

**MOTIVATING POWER AND BEAUTY IN ADOLESCENT WRITING**

by

**GREG PETER**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
LINGUISTICS

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

.....  
Roderic Casali, PhD; Thesis Supervisor

.....  
Wanda Davies, MA; Second Reader

.....  
Jim Cunningham, PhD; Third Reader

TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

November 24th, 2009

© Greg Peter

# MOTIVATING POWER AND BEAUTY IN ADOLESCENT WRITING

Greg Peter

Master of Arts in Linguistics

The Faculty of Graduate Studies  
Trinity Western University

2009

## **Abstract**

High school English teachers are constantly frustrated by the lack of quality in student writing. Students appear to put little thought into spelling, grammar, or structure.

However, the absence of power and beauty in student work is even more disturbing. It signifies a general apathy towards mastery of written expression.

Ironically, the very strategies educators have employed to teach and assess writing are largely responsible for destroying student motivation to write in a way that has impact. Alfie Kohn exposes the destructive nature of the behaviorist philosophy that lies behind the western educational system. The effects of this manipulative mindset are especially detrimental to student writing.

Specifically, behaviorist instruction and evaluation techniques prevent students from entering into a state of consciousness known as *flow*. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's extensive study of the flow experience identifies it as foundational to both motivation and quality. Teachers must reject behaviorist pedagogy and develop practices that help their students enter into flow in order to enhance student passion for power and beauty in written expression.

This thesis explores the nature of motivation. It examines Kohn's concerns about the pedagogy of behaviorism, specifically the way in which extrinsic motivators destroy

any intrinsic motivation a student may possess. It presents Kohn's alternative to behaviorism including his foundational principles of collaboration, meaningful content and choice as well as the concept of discovery learning. It then examines objections to Kohn's approach. Next, it outlines Csikszentmihalyi's research into optimal experience. It examines the components and nature of flow, explaining Csikszentmihalyi's unique perspectives on attention, emotion, intention, and learning.

The thesis then discusses the nature of writing in light of its relationship to orality, reading, speech, listening and grammar. It discusses the defining characteristics of good writing in light of George Orwell's essay on "Politics and the English Language." It also analyzes various approaches to writing including the product approach, the process approach and the contextual approach. It recommends an integrated approach that is focused on impact and highly contextual. Various examples of contextualization from the area of New Literacy Studies illustrate the possibilities.

Finally, the thesis applies Kohn's criticisms to the behaviorist philosophy which characterizes the instructional strategies that dominate the teaching of writing. It proposes an alternative based primarily on Csikszentmihalyi's research in flow and Stephen Wilbers' advice to aspiring authors. It also applies Kohn's concept of discovery learning and his foundational principles of motivation to the teaching of writing. In addition, it introduces principles for healthy feedback based on Joni B. Cole's advice to editors. It examines Kohn's concerns about grading as they relate to the evaluation of student writing and concludes with a section on ways in which the harmful effects of grading can be reduced. This thesis is a challenge to rethink writing instruction in the light of a new perspective on student motivation.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of several individuals without whom this thesis would not have come into existence. First, my wife, Rebekka, sacrificially took care of me and our two small children while working to complete her own masters' degree. She was an invaluable sounding board for my ideas and helped me immeasurably in narrowing my focus down to a feasible breadth. My children, Adoniah and Elijah, both of whom were born since we started this journey, were very patient even though they were unable to understand why I had to spend so many hours staring at a computer screen. I hope I can repay them by applying what I have learned about motivation to the way in which we guide them as they grow.

I also want to thank the instructors, teaching assistants, volunteers, and support staff at the Canada Institute of Linguistics in Langley, British Columbia, who walked with me through this experience. So many people contributed to my understanding of the nature of language throughout my graduate and undergraduate studies that it would be impossible to recall all of their names. However, I would like to thank three individuals who worked very closely with me during the composition of this thesis. Roderic Casali graciously agreed to serve as my supervisor. He spent many hours reading and editing my work, tirelessly pointing out everything from structural issues and philosophical discrepancies to grammar mistakes and typing errors. Wanda Davies served as my literacy advisor and helped me through a very rough first draft while our toddler actively explored her living room. She also contributed many valuable insights from her vast experience as an international literacy worker. Jim Cunningham served as my third reader and his enthusiasm for my topic gave me the energy to press through the final few drafts.

He also reignited my desire to apply what I have learned in the classroom through his comments and suggestions. I am profoundly grateful for the assistance that was given by these individuals and the wonderful team at the Canada Institute of Linguistics.

In addition, I want to thank my extended family for their endless support and encouragement. First, I would like to thank my parents. They have always celebrated my most pitiful attempts at creative writing. They are the reason my intrinsic motivation is still largely intact despite my immersion in the public education system. They also entertained the grandchildren while my wife and I struggled to meet deadlines and helped out financially on many occasions. My grandparents, Ron and Barbra Shettler, also made this journey possible. My grandfather used his third grade education to provide a future for his grandchildren and educated me in the art of perseverance throughout my adolescent years. My grandmother has been a steady source of faith and encouragement throughout my life. Her selflessness and generosity made it possible for my wife and me to complete our degrees together.

Finally, I give glory to the Father of us all who is the source of everything that is good and right in this world. He has showed us His unconditional love through the sacrificial death of His Son and the gift of His Spirit. Without Him, I have nothing to offer. With Him, I can make a difference in the lives of my students and, through them, the world. Through Him, I can help my students reveal a little of the power and beauty that He has created within each of them.

## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL PASSION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>SECTION ONE: MOTIVATION .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1 THE NATURE OF MOTIVATION.....</b>	<b>12</b>
1.1    DEFINING MOTIVATION .....	13
1.2    EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION .....	14
1.3    INTRINSIC MOTIVATION .....	19
1.4    MOTIVATIONAL CONTINUUMS .....	21
1.5    MAJOR THEORIES OF MOTIVATION .....	23
<b>2 KOHN: DEPOSING BEHAVIORISM.....</b>	<b>24</b>
2.1    THE FAILURE OF BEHAVIORISM .....	27
2.2    WHY REWARDS FAIL .....	28
2.3    KOHNS ALTERNATIVE.....	32
2.4    FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES .....	34
2.5    DISCOVERY .....	35
2.6    INTRINSIC OVER EXTRINSIC .....	37
2.7    OBJECTIONS TO KOHN.....	38
<b>3 CSIKSZENTMIHALYI: MOTIVATIONAL FLOW .....</b>	<b>42</b>
3.1    THE FLOW EXPERIENCE .....	43
3.2    ATTENTION AS A RESOURCE .....	48
3.3    THE EMOTION FACTOR .....	50
3.4    GOOD INTENTIONS .....	51
3.5    LEARNING AS A PRODUCT OF FLOW .....	53
3.6    OBJECTIONS TO CSIKSZENTMIHALYI.....	54
<b>SECTION TWO: WRITING .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>4 BASIC ELEMENTS OF WRITING .....</b>	<b>57</b>
4.1    THE ORAL DIMENSION .....	60
4.2    WRITING AT THE WORD LEVEL.....	63
4.3    GRAMMATICAL SOUND CHECKS .....	64
<b>5 WRITING AND READING .....</b>	<b>65</b>
5.1    READING EMPHASIZED OVER WRITING .....	65
5.2    REASONS FOR THE FOCUS ON READING .....	67
5.3    REPERCUSSIONS OF UNDERDEVELOPED WRITING.....	70
<b>6 WRITING AND SPEECH .....</b>	<b>72</b>
6.1    CATEGORIES OF DIFFERENCES .....	72
6.2    SIGNIFICANT SIMILARITIES .....	77
6.3    ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION.....	78
<b>7 WRITING, LISTENING, AND GRAMMAR.....</b>	<b>84</b>
7.1    THE IMPACT OF SOUND QUALITY.....	84
7.2    LISTENING TO REVISE AND EDIT .....	85
7.3    THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR.....	87

