

DONALD GRAVES' WRITING: TEACHERS AND CHILDREN AT WORK: A REVIEW ESSAY

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For ten years now, since the completion of his 400 page dissertation, Donald Graves has been our profession's great describer, like an Orwell taking great delight in apparently useless scraps of information, gathering filing cabinets full of raw data, constructing the most sweeping yet coherent model of writing yet to emerge in the 1980s. The data from his NIE study of first- and third-graders at Atkinson Academy, reported in progress in *Language Arts*, has been collected, organized, classified, and synthesized in his book *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Heinemann, 1983). And while the book deals explicitly with the knowledge gleaned from the Atkinson study, teachers of writing at all levels must be thankful for the book. It outlines for us, in lucid, readable, even engaging prose, the tremendous task we are faced with in teaching our students to write, yet ironically, by the sheer comprehensiveness of his view, Graves demonstrates that teaching writing is possible. Now that the data is collected and analyzed, now that the size of the task before us is clearly outlined, a detailed and convincing picture of how writing can be taught emerges. For the writing teacher who has given up hope that writing can be taught, Graves renews hope.

Reading through the book, one is struck first of all by its richness, its sense of life. Case study narratives make up a large

portion of the book. By using cases—those descriptive and narrative modes we tend to shortchange as we rush our students to “real” (i.e. expository) writing—Graves implies that experience, closely observed, deeply felt, and meticulously analyzed, is valuable. The cases are not dragged in to support this or that theory derived in isolation from students; cases (and the teachers and children they describe) are the book. One remembers the book as one remembers a rich novel—portraits of real people, portrayals of real experiences and emotions. Eleven-year-old Charlie, terrified into writer’s block by a succession of teachers who deduct five points for each misspelled word, mutters “fucking bastard” to his glib English teacher and brags about his still-blank sheet of paper to a friend: “I haven’t made any mistakes yet.” Nine-year-old Andrea, placed in a supportive writing environment, explains her writing process to one of Graves’ researchers with the insight of a professional. Ex-serviceman Mr. Bangs orders his nine-year-olds around like a drill sergeant until he realizes, “I didn’t listen to them, their work; had no idea what they could really do.”

Graves uses ethnographic research techniques, the purpose of which has been described by Sondra Perl as understanding rather than proving (1984 CCC in New York). Ethnographers spend great amounts of time with their subjects, describing and inferring. The Graves team spent two years in the classrooms of Atkinson Academy, observing the full context in which writing is learned. Thus the prominence of the case study narratives which give the book a different “feel” from traditional research monographs. There are no tight experimental designs in Graves’ research, no rigorously-controlled variables, no F-statistics, no $p < .005$ ’s. Rather than control his variables in an attempt to be scientifically accurate, Graves prefers to describe all his variables and how they interact in the whole context of the writing situation. In “A New Look at Research on Writing” included in *Perspectives on Writing in Grades 1-8*, edited by Shirley Haley-James (Urbana: NCTE, 1981), Graves writes: “Though they purport to give direct help, persons using experimental designs to conduct writing research have contributed least to the classroom teacher” (98). He adds, “Research on writing in the eighties must involve the fullest possible contexts. We can no longer have experimental or retrospective studies that move in with treatments of short duration, or that speculate on child growth and behaviors through a mere examination of written pro-

ducts alone. Contexts must be broadened to include closer and longer looks at children while they are writing" (100). He continues later in the same article, "Detailed data gathering through videotapes, audiotapes, direct observation, and teacher and child interviews needs to be done" (107). This type of research is time consuming and expensive, but the results are more valuable because of the breadth and depth of knowledge produced. Pure experimental research, with rigorous designs and controlled variables, may occasionally produce in-depth knowledge, but no such short duration experiment that I've seen produces the breadth of knowledge of Graves' work: the wide perspective, the implications for instruction and further research, the panoramic view of the whole context of writing.

