

IS IT THE 'WRITE' WAY? ®

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Wrong reason for the 'write' choice?

As with most qualitative research, the findings of this project were unexpected. What began as an 'illuminative evaluation' (Patton 1990) of a journalism course in one university soon assumed importance, not for the program in focus, but the numerous secondary school institutions that had pedagogically spawned the respondents.

From this point on we want you the reader to take part in what Mayher (1990) calls the 'doubting game'. We want you to assume a mantle of doubt in which you critically assess, doubt the findings and creatively reflect on what has been written. The following paragraphs are intended not to act as a polemic, but to inform 'critical reflection'.

Just as Ben-Peretz (1994:2) used memory as the mode for revealing how teaching "experience was transformed into professional wisdom", so we have extended this notion by taking the viewpoint of the student. We now ask that you approach this data through Van Manen's (1991) bi-focal viewpoint of 'tact' and 'thoughtfulness'. Read this paper with 'a considerate and empathic regard for the needs and ideas of another, ... and a propensity for critical reflection' (Van Manen 1991:10).

For us, our 'critical reflection' began after the initial data was 'analytically massaged' and we applied an amended version of Lee's (1993) coding scheme. This consisted of a template by which we overlaid the data with four basic questions. These were:

- What was the nature of the task-teacher interaction?
- What was the nature of the procedure-related interaction?
- What was the nature of the socio-emotional interaction?
- What was the nature of the non-specific task interaction?

Having taught in typical schools prior to moving into the tertiary field, we were both pleasantly surprised when the initial pilot surveys came in. Of the 81 respondents, 83% named a teacher as the primary reason they had chosen journalism as a career. A further 15% claimed that it was a primary teacher that had been instrumental in funneling them into the notion that they could write well, thus ultimately leading into their career choice. Our elation soon turned to surprise as the first round of interviews were completed, and complete bewilderment when all of the data had been analysed. It was not clearly demonstrable writing ability that has been the dominant force (although it probably existed in some form), it was the teacher's ability to engage the students in a personal relationship and a relationship with text that were the critical inertia points. In other words, in this particular study the curriculum, clearly articulated writing ability and tertiary benchmarks had been supplanted by a teacher's personality and subsequent ability to make the student feel "a being of a certain sort in an environment of a certain sort" (Lakoff 1987:292).

The 'Write' Feel and the 'Write' Environment

The 81 students who volunteered to take part in this study (survey and follow up interview) clearly remember that it was a particular English teacher that had become a 'significant other' in their lives. The highly subjective lens, through which these students viewed their teacher and ultimately themselves, was centered around Cambourne's (1988) notion of 'engagement'. In order of importance, the cluster of filters or 'categories of engagement' surrounding this viewpoint included:

- ***Engagement with the teacher as a the 'creator of relationships'.***

She had a cheeky wit and an open mind to things that most others teachers didn't. She treated students more like an equal and a friend, rather than a lowly student. (AFa: Second Year Student)

Apparently, the chief condition of engagement with writing began as a developing relationship with the teacher. For each respondent, memories of this person revolved around terms such as 'caring and concerned'. The relationship soon developed into a series of interactions in which the student saw the teacher as someone who was genuinely concerned for them as a person and reacted to their problems in a caring and positive manner. This rapport was further enhanced when the teacher apparently shared incidents from their personal life and consistently offered a reciprocal rapport and respect for the student as an individual.

It would also seem that various forms of humour, including sarcasm, were involved in the development of the relationship. Sarcasm was not used as a 'put down' but was a form of reciprocal interaction during which the student claimed they got to know the teacher on a more intimate level.

Giving each other a hard time made them (the teacher) more human, more approachable. (JFd Female Second Year Student).

Another common element expressed was the idea that the student often felt as if they were the only one in the class. Each respondent also felt empowered by their teacher, viewing them more as a mentor. Memories of themselves as active learners in each and every session is combined with the viewpoint that the teacher took every opportunity to give the student individual responsibility.

While generally dissatisfied with their secondary schooling as a whole, the teacher with whom they identified also appeared to be characterised by an almost an irreverent attitude in that their adherence to the curriculum seemed to be a veneer. Each student was forced to question in these classes as opposed to simply "copying from the board and reciting stuff chapter and verse" (Bme First Year male Student). Tied in with this notion of being different was the constant referral to the vocabulary and turn of phrase these teachers possessed. Each teacher apparently used language as a tool of not only engaging the student's interest through humour, but also challenging their understanding by giving them a platform of vocabulary that reframed the text and writing that the class focusing on.

It should be noted that for these former secondary students, a simple statement made by their teachers such as, 'you should be a journalist' was now taken as being a critical incident when making a decision in regards to which career path to follow.

• ***Engagement with the teacher as the 'demonstrator of nuance'.***

Mr. 'G' (name supplied) stood out because he was the spitting image of Edgar Allan Poe. He got caught up in his books which inspired us to do the same.
(TFb: First year female student)

This view of the teacher would seem to follow quite closely on the heels of the previous category, in that once the relationship had begun to develop the student paid much closer attention to what the teacher was saying and the language used in the text that was being discussed or modeled. Typically, the student now viewed their novels or texts as something much more than simple literary investigation. Respondents claim that they now paid much more attention to the textual elements that their teachers seemed to 'really enjoy, ... reflecting and thinking about these textual features a new light' (TFc: first year male student).