<b>SECTION THREE: WRITING WELL .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>8 WHAT IS GOOD WRITING .....</b>	<b>90</b>
8.1 SETTING OUR SIGHTS .....	90
8.2 IDENTIFYING THE TARGET .....	95
8.3 ADVICE FROM AN ELEPHANT HUNTER .....	96
<b>9 APPROACHES TO WRITING.....</b>	<b>102</b>
9.1 THE PRODUCT APPROACH.....	102
9.2 THE PROCESS APPROACH.....	103
9.3 THE CONTEXTUAL APPROACH .....	104
9.4 A MOTIVATIONAL PERSPECTIVE.....	104
9.5 WRITING FOR IMPACT .....	106
<b>10 DEVELOPING THE CONTEXTUAL ASPECT.....</b>	<b>108</b>
10.1 APPRECIATING YOUTH LITERACIES .....	110
10.2 WRITING IN THE REAL WORLD .....	117
10.3 WRITING TO PEERS .....	119
10.4 RESPONDING TO ART .....	122
10.5 WRITING IN A FAMILY CONTEXT .....	123
10.6 ADAPTING TO ACADEMIA .....	126
<b>SECTION FOUR: MOTIVATING GOOD WRITING.....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>11 MUSING: THE ROLE OF THE WRITING TEACHER.....</b>	<b>129</b>
11.1 ATTITUDE AND ATMOSPHERE .....	129
11.2 PASSION FOR WRITING .....	130
11.3 PASSION FOR STUDENTS.....	133
<b>12 FINDING FLOW IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM.....</b>	<b>135</b>
12.1 RESERVING ATTENTION FOR WRITING.....	135
12.2 THE EMOTIONAL ASPECT OF WRITING.....	137
12.3 DEVELOPING THE INTENTION TO WRITE WELL.....	140
12.4 LEARNING TO WRITE IN A STATE OF FLOW .....	141
<b>13 DISCOVERING THE WRITER.....</b>	<b>146</b>
13.1 DISCOVERY WRITING IS ACTIVE .....	147
13.2 DISCOVERY WRITING IS PURPOSEFUL .....	148
13.3 DISCOVERY WRITING IS DRIVEN BY CURIOSITY .....	149
13.4 DISCOVERY WRITING IS MODELED .....	150
13.5 DISCOVERY WRITING VALUES MISTAKES .....	151
<b>SECTION FIVE: PRINCIPLES OF MOTIVATIONAL WRITING INSTRUCTION.....</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>14 COLLABORATIVE WRITING.....</b>	<b>153</b>
14.1 CREATIVE COMMUNITY .....	154
14.2 CORE VALUES.....	155
14.3 PLANNING TOGETHER .....	157
14.4 SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURE .....	158
<b>15 WRITING THAT MATTERS.....</b>	<b>159</b>
15.1 ASSIGNMENTS THAT KILL .....	160
15.2 POINTLESS PRACTICE .....	162
15.3 READING THE WATERS .....	163

<b>16</b>	<b>CHOOSING TO WRITE .....</b>	<b>164</b>
16.1	CREATIVE PROCESSING .....	165
16.2	PERSONALIZED PRODUCTS.....	167
16.3	TECHNOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVES .....	168
	<b>SECTION SIX: MOTIVATION AND THE EVALUATION OF WRITING .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>DOWNGRADING STUDENT WRITING .....</b>	<b>171</b>
17.1	CURRENT MARKING PRACTICES .....	171
17.2	DAMAGE ASSESSMENT.....	173
17.3	HOW GRADES HURT WRITERS .....	174
<b>18</b>	<b>FEEDBACK: ENGAGING WITHOUT GRADING .....</b>	<b>177</b>
18.1	RECEIVING FEEDBACK .....	178
18.2	GIVING FEEDBACK.....	181
18.3	THE WRITER-EDITOR RELATIONSHIP .....	184
18.4	GUIDELINES FOR A GOOD GROUP DISCUSSION.....	187
<b>19</b>	<b>DAMAGE CONTROL: WHEN GRADING WRITERS IS MANDATORY .....</b>	<b>188</b>
19.1	WHAT TO GRADE: REDUCING RANGE .....	189
19.2	WHEN TO GRADE: DELAYING DEGRADATION .....	191
19.3	HOW TO GRADE: TAKING OUT THE TEETH.....	192
	<b>CONCLUSION: MOTIVATING MASTERS.....</b>	<b>194</b>
	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>196</b>

## INTRODUCTION: A Personal Passion

All good teachers strive to develop their students into good writers. English teachers, social studies teachers, science teachers, and even math teachers<sup>1</sup> all value good writing in its various forms. However, there are far too many opinions on how to teach students to write well<sup>2</sup> and far too few students who actually master the art of writing.

Teaching students to form letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, essays and even poetry or other forms of fiction is not difficult.<sup>3</sup> The challenge lies in mentoring master-writers who are freely able to convey their most complex thoughts in a way that has a powerful impact on their readers. This thesis will discuss motivation and the nature of writing in the context of western, post-modern youth culture. It will then propose an approach through which teachers can motivate adolescents to develop a passion for beauty and power in their written expressions.

As an English and Social Studies teacher, I have encountered difficulty in motivating adolescents towards a mastery of writing first hand. This quickly emerged as the most challenging aspect of my role as a middle school educator. My personal struggles in this area were my main motivation for research and I am hopeful my thoughts and findings will encourage and enable other educators. I am also looking forward to implementing new strategies and approaches when I return to the classroom.

As a teacher, I found it relatively easy to get students to read. Simply set aside a given amount of time, ensure there is an interesting book in front of each student written

---

<sup>1</sup> Many students assume that math teachers are only concerned about numbers. Students are very resistant to including context in their answers in the form of a sentence or short paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the many workshops, workbooks, textbooks and other materials that are produced to teach, support, and improve student writing. Most take the form of grammar exercises.

<sup>3</sup> In the sense that students are being taught patterns and formulas

at an accessible level, and remove all distractions. Most students will immediately open their books out of simple curiosity. Even the stubborn few will eventually take a look, driven by sheer boredom for lack of a more noble motivation.<sup>4</sup> Students who struggle with reading and prefer materials with a lot of pictures will still utilize whatever basic reading skills they may possess to select a text and interpret illustrations.

Reading gradually improves with the introduction of interesting and increasingly challenging materials. Book floods, in which students are simply surrounded by large numbers of books, have proven effective in improving reading levels (Newman 1999). Once students have a number of common sight words in their repertoire and have been taught to use context or phonics when they encounter a new word, they generally don't need to be taught to read at progressively higher levels. Rather, the act of reading itself prepares them for the next level by gradually introducing them to more difficult vocabulary and sentence structures.

Countless resources exist to support classroom literature and spark student interest in reading materials. Especially in a world language like English, children at every level of reading ability can read ceaselessly and never run out of materials specifically written for their consumption. Many of the novels read in school are backed by more than a dozen different novel study packages in various formats to support comprehension and provide background to the reading.<sup>5</sup>

It is not difficult to get students to write either. Simply place a pen and paper in front of them and require them to fill in a certain number of lines before they are granted

---

<sup>4</sup> I did have one student who stared at the same paperback for an entire year without turning a single page so I am well aware that it does not work every time.

<sup>5</sup> An educational supply store I often visit has three or four different novel study guides for nearly every high school novel that I have encountered.

their freedom. Most students scrawl away diligently until they meet their quota. Ensuring their writing is worth the paper it is written on, even in the judgment of a diehard optimist, is another matter entirely.

To complicate matters further, writing does not generally improve as a direct result of writing. In my experience, students can be given writing assignment after writing assignment and they will show remarkably little improvement over the course of a year. In fact, I have often seen the quality of written work steadily deteriorate as interest and enthusiasm wanes. During my years as a middle school English teacher, I had the students write a short journal entry on a different topic every day. For the most part, their entries from the first few weeks were by far superior to anything they produced for the remainder of the year.<sup>6</sup> Regular writing exercises soon become nothing more than a chore for most students.

