: "Children start out as egocentric little monads dominated by solipsistic desires to stay separate and egocentric. They cannot become 'decentered' or social without a terrible struggle." It's as though we fear that our students are each in their own little bathroom, and we must beat on the door and say, "What are you *doing* in there? Why have you been in there so long with the door locked? Come out and have some wholesome fun with us!"

A different model of development that derives from thinkers like George Herbert Meade, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Lev Vygotsky now seems more acceptable: Our children *start out* social and intertwined. Their little selves are not hermetically sealed atoms; instead, they are deeply enmeshed in the important figures in their lives. We don't have to struggle to make children connect with others--They already are naturally connected. We don't have to bang on the bathroom door to make them listen, feel part of, and collaborate with the people and cultural forces around them. They may not want to listen to *us*, but that doesn't make them private and solipsistic. (It's usually the more private and solipsistic kids that listen best to us teachers.)

Separateness and autonomy are not qualities that children start out with but rather qualities they gradually achieve--often with struggle and setbacks throughout adolescence and young adulthood. It can be a slow and difficult process for individuals to achieve that autonomous sense of self that enables them to think and act in ways that their community may disapprove of. Writing, in this instance, is a particularly powerful tool for helping adolescents reflect, listen, converse with themselves, and tackle both cultural messages and peer pressures.

Implications for Teaching

Write Hunches

Students invariably read better if they write first--if they start by writing their own thoughts about a topic that the class will tackle in a text. Even if the topic is scientific, factual, or technical, and students know little or nothing about it, I say, "Write your hunches about this topic--even your fantasies. What do you *wish* were true?"

For example, before having students read an essay about dropping out of school, I might ask them to freewrite about whether they think the number of dropouts has gone up or down in recent decades--and speculate about the causes of dropping out. Before reading an analysis and proposal about environmental degradation, students might speculate about the causes and suggest solutions of their own. Before doing an experiment that involves rolling balls of different weights down inclined planes, students might speculate about the results. Starting with writing rather than with reading highlights how learning and thinking work best: as a process of hypothesis-making and hypothesis-adjustment--where the mind is active rather than passive.

After this writing, students are more attentive to what the author wrote--sometimes out of mere curiosity to see how their fantasies match the material. This kind of writing also

makes students braver about questioning an alleged authority. For example, when students are asked to read an interpretation of something they find farfetched--such as a strongly Marxist or psychoanalytic “take” or some “over-intellectual” explanation--they often just tune out and say to themselves, “This is nuts!” If they write first and try to work out a hypothesis of their own, they may in fact be *more* resistant to the text, but they will, at least, be *engaged in the problem--* which just doesn’t happen when they say, “This is nuts!” Now they have an *intellectual relationship* to ideas in the text.

Write in the Mode

The previous examples focused on content. A comparable approach can help students better understand the forms that writing takes. If we are studying imaginative writing (fiction, poetry, or literary nonfiction), I have students try out the forms that I want them to understand: Tell the story as a flashback; tell it through the eyes of an unreliable narrator; use a certain stanza. Students find this writing less intimidating if they do it as a low-stakes playful exercise *before* reading the “great work of art.” As they get braver, they can write at greater length after discussing the published piece.

Before we read pieces of analytic or academic writing, I ask students to experiment with various forms: a frankly partisan argument where you reveal yourself openly; an argument that strives to be dispassionate where you try to keep yourself out; an analysis that tries to clarify and understand a complexity rather than make an argument. As we self-consciously try out these forms--sometimes as playful exercises, sometimes as serious revised essays--students learn to read more intelligently.

Write Movies of the Reader’s Mind

We saw how writing helps 1st graders learn the difficult process of reading. Writing can help students at the college level as well by providing them with a metacognitive understanding of the nature of the reading process. Most students have been taught by a writing teacher to draft, get feedback, and revise (even if many of them skip this sequence when they can). Most students can see how writing is a process of slowly constructed meaning, often socially negotiated through feedback. They have learned that clarity is *not* what we start with, but what we work towards. Fewer students are prey to the once-common myth that good writers sit down and produce excellent writing as a first draft out of some magical genius place in their heads.

But reading is much quicker and more hidden than writing. Students are therefore more prey to the myth that reading is a process in which experts look at texts and immediately see perfectly formed meanings hidden there--meanings that ordinary folk can’t see. Students have a harder time understanding that reading is just like writing: a process of cognitive (and social) construction where *everyone* goes through a process of building up meanings from cues in the text. The only building blocks, however, are the word meanings already inside readers’ heads. Just as in writing, clarity is not what we start with in reading, but what we work towards.

We can use writing to help students understand this concept. When they understand it, they read better. What helps clarify the process is capturing elusive “rough drafts of reading”-- what I call “movies of the reader’s mind.” I present a text in fragments. After each fragment, I

have students quickly write down everything that's going on in their minds: their reactions, their interpretations. For example, after being given the title and the first several sentences of a text, a student might write, "It seems to be about X. Some kind of analysis or story or argument. I have a hunch that I'm going to like [not like] this piece." After reading the next couple of paragraphs, the student might write, "Oh, now I see it's doing something different from what I thought. It's making me think of X and Y, and it's reminding me of Z from my past experience [my past reading]." I try for three to five interruptions of this sort regardless of the length of the piece. I also have students record changes in their reactions and interpretations after they read the piece a second time. The reflective writing after the first fragment might take only two minutes--but the writings get longer with subsequent fragments. This process flushes out the misreadings and wrong takes that are inevitable and natural even with expert readers. It often helps for the teacher to be the guinea pig for the class and record movies of his or her mind with a text encountered for the first time (see Curtis, 2001).

The Horse *and* the Cart

I'm *not* arguing that reading is less important than writing. Nor am I saying, "Let's put writing first because students already read well." Many students are remarkably *bad* at reading. But weakness in reading often stems from neglect of writing. Students will put more care and attention into reading when they've had more of a chance to write what's on their minds and when they've been given more opportunities to assume the role of writer. This is not an either/or argument, and the writing/reading connection is not a zero-sum game.*

*This essay draws on an earlier longer essay: "The War Between Reading and Writing--and How to End It." *Rhetoric Review* 12.1 (Fall 1993): 5-24.

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