

PROLOGUE

I recently came across this rather delightful little essay in the *Wildcat Roar*, a publication of the Westlane Middle School Triangle Club. An English teacher at Westlane and Washington Township's Teacher of the Year nominee, Debbie Fuller puts the teaching of writing into perspective for parents and others. I am glad I can share the essay with you.

Picture yourself in this situation: you have been fretting for weeks and have finally gotten the courage to write a letter to your boss outlining why you deserve a raise. You've worked on it over the weekend, honing your arguments and documenting your worth to the company. You type your letter, read over it, and sign it. Before you lose courage completely, you put it on his desk at 8:00 A.M. Monday morning.

Your boss says nothing to you on Monday. On Tuesday he passes by your desk but doesn't mention the letter. On Wednesday morning you find your letter back on your desk. A typo that you missed has been circled. In pencil in the margin you see the note, "You'll have to review the use of the semicolon." How would you feel? Angered? Hurt? Ready to quit?

Now put yourself in your child's place. He has worked one evening completing an assigned composition. He has made it say exactly what he wanted. When he receives the graded paper, he finds it filled with red marks and phrases like "vague" or "be more specific." How would he feel? Angered? Hurt? Ready to quit? What lesson has he learned other than that correct form is more important than what he has to say?

Think back to when your child was learning to speak. When he said, "Love you," did you correct the form or respond to the message with a hug? You certainly didn't tell him to stop talking until he could speak grammatically, for you knew that children learn to speak by talking and listening to others speak.

The same maxim, that children learn by doing, holds true for writing. The only way that children will learn to write well is by writing and by reading what others have written. Students are required and encouraged to write in all of their

classes, not just English. You, as parents, probably have your children writing down telephone messages, leaving you notes when they go somewhere, and writing to family members in other cities. In all of these situations one must remember that adolescents are still learning to use the language in its written form. They will write paragraphs that are vague and sentences that are choppy. They will spell words phonetically because they don't recognize the conventional form. They are still developing as writers and will develop as writers throughout their lives, but they will learn to write only by writing.

This is not to say that a student's papers should not or will not be corrected for spelling or grammatical errors for some of his assignments. That is perfectly appropriate, just as it was appropriate for you to return your child's affectional statement with "I love you" and a hug. But in this case the message was clear: the meaning is of first importance. When the boss returned the letter, wouldn't your attitude have been different if he had first said, "Sure, you get the raise" and then told you in an aside about the typographical errors? So, don't be surprised if your children come home with papers that have few corrections but many comments about content and effectiveness. We want to help students develop as writers, not quit.

When I represented *JTW* on a panel of editors of scholarly journals on composition and language at last November's NCTE in Denver, I was asked what I considered the *ideal* article, what I wanted to publish in the *JTW*. The answer was relatively easy; everytime I open an envelope containing a manuscript for us, I have a preconceived picture of that essay. In this way I probably am no different from all writing teachers who envision the "A" papers to be submitted by their students. We may fight against this "fixed" image; we make all the time compromises, and sometimes, at very rare but wonderful moments, we receive a paper that is even better than what we had in mind. I don't think this is all that bad if we understand the dangers of appropriating texts; if our visions don't become obsessive, narrow, and Grecian Urn-like, to use Elaine Maimon's phrase (see Henry Kozicki's review).

At any rate, my answer went something like this: The essay establishes in its first part a theoretical or research base from which a discussion of the implementation of

pedagogy ensues. In other words, the essay moves from the general to the specific, from theory to praxis, from *why* to *what* and *how*. Second, the essay in *JTW* — whether written by a university, high school, middle school, or elementary school teacher — has something to say to all teachers of writing. As I have proclaimed here and at workshops and in the classroom, my teaching of writing has been dramatically affected by my understanding of language acquisition of pre-school and elementary level children. In other words, I owe a great deal to research on college composition done by people such as Murray, Sommers, Flower, Shaughnessy, and others. Yet my understanding of writing didn't entirely come together until I began reading language arts research by Graves, Harste, Burke and Woodward, Frank Smith, the Goodmans, and others, and until I began doing some research of my own in the second grade. I guess I bring this up to answer in part a recent letter from one of our readers lamenting that all the articles in *JTW* were geared to college composition. I would love to have more manuscripts about language pedagogy in the lower grades — send them. But in lieu of these articles, I really believe that the good article always reverberates up and down and throughout the curriculum, regardless of what level of writing the author teaches.

I also bring up this editorial perspective because I think this issue epitomizes what we are after, what we have been after for four issues of *JTW*. Despite not having an essay from an elementary or middle school teacher, this issue seems to come the closest to the *ideal* I envisioned three years ago: in short, it is, I think, an "A" issue. The articles generally flow from theory and research to praxis; they have, or should have, appeal for all teachers of writing; and the twelve essays are extremely pertinent. In fact, I was so struck with the essays here that I simply could not bring myself to "delay" the publishing of three of the essays until Fall. Consequently, we have an issue that is long and expensive but good, probably the best yet. I hope you agree.

Ron Strahl