It is difficult to instill an intrinsic pride within students that motivates them to choose their words with the care of a diamond cutter or forge their phrases with the skill of a silversmith. Quality in written work cannot be forced on students or pried out of them. It must be planted within them and nurtured carefully as it grows.

Most students seem to fall into one of two categories as they progress through the grades. The first group is made up of students who can't write and know it. They are often reluctant to begin and constantly request affirmation from the teacher. The second group consists of students who can't write and think they can. This group is even more difficult to teach because they believe they have nothing more to learn. Only a few rise above these norms. The students who excel write well for their grade level but are constantly looking for ways to improve.

As an educator, I am always searching for approaches that bring more of my students to this level. Writers must be both confident in, and critical of, their own ability. A similar ideal is reflected in several “self-help books” for aspiring authors. In his book, *Keys to Great Writing*, Wilbers (2000) describes this attitude well:

Your relationship with language is dynamic. No matter how skilled and accomplished you are as a writer, there is always something else you can learn, always another insight you can acquire, always a new trick or technique you can add to your repertoire. One of the most exciting and exasperating things about being a writer is that your work is never done. You can never completely develop your skills, and you will never solve all the mysteries of language. (239)

This truth is unsettling to young writers. They are accustomed to questions that have right and wrong answers. It takes time to adjust to a setting in which each of their submissions are neither right nor wrong or even best but simply better and better yet.

There are numerous materials that describe how to write according to the rules. Most manuals are book length and written in language accessible only to those who have no need for further grammatical instruction. These have little effect on the correctness of student work. Emphasizing these aspects does not increase the quality either. Williams, author of *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (2000), argues, “A writer who obsesses on usage can write in ways that are entirely correct but wholly unreadable.” On the other hand, I have seen a piece of prose so full of errors in spelling, grammar and structure it was difficult to find even three words strung together correctly. Still the piece was hauntingly beautiful and had a poetic power about it that was missing when the author finally forced it to conform to grammatical standards.<sup>7</sup> Even if students write according to the rules, they do not necessarily write well. Painting by numbers does not produce masterpieces.

---

<sup>6</sup> With the exception of two students who began writing their own novel in their free time

Materials focused on planning and editing are also readily available. However, the planning activities usually generate unoriginal responses and the editing guidelines must be interpreted and applied by the teacher to each and every piece of writing before students improve their work. Even when students are given detailed suggestions for revision, their efforts are usually half-hearted and their final drafts look more like compliance than improvement.<sup>8</sup>

There are even books that present creative activities guaranteed to motivate student writing. Many are original and well designed. However, in my experience, these innovations usually have a short life span and students quickly lapse back into their lethargy once the fireworks have fizzled out. The results are often artificial and produce no long-term gains in quality. Understandably, many teachers give up and subscribe to the “they have it or they don’t” philosophy. It seems no matter how hard they try, some students do not improve while others seem to succeed with little or no effort at all. Some teachers may even argue writing ability is innate and cannot be taught.

However, most educators continue to believe in the potential of their students. Wilbers (2000) states, “anyone with average intelligence and commitment can become a competent writer” (3). The key is commitment. Commitment is the motivation to persist despite obstacles and difficulties. Developing this motivation is the challenge. Motivation towards quality in writing must be nurtured as an aspect of character. This is a complex process. Unfortunately, little has been written on how the skill of word-crafting can be grafted to a student’s identity.

---

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to a paragraph written by an English as a Second Language student.

<sup>8</sup> ...from years of bitter experience.

The exact nature of quality in writing is elusive as well. Wilbers (2000) refers to quality in writing as deep style, which he distinguishes, from surface style or technique:

I am talking now about style on two levels: surface style and deep style. Surface style has to do with technique. It is acquired by deliberate study and practice. It can be put on, like a suit of clothes, to achieve a particular effect. Deep style, on the other hand, has to do with who you are, both as a writer and a person. It results from genuine self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-revelation. It is developed over time, sometimes over a lifetime. (1)

According to Wilbers, deep style cannot be taught. It must come from within the writer.

However, Wilbers is not an educator. He is writing to writers. His book is a self-help manual for people who are already impassioned and motivated by the art of writing. Only a few of my students would fit into this category. The majority see writing as a mundane task, a means to an end. They are neither impassioned<sup>9</sup> by good writing nor committed to their own development as writers.

With Wilbers, I firmly believe each of my students can become a competent writer. All that is lacking is the motivation to do so. How do I as an educator motivate my students to become powerful writers? It is this winding path I wish to wander down for the length of this thesis. It begins with my personal journey as a writer.

I have never published a book or received an award for my writing. My works have received little recognition apart from biased praise by members of my immediate family. Even my grades in English Literature were not consistently high enough to win scholarships or other forms of academic recognition. Yet at some point, I came to consider myself a wordsmith—not a master of the trade by any means, but at least a poor apprentice.

---

<sup>9</sup> To a discernable extent.

It is difficult to identify any one catalyst for this change. I am sure the foundation in early literacy I received from my parents and my elementary-school teachers played a significant role. However, many of my students receive a similar foundation and never experience this crucial identity shift.

An early and voracious love of reading may also be a key component. I read fiction constantly for most of my childhood. This naturally led to an admiration for good writing and a desire to produce work of similar quality. It also gave me the ability to discern good writing from a mediocre piece, at least in my personal opinion. However, this does not, in itself, explain my mental transition into authorship.

The change took place when I began writing by myself and for myself. I formed my new identity by writing poetry, not fiction. This was ironic because I have never enjoyed reading poetry. I can't even remember when I was introduced to the art of writing poetry for the first time. All I know is I began expressing myself through the poetic form at some point in my adolescence apart from the direction of a teacher.

At the same time, I developed a love for words that has stayed with me. Wilbers describes it as “a feeling for language that comes from close association and familiarity, like the intimacy that develops between longtime friends” (4). It is this transformational experience I wish for all of my students.

My beliefs about the universe and human nature also inform my perspective. Language in general holds a special place in the cosmos. The spoken word brought everything we know into existence. The creator said, “Let there be... and there was.”<sup>10</sup> When the creator later appeared in human form, his closest companion described him as

---

<sup>10</sup> The Holy Bible, Genesis Chapter 1

“the Word made flesh.”<sup>11</sup> The law of God was given to man in written form and his deeds were recorded in Holy Scripture. Regardless of the interpretation of these things, it is plain both speech and script have held a place of power from beginning of time.<sup>12</sup>

These beliefs stand in stark contrast to the materialist tendencies of our world. Where scientists look to the physical facts for evidence, I am convinced that all we see, taste, and touch, was brought into being by the intangible word. Where the wise and learned of our age view human beings as the product of time and chance, I believe each individual is created in the image God, with all of the limitless potential that implies.

However, it is difficult to live in this reality. The physical world seems so real and words are so fleeting that we forget their supernatural power. Many Christians have less faith in the power of God to redeem man than humanists do in human potential. As a result, we are often associated with the critical and restrictive elements of society. We draw harsh and often justified condemnation to ourselves and our faith by subscribing to values that are more traditional than spiritual.<sup>13</sup>

When it comes to the teaching of language, Christianity is more often associated with phonics than with creativity. Grammar is next to godliness, whole language is unholy, and spelling mistakes are an abomination. In the realm of public education, a Christian is someone who is pro-creation and anti-creativity, pro-grading and anti-grace, pro-phonics and anti-fun.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, we often see God the same way. The Bible is our textbook, God is our examiner, heaven is our reward, and hell is for those who don't know enough memory

---

<sup>11</sup> John the Apostle in The Holy Bible, John 1

<sup>12</sup> At least recorded time

<sup>13</sup> The traditional is often confused with the spiritual

<sup>14</sup> Or at least perceived in that way

verses. We are more likely to apply our traditionalist pedagogy to our faith than faith to our pedagogy.