Although highly subjective in nature, this facet of the teacher-pupil relationship seemed to have one important spin-off in that 75% of these students also believed that they now began to 'tune into books' in a way that they never previously had. Literary techniques and devices took on a new meaning and depth of appreciation.

Almost a third of these students reported that they now actively began to reflect on their writing, drawing on the textual features they had seen in their English classes. The same percentage of students also claimed that they also read more and that this eventually became a major force in their ability to write.

I attribute my choice of becoming a journalist as now reading extensively. I was influenced by quality articles and books. (FM5 Male Third Year Student)

It should be noted that only one student claimed that he had received any formal instruction in respect to genre and associated grammar.

• ***Engagement with the teacher as the 'valuer of individual difference'.***

He was an excitable and exciting person who always had time for everyone. He had wispy hair. He listened to every point of view. He never forced his own view on us. He always had room in his head for every unique view on the texts. (TMa: First year male student)

A strong theme coming from this data was the student's belief that these teachers not only valued individual difference and creativity, but endorsed these ideas constantly in their classes. It would seem that the students who had engaged with these teachers saw these ideas embedded in every major language transaction. For some of these students this created some degree of tension because all had realised that the courses they were involved in were very much curriculum driven. All felt that their teachers had managed to weave a path through this dilemma by given them the 'language tools' they needed to pass their exams while simultaneously providing them with the drive 'find their own feet' and opportunity to express their own individual differences.

Many of the respondents made special reference to the fact that while they had enjoyed these English classes immensely, they felt let down by the system in that it did not allow

them to fully explore their new found gifts and notions of individuality. A common sub theme running through their responses was the need for secondary schools to provide a general base while also providing opportunities for individual students to explore their own interests and talents.

• ***Engagement with writing as an 'indwelling reader'.***

*I remember that I now saw writing as being much the same as reading. (Amc
Third Year Female Student)*

It would seem that after having engaged with the teacher and the process of reading, these students began to "read like writers and write like readers" (Smith 1983:564). In other words they used print as a reflective tool. They came to appreciate style, textual devices and language patterns in the texts they studied and began to apply them in their own writing. Some of the respondents reported that it was like having an 'inner voice' and that they read their own work in light of the inner reflection that was constantly 'tagging along with their own work' (PI2 Female Third year Student).

Implications for the student's 'write of passage'

Although this study was somewhat limited by scale and scope it does suggest that in a time when educational institutions of all kinds are coming under the increasing pressures of accountability, there is need for even greater scrutiny in respect to the twin notions of 'teacher quality and effectiveness' and 'links between educational institutions'. The former point has been the focus of intense discussion and criticism (Gannicott 1997, Kemp 1997), while the latter has received virtually no consideration at all despite the supposed need for improving it.

Teacher Effectiveness

While it could be argued that the respondents in this study believed that they had received effective education and the subsequent impetus to pursue a respectable career, the decisions they made in regard to their career choice were based on extremely flimsy and subjective ideals. This raises several key questions in regard to what actually constitutes 'quality teaching'. Indeed this notion has been the subject of debate within a research field that is at times confusing (Aspin, Chapman and Wilkinson 1994), and speculative (NSW Department of Education 1994). This study highlights several key issues;

- What is the actual nature of quality teaching?
- Could quality teaching be confused with effective teaching?
- Does the difference between the two really matter?
- What is the role of the curriculum in developing writing ability, and how does this fit into journalism as a career choice?

Although extremely tentative, the findings of this study give some insight into the nature of 'quality teaching'. Given the reflection of the respondents it could be argued that the characteristics of quality teaching include:

- infectious enthusiasm (Killen 1996)
- evaluative feedback (Barry and King 1994)
- spontaneous positive reaction to student achievement (Brophy 1982)
- use of student ideas and contributions as part of the learning process (Borich 1992)

As we read through the data we could not but help wonder why our respondents viewpoints were at variance with most of the current research in this area. For us, herein lies the crucial point. Perhaps current research data in regard to the nature of quality teaching is flawed in that it is ill defined despite the relative depth of research. It also seems to be dominated by a viewpoint that equates quality and effectiveness with instructional practice and student outcomes.

We have no problem with the notion that effective teaching must of necessity be constituted by sound instructional practices and strategies. However our data suggests that a teacher's ability to engage students in the learning process is of equal importance. While effective classroom practice such as providing structure (Killen 1996), effective questioning (Cole and Chan 1994) and probing discussion (Zahorik 1994) provide some of the mechanisms through which children are given the opportunity to learn, they do not in themselves guarantee that learning will take place (Killen 1996). We would argue that this aspect of teaching has become mechanistic in application and process-product oriented to the point where the research into teacher effectiveness appears to have dismissed the notion of 'engagement' as a fundamental in the learning process.

