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I don't see this happening; and I live in California! This book is James Moffett in evolution, not English education.

Personally, instead of contemplating mantras, yantras, and tantra, I prefer to read Moffett’s early books. Every time I do I come away enlightened—about what English is and how to teach it.


Reviewed by Gordon M. Pratl, New York University

This volume represents the final stage in the demographic research Applebee reported on in *Writing in the Secondary School* (1981). In the initial stage of his national study, supported for three and a half years by NIE, he was concerned with the broad picture of what kinds and amounts of writing were occurring in the classrooms of American high schools. In the current book, he takes an in-depth look at one exemplary California school to attempt to understand better how students develop their writing abilities during their high school years. The attempt here is to look at this phenomenon both from the perspective of the students, including their understandings, feelings, and strategies as they engage in writing, and from the perspective of those who shape the writing context: the teachers and the planners of the curriculum. Specifically, Applebee has asked: (1) how do students come to decipher the intellectual task required in the analytic writing which teachers assign and claim to value? and (2) how is writing for students constrained when it occurs merely as a way of enabling teachers to evaluate students’ previous learning of information? He has been helped in this effort by a team of graduate assistants and Judith Langer, who have contributed chapters to the present volume. Although it is difficult to imagine the book having a very wide audience, given the fact that it is a research report, its insights into schools and teaching and its general clarity of presentation make it an excellent work to be recommended for both teacher-training courses and research foundations courses in Writing and English Education.

In this research, fifteen students across the academic spectrum, including four from ESL, were followed for 16 months to ascertain the kinds of texts they wrote, and the amount and kinds of instruction they received. The students were also interviewed about their composing strategies and their previous histories as writers. Although in most instances the students ended up learning more about writing than would be predicted from an examination of their writing experiences, clearly the dominant mode of writing was low-level exposition to a teacher as examiner.

The research team also examined the approach to writing taken by a variety of textbooks from across the curriculum. As an indirect measure of the school writing environment, this dimension of Applebee’s study revealed singularly dismal results, however anticipated they may have been. In selecting 21 representative texts (3 for each of 7 subject areas), the team analyzed 90,485 individual items representing 15,279 separate exercises distributed through 13,561 pages of textbook material, looking particularly at the length of writing tasks and their intended audience. In most cases they were to write short answers directed to the teacher as examiner. Such a pattern, of course, is consistent with the traditional role of textbooks, which serve to reinforce the “transmission” view of education so predominant in our culture.

It is precisely the exposure of this disjunction, namely between the educational philosophy implied by the “process” or “interpretative” approaches to writing supposedly in vogue today and the belief systems underlying the contrary practices found even in many of our best schools, that makes Applebee’s timely volume so crucial in the heated debate over both writing and the nature of learning in American education today. In a chapter examining the values of and the actual teaching of writing by two teach-
ers, one in social studies, the other in science, we are given numerous examples of how well-intended attempts to engage students in meaningful writing activities are consistently undercut by the mechanistic philosophy dominating the curriculum, one which almost exclusively prizes information transfer. Sadly, even the teachers themselves finally share such a model for their discipline. In such a climate, the world of knowledge exists as a search for pre-determined answers, never as a genuine engagement with the problematic.

Those committed to writing and learning as primary ways of constructing meaning in the world must wonder why such important beliefs are not more widely enacted. In brief, to find the answer requires us to fathom the coherence and purpose that do exist in the present circumstances as experienced by the teacher. We must, in other words, begin to appreciate how new process-centered activities can threaten a teacher’s traditional role in the classroom. Since the issues of ownership and control are everywhere present in these teachers’ lives, we should not be surprised at the model of human intellectual activity that is being valued at any given moment in our schools. Under such circumstances it is little wonder that Applebee found that the teachers’ purposes for writing are frequently at odds with the purposes of their students.

Applebee’s wisdom, and the reason why he has come to be one of the leading researchers in the profession, is that he resists any self-righteous condemnation of the contradictory educational scenes he has so carefully uncovered. Thus he can prove helpful to those who genuinely seek to understand the culture of the school and not simply attack it. To effect change, Applebee sees that we will need to pay more attention to the interaction of teachers’ beliefs and behaviors. For, despite all our concern with the externals of education, from textbooks to testing, teachers remain the key socializing links in the delivery chain of learning and knowledge. It is finally they who convene and determine the nature of the “writing event.” Therefore, a continuing challenge for both researchers and teacher trainers is how teachers come to either reject or internalize new approaches to writing instruction.

Beat Not the Poor Desk: Writing, What to Teach, How to Teach It and Why, Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1982, 212 pages).

Reviewed by H. F. Dowling, Towson State University, Baltimore, Maryland

It’s frustrating to review Beat Not. It won a Mina Shaughnessy award from the MLA as an outstanding book in teaching language and literature, and Boynton/Cook has since published the authors’ student text, The Common Sense, based on principles developed in Beat Not. Yet the book is idiosyncratic; many teachers will surely disagree with parts of it and thus spurn the authors’ suggestion that its approach be adopted totally or not at all.

The principles behind the book are, collectively, quite innovative. Beat Not ranges widely, and even offers a detailed class-by-class syllabus for a basic college writing class. However, its heart lies in its early sections. The preface sets forth the authors’ method: students will discover inductively a coherent set of writing skills through incremental repetition in the act of writing itself. Among the authors’ principles, also listed in the preface, are these:

1. Writing instruction should focus on teaching skills rather than on process or product. Ponsot and Deen optimistically believe that through constant practice, these elemental skills will perfect themselves without having to be measured or tested.

2. Students should control their own writing. They should learn by writing, not from teachers’ rules for or theories about writing. Teachers should refrain from giving topic or process suggestions, for these intrude on student idea-forming and shaping. Teachers should even abstain from judgmental comments on student writings, limiting themselves to making observations about problems in the writing. (Like much in