As I wrote this thesis, I came to realize I held an essentially behaviorist view of faith. I saw heaven as a reward and hell as punishment. Blessings were what happened to people who did the right things and bad things happened to those who strayed. God used rewards and punishments to conform our behavior to his standards.

However, many of the ideas on motivation that follow have caused me to question these assumptions. I am not denying punishments and rewards are present in scripture. However, I am questioning whether many western Christians have seriously misplaced the emphasis, both in education and in life in general.

The conclusions and proposals are presented in this thesis are based both on research and on my own experience as a teacher. Although I have only been teaching for slightly less than a decade, my experience is very diverse and I have had ample opportunity to observe the way in which writing is taught in the current educational system. I have also made all of the mistakes that are discussed in this thesis and, hopefully, learned something from my failures.

I began my career as a primary teacher in the independent system, starting with a year of grade three after which I took over a grade one class from a experienced senior teacher. For the next three years, I taught humanities – a combination of social studies and English – in grades six through nine. During this time, I became the vice-principal and oversaw the formation of year plans and the compilation of report cards. I also observed teachers from kindergarten through grade nine in their classrooms and compiled evaluations that included both comments and suggestions.

For the past two years, I have been working as a substitute teacher in Surrey, British Columbia. Surrey is the largest and fastest growing district in the province with nearly one hundred elementary schools, twenty high schools and several learning centers serving well over sixty-five thousand students. It is also one of the most diverse districts in the country with large Southeast Asian, Arabic, and Korean populations in addition to smaller minorities from nearly every nation on earth.

I have taught as a classroom teacher in every grade from kindergarten to grade seven and in nearly every elementary school in the district. I have also taught English and social studies in grades eight through twelve in most of the local high schools. Due to the size of the district, I am seldom in the same classroom twice. However, I did have a long-term position in a grade eight humanities classroom in which I was privileged to end the year for an experienced colleague and start off the next year the following autumn. For the past few months I have been working in a high school learning support classroom.

This wide range of experience has given me a broad perspective on the way writing is taught in the western educational system. I have also experienced the impact of standardized testing on both my own practice and the work of my colleagues.<sup>15</sup> While I do not claim to be an expert on the current state of education in our hemisphere, I am able to bear witness to the claims others have made about our school systems. My experience at a variety of grade levels and in a variety of subjects also allows me to make proposals that apply to secondary education in general. While I have not yet had the opportunity to implement many of my suggestions, they are based on my past attempts to motivate

---

<sup>15</sup> The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) is an example (<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/fsa/>)

students towards quality in writing. I hope this brief but diverse experience will lend some measure of support to my arguments.

This thesis begins with an introduction to motivation in general followed by a summary of Kohn's critique of behaviorism and Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow. It then explores the nature of writing and analyzes various approaches to writing instruction in light of the preceding discussion. Next, it identifies three areas in which a teacher can impact student motivation to write. First, it suggests ways in which a teacher can influence student attitudes towards writing and the classroom atmosphere in general. Second it identifies activities and assignments that destroy motivation and others that allow it to increase. Finally, it examines assessment and evaluation techniques that stimulate motivation. I am hopeful this arrangement will give full credit to the authors from whom I drew inspiration while creating space for my own ideas.

## **SECTION ONE: Motivation**

This section explores the nature of motivation. It begins with a discussion of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Following this, it presents the ideas of Alfie Kohn and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, prominent writers and thinkers in the field of modern psychology.

### **1 The Nature of Motivation**

Motivating adolescents to write is not difficult. Most high school students generate mountains of written work during their secondary career. Every high school teacher is familiar with the pile of assignments they struggle to return to their students before they are overwhelmed by the next avalanche of written responses. Students write constantly in almost every subject. When they are not taking notes, they are completing worksheets, finishing assignments, writing reports, working on projects, and making journal entries. Those who are not motivated by letter grades can usually be threatened into production by the removal of privileges.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, adolescents are continually writing in extracurricular environments as well. Participation in society through the internet requires frequent written communication. Most adolescents email on a daily basis and many interact constantly through instant messaging services, online forums, and the text messaging function on their cellular phones.<sup>17</sup> Others turn to more traditional methods such as regular journal writing or passing notes in class. Writing is more important to the average North American adolescent than ever before.

---

<sup>16</sup> Such as free time either in class or during breaks

However, most written work is of an extremely low quality, both in and out of the classroom. Errors in punctuation, spelling, and grammar abound. It is painfully obvious even less effort is put into the overall effect of the work. The writing is generally dull, unoriginal, and without heart. Little thought is given to high level organization or even word choice. The language is utterly without beauty and power. It frequently lacks basic qualities like clarity and structure as well. There are exceptions to this bleak assessment but they are certainly not the rule.

Motivating adolescents to see themselves as writers and to put all of their intellectual and emotional resources into their work is challenging. Without adequate motivation, adolescent writing is doomed to mediocrity. The responsibility for motivating quality in adolescent writing falls chiefly to the teacher. Other individuals can have a role but these allies often need to be enlisted by the teacher before they will play a part. Students rarely arrive with their own muses in tow.

### ***1.1 Defining Motivation***

Of first importance is an in-depth understanding of motivation itself. If teachers do not understand the complex nature of student motivation, they will fall back on methods that appear effective over the short term but are actually destructive in the end. On the other hand, a clear understanding of motivation will allow teachers to apply techniques that produce desirable lifelong results.

Traditionally, motivation is divided into two categories. The first category is extrinsic motivation. This refers to external motivational forces that are exerted on the

---

<sup>17</sup> If students have their hands in their lap and they are staring downward, it is safe to assume they are writing a text message. Parents who make the mistake of signing a cell phone contract for their children in which text messages are billed individually often get surprisingly large bills in the mail.

student from without. The second category is intrinsic motivation. This refers to internal forces that drive the student from within. It is important to understand both forms of motivation. With the advent of psychology, motivational theories have matured and multiplied.<sup>18</sup> Slowly we have come to a more comprehensive understanding of what motivates our students and how we can affect this essential aspect of their education.

## **1.2 Extrinsic Motivation**

Extrinsic motivation is generally the more obvious of the two forms. It can be as concrete as candy offered as an incentive for good performance or as fleeting as a faint smile of approval from an admired instructor. Punishment is another form of extrinsic motivation. Many of us are motivated to do the right thing by the knowledge of the consequences we would face if we deviated from the true path. In the past, punishment maintained a much more obvious presence in the school system. Students would get their knuckles rapped or the dreaded strap for even the most minor of infractions. Physical discomfort was even used to punish academic misdemeanors such as unfinished homework or the improper use of grammar. In any form, extrinsic motivation depends on the words or actions of others.

In the North American school system of the present day, punishment has taken on a much more subtle form. It can still be as obvious as detention, suspension, or expulsion. However, it more frequently surfaces as the retention of a reward. In his groundbreaking book Punished by Rewards, Kohn (1993) describes how rewards systems are simply another form of punishment. Rewarding some students is fundamentally the same as punishing the students who are not rewarded.

---

<sup>18</sup> I have chosen to focus on more traditional categories because they are more familiar to teachers

In fact, more students are effectively punished by reward systems today than were ever punished by more traditional forms of discipline. In the past, when one student received the strap for their poor performance, all of the other students were effectively rewarded by not receiving the strap. Today, when one student receives recognition for good performance, all of the other students are simultaneously punished by the lack of recognition.

Still, extrinsic motivation techniques appear to be very effective in producing results if applied consistently. Students often respond quickly to rewards and punishments. The offer of an exciting prize or the threat of a dreaded consequence can quickly turn an unruly class into a model of dedicated perfection.

However, there are two main disadvantages to models that rely on extrinsic motivation. First, they do not often produce the desired results in the long run, although they may appear to do so initially. Second, they are entirely dependent on the source or the provider for motivation. If the source dries up or the provider fails to produce the required stimulus, the motivation itself quickly evaporates. As well, the rewards are often artificial or contrived. They frequently do not have any value in and of themselves.