Recently, however, Graves' results and even his research methods have been questioned by Myra Barrs, an associate of James Britton in London ("The New Orthodoxy about Writing: Confusing Process and Pedagogy." *Language Arts* 60 (October 1983): 829-840). She questions, in ethnographic research of the type Graves does, what actually the researcher is observing: the students and their development, or a particular teaching method? Are the results applicable to all children, or only those taught by instructors heavily steeped in drafting methods derived from professional writers, relying on extensive revisions to produce significantly different final drafts? The answer is most clearly put by Lucy Calkins, one of Graves' associates at Atkinson, in her own book based on the study, *Lessons from a Child*: "And so *Lessons from a Child* encompasses the full drama of classroom life In the book, as in the real-life story, . . . changes in Susie's writing occur within the context of the changes in her friends, her teachers, and her researchers. . . . As teachers we have always known that every child's writing development involves the special combination of that youngster's personal style, cognitive development, and writing instruction" (7). No meaningful statements about how children learn to write can be made divorced from the context of the whole writing situation. Graves and Calkins have described a particular context in which children learn to write and teachers learn to teach, no more and no less. That is the premise of ethnographic research: context and interaction, not isolated students or teachers or methods.

Through ethnographic research in context, close observation

of minute detail leads to knowledge. The same chapter, chapter 6, that contains explicit detail on how to bind children's writing in final published form ("Various types of wallpaper make excellent cover materials for the books") also contains the startling observation "One language arts textbook at 1982 prices costs \$7.00. The same money spent on the child's publishing would pay for twenty-eight books." Such is the modulation from almost trivial detail or anecdote to generalizations of striking lucidity, and back again to detailed implications.

This modulation characterizes the best chapters of the book: chapter 11, "Ask Questions that Teach"; chapter 15, "How to Revise for Meaning"; chapter 25, "Accept the Extremes of Change." Up to this point the most useful treatments of revision I've seen have been Roger Garrison's chapter "Revising" in his book *How a Writer Works* and Don Murray's "Listening to Writing" in his *Learning by Teaching* collection. Both are case studies of the author himself, observations of the writer as he revises an actual piece of writing. Graves' "How to Revise for Meaning" is equally perceptive and useful to teachers. It documents that children, like the professional writers Murray and Garrison, are capable of revising for meaning, not just correcting spelling or rectifying margins. Graves carefully weaves anecdote, example and hard data in with the threads of the revision model he's constructing. Much of the first half of chapter 15 keeps returning to Sarah: revising her early drawings, more carefully changing the order of information as her writing develops from syncretic pre-narratives to first narratives, learning to locate where on the page to add new information. In the midst of Sarah's development we are treated to such inductive leaps as "Until there is some order to a selection, it is very difficult to entertain any idea of revising information." Noticing that revision-as-addition gets easier for Sarah as she begins to write narratives, Graves extrapolates, moving to a principle of revision that covers writing in any content areas and any level from kindergarten to graduate school: "When children attempt to recall information in a personal narrative, they have a much stronger sense of chronology, as well as of missing information. The next easiest is fantasy or fiction, where children must recall imagined information and locate in their own contrived stories the proper place for the data. . . . In the content areas where the order is determined by the logical relationships of information, the task is even more difficult."

Also in chapter 15 arises a new concept, or rather a new more suggestive name for an old concept in teaching writing. All of us, I'd suggest, insist our students have one main idea in their final drafts, whether it's called a dominant impression or focus or slant or even whether it's reduced to the lifeless "thesis statement." Graves introduces the term "valuing." As a young writer learns to "value" certain pieces of information over others in a rough draft, his writing begins to make the transition from the all-inclusive "bed-to-bed" narrative to selective and emphatic prose. The key is that the writer makes the decision as to what is most valuable in a piece of writing, not the teacher. Revision then becomes a process of emphasizing what is most valuable and deemphasizing what is peripheral, and the writer is continually engaged in the process because the writing—the ideas and words—remain his and remain true to his notion of what he wants to say. He maintains, as Graves says, "ownership" of his own writing, thus increasing his commitment to and willingness to take responsibility for the writing. The writing becomes valuable and vital, not just an exercise in supporting a "thesis" nobody (including student writer and weary teacher) cares about.