[Children] tend to engage with demonstrations given by those whom [they] want to emulate. (Cambourne 1988:54)

Links between Educational Institutions

While career choice is a process and is not comprised of a single event (Super and Bohn 1971), the indications that teacher specific comments and the relationship that allows engagement with language and literature can steer students into considering a career have profound implications for teachers and career advisors.

While the reasons why students select journalism as a career has not been widely studied, Alysén and Oakham (1996) confirmed our findings to some extent. They found that most students selected journalism because of what they termed a "Jana Wendt factor", that is they wanted to be famous, travel and be on television. The idea that journalism is something rather different and involved engagement with text (both in print and broadcasting) was also not evident.

Pearson's (1988) survey of 207 applicants for cadetships at four eastern newspapers revealed a mostly female cohort in which about half had a strong bent for English at high school and a big majority considered journalism to be 'creative' (Pearson 1988:131). Herein lies another danger when comparing teacher's comments and student's career choice.

When questioned by journalism academics, editors consistently say they want their journalists to be good writers but this notion is a far cry from the school-based view of good writing. Good writing for editors and journalists is very simple, concise and tight, with a minimum of adjectives and even less comment, individual thought and opinion. In other words, good writing for teachers and students bears no relationship to good writing for editors and journalists. Indeed, many journalism academics find that those students who are reported to 'write well' by teachers find it extraordinarily difficult to come to grips with a journalistic form and structure for news writing and features.

It is here that stronger links between secondary schools, tertiary institutions and employers could provide the key to the knowledge and experience that each section of the community has to exchange and work with. With the strongest factor for choice of a journalism career being the simple praise from a teacher and the subsequent ensuing relationship, it would appear that a more formalised and substantive emphasis be placed on the career advisor position and role.

In regard to journalism (and more than likely other vocations) there needs to be closer links made between schools, tertiary institutions and the media industry. The current 'work experience' program operating in NSW schools needs to be expanded to incorporate an integrated program or 'co-operative education program' (Stern et al 1995), which sees secondary school students and tertiary students experiencing the actual conditions of a working journalist to a much larger degree. Too often students in lower years, such as Year 10, spend a fleeting time in a busy newsroom where it looks exciting, active and creative. They often do not engage in text, because they are not researching, interviewing and writing the facts into a cogent news story. While they are observing others performing the work of journalists, it seems they only see external connections and not the hard work that goes into constructing news, including the engagement with text as the basis for the communication.

Stemming from the preceding issue is one that touches on the English curriculum. It would seem that some secondary schools should consider having a more focused English curriculum. It is also apparent that the curriculum needs to be much more practical and genre intensive than currently exists. Anecdotal evidence and a review of Media and English curricula by the authors indicate that much of the study of media and journalism in secondary schools focuses on media studies and critiquing outcomes of TV shows etc., rather than providing a whole understanding of the context in which journalists work.

A focus on 'cultural studies' may also give many students the wrong impression of what journalists actually do and the context in which they work. Few works written in a literary journalism genre are studied. Hemingway and Tom Wolfe occasionally appear on the reading list but literary journalism consistently remains hidden in the background. This lack of literary knowledge is a major issue for journalism educators. Literary journalism, which stemmed from Capote and Wolfe, to name just two, is an important link to modern literature and writing which should not be ignored. This form of literature is also an invaluable way of having students inculcated into the format and structure of writing news.

This is not to say that other forms of literature should be neglected. Because so many of our constructs, everyday phrases and understanding of life comes from traditional literature ranging from the Bible to Shakespeare these too are important. Broadening the range of literature and the understanding of literary devices would obviously aid those students considering journalism and communication as a career.

Another important consideration, but one that is fraught with difficulty, is the need for journalism faculties to be more selective in respect to their student intake. If this set of respondents is indication of student choice in selecting career paths, it would appear that it

would serve the faculties (and the students) well to introduce either a new mode of induction into the field. This could either take the form of an initial trial period based on an apprenticeship model, or the introduction of new selection criteria which move beyond the highly idealistic and subjective notions unearthed in this project.

Presently, universities throughout Australia have differing selection criteria when selecting prospective journalism students. While these are constantly criticised and reviewed, there appears to be little change. RMIT in Melbourne has an interview, written skills and general knowledge test and Charles Sturt University has a written test with further consideration is given to the tertiary entrance score, now the UAI. The University of Canberra bases its selection entirely on the UAI which would appear to have little correspondence to a student's ability to readily adapt to journalistic form and style.

Although still small in scope and structure, current research into the links between tertiary institutions and school show that students may not have accurate self-perceptions, precise information about job requirements and may have difficulty accurately matching self-perception and job pre-requisites. Weeding out subjective notions and excessively unrealistic expectations of students wishing to entering journalism would ensure that students find study more rewarding and useful. The rate of attrition may also be reduced.

Finally, we would argue that the love of and engagement with text does remain the most critical factor to a student's success in a journalism course and their ensuing working life. This 'engagement' factor needs to be nurtured by teachers; fostered by correct knowledge, developed through clear understanding and at much earlier stages

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