From a sardonic perspective, systems that rely on extrinsic motivation can be seen as little more than classic conditioning. Students are fortunate if they receive anything more than a tick or two from Pavlov's metronome.<sup>19</sup> Rarely do they get a reward as nourishing as a meal. The metronome evolves into various alternate forms as they get older but the motivation is still external.

By the time children grow into adolescents, motivators like candy or extra playtime no longer have the same effect. Those who have bought into the system are now

driven by less concrete rewards like good grades. Still, the motivation is largely external. On a basic level, grades spell approval. Many adolescents are desperate for approval or praise in one form or another. Though most would never admit it, they are constantly looking for a source of affirmation. Grades become a form of affirmation for many successful students and remain a source of motivation throughout their academic careers.

Grades are sometimes transformed into other currency by their parents.<sup>20</sup> Students frequently strive for the higher percentages because they've been promised expensive electronics or even cold cash in exchange for a certain level of academic achievement. Many educators feel this trivializes the whole learning process. However, most have lectured students on the future material advantages that result from high academic performance. I am guilty of this myself. Some would argue there is little difference between paying out cash for good grades and promising a high-paying career. Both encourage students to do their tricks in exchange for a treat.

Even more tragic are the students who do not experience academic success during their middle school years. These students quickly form low opinions of their intellectual abilities. A few continue to strive for good grades throughout their high school years and end up discouraged and disillusioned when the doors to post secondary institutions are shut in their faces because they don't have the right letters on their report cards.

Others recognize they will receive scant approval from academia and look for it elsewhere. These become the class-clowns or the troublemakers. They can't get a positive response from their teachers so they look for approval from their peers. Frequently, they

---

<sup>19</sup> Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate by introducing a metronome before their meals.

<sup>20</sup> To be fair, the educational establishment has conditioned parents to value good grades above all else and to see rewards as the best way to motivate students towards academic progress.

misinterpret expressions of amusement for praise and are confused when this does not translate into friendship and admiration in the hallways.

In school communities where the culture is not supportive of academic achievement, poor performance in class may even gain students actual acceptance by large groups of their peers who have also opted out of the system. In this environment, good grades can even result in criticism and rejection by classmates. Students must then choose between the approval of their teachers and the approval of their peers.

Many students drop out before they graduate from high school. Many more withdraw mentally from the system even though they still attend classes. Teachers often give up as well because they cannot find the means to effectively motivate their students.

There are also less obvious side effects of a reliance on external motivators. These come in many forms. One of the most common is the development of an unhealthy dependency on approval from authority figures. When successful students eventually graduate from academia, they no longer receive constant approval in the form of letter grades. In response, they quickly look for a new source of affirmation. The closest equivalent to a teacher is often another authority figure like a manager or supervisor.

Model students quickly become model employees. They do everything they can to win approval from their superiors. This often means long hours and sacrifices in other areas of their lives.<sup>21</sup> Frequently, they permit authority figures to cross their boundaries because they will do anything for approval. Even self-employed entrepreneurs allow themselves to be controlled by their customers.

A reliance on external motivators has an equally detrimental effect on the product. Externally motivated employees are so driven by praise from others they produce

products with the sole aim of pleasing their employers or their customers. In doing so, they remove themselves from the process as much as possible. Every aspect of the product is designed to please and much of its authenticity is sacrificed. Even quality can diminish as a result. Ironically, in trying so hard to please, the employee often fails to do so for that very reason. This failure motivates even more approval-driven performance.

An illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the markets of the third world. Experienced travelers are all too familiar with how difficult it is to discover an authentic souvenir in the local bazaar. Every shop is filled with the same trinkets, often mass-produced in another country.<sup>22</sup> Even products manufactured locally have an artificial feel to them. Rather than representing the cultural heritage of a proud people, the trinkets attempt to predict and satisfy the whims of the foreigners.

Of course, the motivation is different. Most of the merchants and their suppliers are motivated more by survival than by the need for approval. Winning the approval of tourists is only a means to this end. However, the effect on the product is equally demeaning.

In the same way, when we train students to rely on external sources for their motivation, they produce work lacking in personality and power. Writing that is solely focused on pleasing the audience lacks presence and comes across as false or contrived. Writers should aim for impact, not admiration. A piece that aims solely to please pleases no one. Extrinsic motivators do not produce powerful writers.

---

<sup>21</sup> From my own experience

<sup>22</sup> On my first overseas trip, I thought I was getting authentic handcrafts. When I found the same items in another country, I realized I had brought home a piece of my own capitalistic culture by mistake.

### **1.3 Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation refers to a student's internal drives. An intrinsically motivated individual is not driven by external factors like rewards, punishments or even praise. Instead, they rely on an inner force for their motivation. Intrinsic motivation is naturally preferred by a good educator. However, it is difficult to identify purely intrinsic motivators. Some may question if truly intrinsic motivators even exist.

By way of illustration, let us consider a student who has a passion for basketball. This student spends hours practicing shots and developing their physical fitness. The student is driven by the dream of becoming a basketball star. Most would consider this secret ambition a true source of internal motivation. However, if we analyze the underlying motivation more closely, we may discover the passion itself is motivated by a desire for fame and fortune. The student is actually motivated by dreams of adoring fans and multi-million dollar salaries. These motivators are plainly external.

Therefore, what appears to be a purely internal source of motivation often is extrinsic at its core. The individual is simply demonstrating a capacity for delayed gratification, not the outworking of intrinsic motivation. Their long-range goals are driven by the dream of external rewards.

Purely intrinsic motivation is as illusive as perpetual motion. In the same way all devices require the input of energy from an external source in order to operate, humans appear to be motivated only by external factors. Even religion has its rewards. Religious individuals are often considered selfless but many make sacrifices in the belief that they will reap eternal benefits.

Therefore, intrinsic motivation could be seen as nothing more than the internalization of extrinsic motivators. In other words, intrinsic motivators are seen as those already present within students as opposed to those that are presented to them within the context of the current learning environment. While a behaviorist would be satisfied with this explanation, other definitions for intrinsic motivation have been proposed.

One of the most common perspectives preserves the idea that intrinsic motivation is internal. However, it suggests the motivation is internal to the task rather than the individual. In other words, an individual is considered intrinsically motivated if they find enough enjoyment in the task itself to motivate their continued participation.

I would argue motivation internal to the task is a purer form of intrinsic motivation than are external motivators that have been internalized. On the surface, it is difficult to distinguish between the two forms. In a study on achievement, Harter and Connell (1984) present five aspects that are helpful in identifying true intrinsic motivation in a student. They are as follows:

1. Preference for challenge rather than for easy work.
2. Incentive to work to satisfy one's own interest and curiosity rather than working to please the teacher and obtain good grades.
3. Independent mastery attempts rather than dependence on the teacher.
4. Independent judgment rather than reliance on the teacher's judgment.
5. Internal criteria for success and failure rather than external criteria.

The challenge is in finding a way to build these characteristics into students who have not yet made them a part of their nature. However, understanding intrinsic motivators can be planted and nurtured is encouraging.

One theory suggests students' beliefs about themselves determine levels of intrinsic motivation. de Charms presents two opposing beliefs about success and failure

(1968). He labels individuals who hold the first set “origins” because they see their own actions or lack of action as the cause of their success or failure. Individuals who see their success or failure as the result of fate, chance, or the actions of others are deemed “pawns.” de Charms argues origins are intrinsically motivated because they believe their actions have an effect on their environment. Pawns, on the other hand, see no reason to act because they do not believe their actions have any effect. While these beliefs can be planted and nurtured, the Rochester School, of which de Charms is a part, proposes intrinsic motivation is based on the innate, human desire for self-determination. Therefore, it is more a matter of allowing this desire for freedom to grow than it is a matter of planting the desire in the first place.