Perhaps the best chapter in the book, the one to pull out and reread every term when mid-term blahs and self-doubts threaten to turn into full-blown depression, is chapter 25, "Accept the Extremes of Change." Every writing teacher has had the experience of students who seem to make no noticeable progress for long periods of time, or even to regress. In those moments we feel most like failures, like we're not doing our jobs, our students aren't learning or aren't "applying" what they've been taught. Through his data, Graves counsels us to relax. An uneven progress, marked by plateaus, regressions, and inexplicable heights, is natural: it's the normal way writers develop. Progress in writing is slow. At the end of two years, given proper instruction and encouragement, students are better writers; an off-week or off-paper is a minor matter, and no cause for alarm or depression. Andrea, a child whose writing was so remarkable that Graves's personal conversation to this day is still filled with anecdotes about her, wrote her best paper over the 1978-1980 period in December of 1979. She spent another six months and never wrote a better paper that school year! A chronological graph of her papers' quality looks like a jagged sine curve—up, down, up, down. But the overall trend in quality is unmistakably upward. Imagine if An-

drea had been placed in some ruthlessly linear competency-based program: each week measurable progress or do it over again until you've mastered it. She would have failed the year.

Not only is writer variability to be expected, Graves demonstrates, it can be explained (with his typical thoroughness he lists eight causes!). Variability can explain other phenomena in the classroom (a child is most restless and inattentive to her task immediately after a highly successful paper is finished, for example), and in fact it should be encouraged. "Good teaching," he writes, "enhances even greater variation." For progress to occur, a writer must take risks, even though some of those attempts will fail. Occasional failure is natural and beneficial, as long as the classroom atmosphere is supportive and the teacher knows "How to Adjust to the Changing Child," the title of chapter 26. In fact, according to Graves, the most important conclusion from the Atkinson study concerns this variability: "WRITING IS A HIGHLY IDIOSYNCRATIC PROCESS THAT VARIES FROM DAY TO DAY."

Chapter 11, "Ask Questions that Teach," is part of the five-chapter second section of the book which deals with teaching in conference. I suspect that for most of us, the real revelation, the real value, of the book is its emphasis on what Graves has called in his study for the Ford Foundation "the process-conference" approach to teaching writing. He writes there, "A way of teaching writing called the process-conference approach is a proven, workable way to reverse the decline of writing in our schools." Section II is explicitly about the writing conference, but implicit throughout the book is the assumption that good teaching demands teacher-learner interaction in conference. In fact, the process-conference technique is the best method for addressing the five conclusions drawn from the Atkinson study and presented in the book:

1. Voice drives writing.
2. A student must "own" her writing.
3. Writing is a process and revision is a major subprocess.
4. Variation in quality from week to week is normal.
5. Learning to write is a developmental process.

First, the conference is the best way for a writer's voice to emerge, orally first with the teacher listening and encouraging, then on paper. The child learns to hear her own voice and then

recognize it on paper. Writing a theme every other week and getting it returned with silent red marks made by a distant teacher is a sure way for a child's writing voice to be muffled. With her voice maintained and even enhanced by frequent conferences with her teacher, the writer can establish ownership of her writing. A good teacher will probe, follow the student's lead, nod non-directively, and generally reinforce the student's growing stake in her own writing. Without constant intervening as the writing is occurring, the teacher is likely to miss the direction the child wants to take, not to hear the growing confidence in her writing voice. Under those circumstances, assigning writing infrequently and responding only by red-pencilling, the teacher appropriates the child's final draft for his own, notes in red what the child should have done (rather than reacting to what the child actually did), and unwittingly causes her to drop her commitment to her writing. Since it's the teacher's paper now, the writer no longer cares about the writing.