#### **1.4 Motivational Continuums**

Extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation are most often seen as opposite ends of the same continuum. However, Pintrich and Schunk propose a different model. In their book, *Motivation in Education*, Pintrich and Schunk suggest intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are actually on separate continuums (2002: 247).

On the surface, this appears to be true. Some students are very motivated by extrinsic rewards like letter grades. They will work extremely hard in a subject they have no interest in simply to achieve a high mark. Other students could care less about letter grades, as evidenced by their general lack of attendance and effort in other subjects. Still, they work hard in certain classes because they enjoy the task or content. These students represent the opposing ends of the single spectrum model. The first is far to the extrinsic end of the spectrum and the second is at the intrinsic terminus. However, many of my students are extremely motivated by marks but appear to be equally in love with the

subject. Of course, others seem to have no intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to succeed whatsoever. A twin continuum model seems to represent these students much better than one with only a single spectrum.

Perhaps the best illustration for this model of interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is the adjustments for brightness and contrast on the standard computer monitor. The two continuums allow for four extremes: bright and high contrast; bright and low contrast; dim and high contrast; dim and low contrast. In the same way, some students appear to have high levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; low levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; high intrinsic and low extrinsic motivation; or low intrinsic and high extrinsic motivation.

Typically, we would assume high levels of intrinsic motivation and low levels of extrinsic motivation are preferable. However, students who are exposed to medium-high levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation appear to be the most teachable. If their intrinsic settings are too high and the extrinsic settings are too low, they may ignore instruction in their idealistic infatuation with the act itself. If the extrinsic settings are too high, they may be overly anxious about whether or not they will earn a reward to focus on the lesson. Of course, low settings in both areas result in an overall lack of motivation, which is even less desirable.

Pintrich and Schunk agree determining an “optimal level” of motivation is important when they discuss the “use of novelty, surprise, and incongruity in the classroom” as a way to increase interest. “When arousal or incongruity becomes too great,” they warn, “people may become frustrated and attempt to escape from the situation or diminish level of arousal” (248). A similar concept, the zone of proximal

growth, was proposed by Vygotsky (1978). In proximal growth theory, educators are encouraged to create assignments that are challenging but attainable. If the task is too easy, students will lose interest. If the task is too difficult, students will give up or become frustrated.

### ***1.5 Major Theories of Motivation***

Modern psychology has provided us with a plethora of theories on motivation. When approaching such a diverse collection of thoughts and ideas, it is important to recognize that all have something to contribute to the discussion. Most are based on careful research and many focus in on a unique aspect of the subject that may be overlooked from another perspective. However, the vast majority of theories can be placed somewhere on a continuum between the behaviorist and cognitivist camps.

Behavioral theories on motivation, focused mainly on extrinsic sources of motivation. This was largely due to the refusal of psychologists during this period to consider aspects of motivation they were unable to observe directly. Therefore, they ignored the role of inner influences, such as thoughts or emotions, in favor of environmental stimuli.

Cognitive theorists were more willing to consider the internal factors in relation to motivation. They emphasized the effects an individual's beliefs and feelings had on motivation. The way in which an individual processed environmental factors was deemed more important than the environmental factors themselves.

Writing teachers, however, must consider the full spectrum. They must be behaviorists because the only aspect of a student's education a teacher has any direct control over is the environment. A teacher can only alter, introduce, or remove external

factors. They are unable to directly manipulate any of the internal processes. However, the goal of every writing teacher must be to have a positive impact on these internal factors. If they only succeed in producing a desired behavior in response to classroom stimuli but have no long-term effect on student writing, they will have failed in their calling. Therefore, educators must consider the cognitive aspects of motivation and devise ways in which they can shape or mould these attitudes and emotions toward writing.

While researching the field of motivation, I came across two writers and thinkers who had a significant impact on my perspective. The first, Kohn, has already been mentioned. However, his arguments against behaviorism go far beyond the revelation rewards are actually punishments in disguise. The research he amassed in several powerfully written volumes knocked me permanently off the middle road I had idealized in the past.

The second is Csikszentmihalyi. I was intrigued when I first encountered Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory (1978). However, I found it informative rather than inspiring. Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow takes Vygotsky's principle and develops it into a field of its own. Csikszentmihalyi convinced me the flow experience itself is the source of intrinsic motivation. The following two chapters will attempt to summarize some of the most relevant research and theory these two great thinkers have to offer.

## **2 Kohn: Deposing Behaviorism**

While most would argue Kohn is neither a researcher nor a theoretician in his own right, he is certainly no stranger to either discipline. His thorough meta-analysis of hundreds of

groundbreaking studies and his revolutionary refutation of behaviorist theory have certainly earned him the right to be heard. The only reasons he is not more widely acclaimed are that his conclusions fly in the face of the entire establishment and his solutions take the kind of effort and dedication few educators are willing to give. As Kohn states, “Any kind of teaching that is more rigorous and demanding of students is likely to be so for teachers too” (Kohn 1999b: 185). However, teachers are not to blame. The current system keeps them so preoccupied with meeting standards it is no wonder they have little energy left for innovation.

If one is counting pages, it is true Kohn offers more refutation than solution. However, there is one very convincing reason why his work is weighted in this way—the omnipresence of behaviorism in our society. Kohn argues behaviorism is so much a part of the North American mindset we view its conclusions as simple common sense. Most North Americans are still firmly convinced the best way to get people to do something is to offer them rewards and the best way to stop people from doing something is to threaten them with punishment. Kohn suggests this stems from the prevalence of behaviorist psychology in our society.

I would argue this widespread acceptance of behaviorist theory is more likely the result of a predisposition to behaviorism than a process of indoctrination in the theory. In my opinion, humans fall naturally into the practice of behaviorism. Perhaps, like behaviorist researchers who developed their theories through experiments with rats and mice, our interactions with less intelligent life forms have taught us rewards and punishments get results. Or perhaps our desire to establish control over other individuals is a part of our fallen nature, which seeks to dominate both creation and other humans. As

Kohn points out, however, our students are not animals and the results we hope to produce are not low level instinctual responses to painful or pleasing stimuli.

Nevertheless, behaviorism appears to be the most logical approach to life from the western perspective and Kohn is forced to argue extensively against its tenets.

At the same time, his solutions are necessarily vague. As a proponent of constructivist theory, Kohn can offer no step-by-step methods or perfectly packaged programs. There is no universal formula for meaning making and motivation does not come in a pill. Kohn's alternative requires a level of effort few educators would be willing to give unless they were utterly convinced there was no alternative. For this reason, Kohn spends the better part of each published work attempting the complete annihilation of behaviorist approaches to education.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to review all of the studies Kohn has amassed against behaviorism. I could not hope to better Kohn's lifework in a simple graduate level thesis. Furthermore, if a writer of Kohn's caliber is unable to bring down the behaviorist establishment with the extensive publication of several best sellers, I could not hope to do so with a single shot.

Still, I might begin to chip away at a point in behaviorist pedagogy that, in my opinion, is already crumbling. That point is the teaching of writing. Many writing teachers are frustrated with the results they obtain through behaviorist pedagogy and would welcome an alternative. By the end of this thesis, I hope to offer an alternate approach to writing instruction. First, however, I will outline Kohn's basic argument against behaviorism and the solution he directs us toward.

## 2.1 *The Failure of Behaviorism*

Kohn begins his foundational work, *Punished by Rewards*, with the following statement:

There is a time to admire the grace and persuasive power of an influential idea, and there is time to fear its hold over us. The time to worry is when the idea is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it, when it is so deeply rooted that it feels to us like plain common sense. At the point when objections are not answered anymore because they are no longer even raised, we are not in control: we do not have the idea; it has us. (Kohn 1993: 3)

Most North American educators would not consider themselves behaviorists. They do not use electric shock to cause their students to pull levers or run their young charges through cardboard mazes. However, punishments and rewards are an ever-present part of every aspect of our society, especially in the classroom. In every instance, Kohn argues, the aim is the same—survival through domination. “It is the institution, the social practice, the status quo that is preserved by the control of people’s behavior” (Kohn 1993: 29).

Kohn does not dispute the fact rewards are effective. Instead, he questions the nature and desirability of their effect.

Rewards are often successful at increasing the probability that we will do something. At the same time, though... they also change the *way* we do it. They offer one particular *reason* for doing it, sometimes displacing other possible motivations. And they change the *attitude* we take toward the activity. In each case, by a reasonable measure, the change is for the worse. (Kohn 1993: 35)<sup>23</sup>

It is not enough to measure the strength of the response. Instead, “*rewards must be judged on whether they lead to lasting change—change that persists when there are no longer any goodies to be gained*” (Kohn 1993: 37). We must question not only the method but also our objectives.

What rewards and punishments do is induce compliance, and this they do very well indeed. If your objective is to get people to obey an order, to show up on time and do what they’re told, then bribing or threatening them may be sensible

---

<sup>23</sup> Kohn likes to use italics for emphasis. All italics within quotes are his.

strategies. But if your objective is to get long-term quality in the workplace, to help students become careful thinkers and self-directed learners, or to support children in developing good values, then rewards, like punishments, are absolutely useless. In fact, as we are beginning to see, they are worse than useless—they are actually counterproductive. (Kohn 1993: 41-2)

According to Kohn, there is no middle road. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are on a single continuum—and it only moves in one direction. When extrinsic motivators are increased, intrinsic motivation decreases. Unfortunately, the reduction of extrinsic motivators does not automatically result in the restoration of intrinsic motivation. In many cases, the damage caused by the application of extrinsic motivators is nearly irreversible.

For this reason, Kohn argues, it is pointless to measure how motivated students are. It is not a question of quantity.

[T]here are qualitatively different kinds of motivation, and *the kind matters more than the amount*. Even large quantities of the wrong kind (namely, extrinsic) do not bode well for the goals that matter... What matters is not how motivated someone is, but *how* someone is motivated. (Kohn 1999: 257)

Many teachers are so relieved to see a motivated student they ignore the nature of the motivation. When the report card is issued, they are surprised their star pupil shows no further interest in the subject. Later, they learn the student was motivated by an extrinsic source like a monetary reward from their parents, not a passion for the subject.<sup>24</sup>

## **2.2 Why Rewards Fail**

While many educators rely on rewards extensively, they generally recognize their reward systems typically have a short life span. Teachers are constantly searching for new

---

<sup>24</sup> Far too often, students have approached my desk to ask what grade they will be getting on their next report card. With the love of learning shining from their bright young faces, they then tell me that their fathers will be buying them new electronic gadgets if they earn high marks in my course.

systems and teacher supply stores are filled with exhaustive collections of colorful stickers, pretty pencils, and certificates for every imaginable achievement. They believe their students will learn if they can just find the right system. Kohn (1993) proposes several reasons why rewards, even in the form of praise, fail to produce positive results.

First of all, rewards punish. They are intended to control and they are withdrawn if students do not meet expectations. Students who do not receive rewards are, in effect, punished. This subversive form of punishment is much worse than a straightforward consequence because it turns the situation into a competition. The students who receive rewards become winners and those who do not now see themselves as losers.

Second, rewards destroy relationships. If rewards are only given to the best, they produce high-stakes competition rather than friendly cooperation. Instead of aiming to do their best, students are hoping their classmates will fail. They may even attempt to sabotage their classmates' efforts or cheat them out of the prize in some way. For this reason, some teachers reward the whole class if they succeed collectively instead of individual students.

However, if the whole class is typically rewarded, their collective anger is turned against any student unfortunate enough to cost the class its reward. This wrath often falls on the same student again and again. In addition, rewards destroy the relationship between students and teachers. Their interaction becomes focused on the process of attaining rewards rather than on getting to know one another as people. Conflicts between students and teachers often result when rewards are withheld or given to someone who other students feel is undeserving.

Third, rewards are blind to the underlying motivation for specific behaviors. They are concerned with the product, not with the process. “Rewards are not actually solutions at all; they are gimmicks, shortcuts, quick fixes that mask problems and ignore reasons. They never look below the surface” (Kohn 1993: 60). Rewards do not help kids to overcome obstacles. Students who are unable to achieve the required standard because they don’t have the necessary skills do not suddenly acquire the skills when a reward is offered. Their repeated failure to earn a reward may even convince them they are lacking in intelligence. In fact, their teachers have simply become too preoccupied with distributing rewards to teach them the required skills. Rewards simply reward those who succeed and punish those who fail.

Fourth, rewards repress exploration and discourage risk-taking. In a reward-based system, students are punished for thinking outside the box and trying new approaches. Extraordinary accomplishments and discoveries go unnoticed simply because they do not fit the criteria. In addition, inquisitive students frequently lose out on the reward because they spend too much time making important discoveries and too little time on the frequently mundane tasks that are required. Students soon learn to stay between the lines. “[W]hen we are working for a reward, we do exactly what is necessary to get it and no more... Risks are to be avoided whenever possible because the objective is not to engage in an open-ended encounter with ideas; it is simply to get the goody” (Kohn 1993: 63). Students become single-minded in the narrow sense of the term. They miss all of the sights and focus only on the dull gray pavement of the race track.

Fifth, rewards undermine any attraction the activity itself holds for the students. “People’s interest in what they are doing typically declines when they are rewarded for

doing it” (Kohn 1993: 71). Any interest students have in the activity is quickly transferred to the reward. The activity loses any value it once had in and of itself—it is only valued as a means to an end. When the end is achieved, the activity itself is seen as pointless. Even more damaging, the activity is valued in reference to the reward. If the reward is a jelly bean, the value of the activity itself becomes equal to that of a jelly bean because the activity is now simply currency used to acquire the reward.

Kohn even condemns praise as nothing more than a verbal reward system. At this point most parents and teachers are tempted to burn the book. As parents and teachers, we pride ourselves on our ability to lavish constant praise on our charges. However, praise has been shown to have a similarly harmful effect. It creates pressure to live up to the compliment and encourages students to seek success over challenge in order to receive further recognition for their accomplishments. Once again, interest is transferred from the activity to the reward. Even more damaging is our inclination to praise accomplishments both student and teacher know are insignificant. Instead of building up self-esteem, this practice has the opposite effect. By praising the student prematurely, the teacher is suggesting the student is incapable of anything more complex or challenging. Kohn does advocate healthy praise. Healthy praise preserves autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Unconditional love does not necessitate unconditional praise. He suggests we should avoid praising people, especially in a phony way or a manner that creates competition. Instead, we should praise specific accomplishments.

Kohn also decries the way in which the system compartmentalizes education and depersonalizes the students. He attributes this to behaviorism’s tendency to break everything into a series of small tasks that are completed in response to external stimuli.

In a word, learning is decontextualized . We break ideas down into tiny pieces that bear no relation to the whole. We give students a brick of information, followed by another brick, followed by another brick, followed by another brick, until they are graduated, at which point we assume they have a house. What they have is a pile of bricks, and they don't have it for long. (Kohn 1993: 216)

In regards to the impersonal nature of behaviorist educational systems, Kohn refers to an excerpt from an interview he conducted with the father of behaviorism, Dr. B. F. Skinner: “If the question is how much the individual contributes,” Skinner states, “I think the answer to that is: nothing” (Kohn 1993: 289). This cold and segregated system cannot hope to provide the holistic experience we desire for all of our students.

Kohn argues that more than the methods and structure need to change. The objectives themselves are misleading.