"The Writing Process" is, unfortunately, fast becoming our cliché, becoming so broad and ill-defined that nearly anything constitutes teaching "The Writing Process." Textbook publishers haven't, as usual, helped matters; a chapter on the useless formal Roman-numeral outline qualifies, in the minds of profit hungry publishers, as "prewriting" and allows them to use the word "process" in the title and advertising blurbs, even though the book itself is informed by the oldest and most discredited notions about teaching writing and shows no evidence of any recent research into the writing process. But before the phrase loses its meaning entirely, let me try to reassert it. The ingredients of the writing process are rehearsal (or prewriting), drafting (or writing), and revision. They are all mixed up, occur simultaneously, out of sequence, and sometimes disguised or hidden, but the ingredients are still there. And it is just the messiness of that creative process that demands the frequent intervention of a teacher—to read, to listen, to encourage, to question, sometimes just to talk. The important thing is for us to be present when the writer needs us. And if we are just correcting final drafts, without having seen and helped the papers develop, we haven't really taught anything. The value of conference teaching is it allows the teacher to become involved in the writer's process of learning, to form learning rather than evaluate whether or not it has happened.

The conference is also the best method for reacting to and coping with writer variability. A teacher constantly seeing and conferring with a student knows his needs, can observe his progress or stagnation and figure out how to respond, and see immediately whether her response has been effective. A teacher grading only final drafts can only wonder why seven-year-old Patrick writes so few words on any subject, even though he spells every word correctly. A conferencing teacher would observe Patrick stopping to find out how to spell every word, refusing to go on until each word is perfect. The first teacher would write "C" at the top, note the good spelling, and implore "write more" in the margin. The conferencing teacher could encourage Patrick slowly to risk some invented spellings in order to increase the flow of his ideas, and not berate him (as it turns out his parents did!) if the quality of his spelling varied from week to week. Finally, the conference teacher, who works orally, shoulder to shoulder, with the student can watch the development of each writer over a long period of time. The teacher is so close to the student and her work that he can easily accept individual rates of growth, knowing that one student's progress in determining where to add information in a rough draft is as much a developmental breakthrough as another student's suspicion that "liked" may not be spelled "LAT." The teacher in conference knows that the first writer should not be bothered with the niceties of spelling during the enthusiasm of revision, while the second writer is ready for a question such as "do you hear any other sounds in 'liked'?" and should not be pushed into revision of content at this time.

The book shows the process-conference in action, convincing us that conference teaching can work, does work. Much has been made of the turmoil in our profession over the past twenty years. Richard Young has postulated that we are in the midst of a "paradigm shift" of the type described by Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. We are replacing the "current-traditional" mode of instruction, Young writes, with a new emerging paradigm, the writing process. I suspect that much wrongheaded teaching is legitimized by this excuse. We're in the midst of a crisis and a paradigm shift, so the reasoning seems to imply, and therefore we're not sure just how to teach writing, but we will know someday. Nonsense. Research has given us the knowledge of how to teach writing, and the "paradigm shift" or "the search for intelligible structure in the teaching of writing" rings hollow. The pro-

blem, as Clinton S. Burhans, Jr., has shown in a recent article ("The Teaching of Writing and The Knowledge Gap," *College English*, November, 1983), is that practice and textbook publishers routinely lag behind current knowledge by thirty-five years. In the United States today, if Burhans is correct, as it seems he is, writing is being taught and textbooks are being published based on 1950 knowledge of how people learn to write: before the Dartmouth Conference, before Moffett and Murray, before Britton, before Flower and Hayes and Sommers, before Graves. The current-traditional paradigm, Burhans explains, hangs on with the persistence of myth, not paradigm. As writing teachers, we've tried everything the current-traditional paradigm has to offer: teaching grammar, teaching literary analysis, teaching spelling, teaching the thesis statement, teaching phonics and CVC syllables, teaching the fixed methods of paragraph development, teaching the five paragraph theme. In doing so, we have produced the first generation in our country's history that writes worse than its parents. The hope that Graves' research and his book offer us is the process conference, and the hope is being fulfilled daily in Atkinson and Australia, in Boothbay Harbor, Maine and in the Bay Area. Meanwhile, much of the country's educational system is biding its time, waiting for thirty-five years to pass.

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