The problem may not be just with rewards and punishments per se but with an excessive concern about kids performance. The use of grades, stickers, and other goodies often implies that too much attention is being paid to *how well* students are doing in school. This is not at all the same thing as helping students to become fully engaged with *what* they're doing. Bribes and threats are intended to increase *performance* (or, if you like, “raise standards”), but that may undermine *learning*. (Kohn 1999: 271)

Kohn concludes Western society is concerned with production, not education. This, he suggests, stems from our glorification of capitalism over democracy. The economy benefits when we use the education system to filter out a large working class. The upper class can then pay the working class low wages and justify this inequality on the basis of their poor academic performance.

### **2.3 Kohn's Alternative**

As previously mentioned, Kohn spends the majority of his manuscripts refuting behaviorism and appears rather vague when it come to offering a feasible alternative.

Kohn is not unaware of this criticism and he mentions several incidents where educators

have questioned whether or not he has another motivational system to offer. Kohn is unable to provide an easy answer. Quite simply, he argues, there is no easy answer. The alternative cannot be packaged or distributed. It cannot be presented in a workshop or passed around in a staff meeting. There are no step-by-step procedures that guarantee its successful implementation. There is no curriculum. Instead, it must be constructed year after year, piece by piece, student by student. Anything less is a pointless compromise.

In place of a glossy how-to-motivate-your-students-without-rewards manual, Kohn offers the simple vision of a system free from the manipulative power of rewards.

As I see it, the best sort of schooling is organized around problems, projects, and questions—as opposed to facts, skills, and disciplines. Knowledge is acquired of course, but in a context and for a purpose. The emphasis is not only on depth rather than breadth, but also on discovering ideas rather than on covering a prescribed curriculum. Teachers are generalists first and specialists (in a given subject matter) second; they commonly collaborate to offer interdisciplinary courses that students play an active role in designing. All of this happens in small, democratic schools that are experienced as caring communities. (Kohn 2004: 8)

Here, Kohn is at his most vulnerable. The realist points out his impracticality and the conservative calls it anarchy. However, if we take the brutal impact of behaviorism seriously, alternatives must be explored.

Kohn's alternative is based on the premise children are already motivated. Any one with young children can attest to the wealth of energy they possess.

Children do not need to be motivated. From the beginning they are hungry to make sense of their world. Given an environment in which they don't feel controlled and in which they are encouraged to think about what they are doing (rather than how well they are doing it), students of any age will generally exhibit an abundance of motivation and a healthy appetite for challenge" (Kohn 1993: 198-99)

Children don't have to be rewarded in order to motivate learning. In fact, rewards are less effective motivators than intrinsic motivation and they actually work against intrinsic motivators.

Along with the rewards, Kohn advocates the abolition of letter grades. If this is not possible due to the requirements of the educational establishment, "*teachers and parents who care about learning need to do everything in their power to help students forget that grades exist*" (Kohn 1993: 206).<sup>25</sup> In their place, Kohn advocates an evaluation of intrinsic motivation. We must be willing to "consider putting aside grades and scores as indicators of success and to look instead at the child's *interest* in learning. This is the primary criterion by which schools (and our own actions) should be judged" Kohn argues (Kohn 1993: 207). It is the schools and teachers who are being evaluated in Kohn's model, not the students.

## **2.4 Foundational Principles**

Kohn also proposes three foundational principles on which to build a motivating curriculum and learning environment (Kohn 1993: 213-226). Once again, these principles are not three easy steps to a motivated classroom. Instead, they are general guidelines that must be incorporated into every aspect of the curriculum.

The first is the principle of collaboration. Students learn best when they learn together. It is important to note this principle encourages cooperation not competition. Kohn encourages students at different levels of ability to work together. This also

---

<sup>25</sup> This is an exceptionally difficult adjustment for parents. Most feel that responsible parents should sit down with their children when the report card arrives and praise or punish them for its contents. Protecting them from the harmful effects of grades is a foreign concept.

involves students working in collaboration with their teacher to create curriculum and a classroom environment that encourages creativity and exploration.

The second principle emphasizes the importance of meaningful content. Students are highly motivated to learn by what they consider worth learning, not by what their government, their district, their teachers, or their parents prescribe for them. Of course, this implies students must have a high level of input.

Choice, the third principle, is perhaps the most foundational of the three. Student choice is a key element of both successful collaboration and the selection of meaningful content. Excessive control kills interest. Students may be guided in their learning choices but they should not be forced into them.

The old adage about leading a horse to water holds true. This “dead metaphor” was forever revived for me by a six-foot-something ex-marine named Tiny. “You can lead a ‘orse to water but you can’t make ‘im drink,” he drawled. After a glowering pause, he continued, “You can drown ‘im even—but you can’t make ‘im drink.” The image of the towering Texan wrestling a wide-eyed yearling into a muddy slough will forever represent to me the indignities we impose upon our students day after day in the name of education. Is it any wonder some of them flounder in the quagmire we have created?

## **2.5 Discovery**

Along with these principles, Kohn suggests five ways educators can turn learning into discovery. Even the term discovery is motivating. It suggests wonder and excitement. It also implies a high level of involvement by the learners. Kohn’s suggestions bring the expectation of discover to the classroom.

First, Kohn recommends, we must allow for active learning. Silence is a sign of submission—not fascination. Administrators, he proposes, should be stalking the hallways alert for the sound of silent classroom. They should then demand to know why they can't hear any learning happening there. Students should be free to move as they learn, not confined to their seats. As teachers and administrators, we can become so concerned with control we neglect our primary calling.

Second, reasons need to be given or proposed for each assignment. “Because I said so!” is a threat, not an explanation. If the foundational principles of collaboration, meaningful content, and choice are followed carefully, students and teachers will discuss the rationale for each assignment as they create curriculum together. The explanations don't have to be universal. Even if the whole class is working on the same assignment, each student can participate for their own reasons.

Third, we need to take full advantage of our students' natural curiosity. Humans are naturally curious. Curiosity may kill cats but this should not be used as a lesson for children. Instead, teachers should allow mystery and suspense to flourish in their classroom. Nothing is more tantalizing than the unknown and nothing is more boring than the predictable. Surprise is on our side!

Fourth, we need to set an example for our students. As educators, Kohn insists, we must give up the pretense we have all of the answers. We must debunk the belief that a certain search engine can download all the secrets of the universe in 2.3 seconds. We must not be afraid to venture into the unknown, to make discoveries along with our students, or to let our students lead us.

Fifth, we must welcome mistakes – both in our own bumbling attempts to guide the process of discovery and in our students’ attempts to make sense of the world around them. Kohn points out several revolutionary discoveries that came about as the accidental result of a series of disastrous mistakes. Of course, student safety is still a priority. Understanding is the ultimate goal—not the production of a correct answer. Students often attain a much deeper level of understanding when they are forced to grapple with their mistakes than they do when they chance on the correct answer the first time. Even when the correct answer is given, Kohn encourages students to discover why the answer is correct. Once again, the emphasis is on learning, not performance.

## **2.6 *Intrinsic Over Extrinsic***

Kohn also presents a unique perspective on the nature of intrinsic motivation. “The main question,” he asserts, “is whether we understand the concept in terms of a desire to engage in a particular task or in terms of certain qualities and more general motivations that define human beings” (Kohn 1993: 291). He also distinguishes between intrinsic and internal. “*Internal* does not always imply *intrinsic*... is [it] enough just to get children to ‘internalize’ norms and values? After all, feeling controlled from the inside isn’t much of an improvement over feeling controlled from the outside” (Kohn 1993: 293). Some may argue the absence of both external and internal control would result in anarchy. However, Kohn is hoping students will develop an intrinsic desire that will motivate and guide them in place of external and internal controls. Intrinsic motivation must be pure and free from coercion or it quickly dies.

Kohn acknowledges the existence of individuals who “are not seeking what we would ordinarily call extrinsic rewards, yet neither are they motivated by the tasks

themselves” (Kohn 1993: 294). However, he does not elevate this quality as the sole ideal. Instead, he also commends people who are “intrinsically interested in what they are doing” (Kohn 1993: 295). Basically, he views the desire to engage in a task and the quality of inner intrinsic motivation as equally superior to any motivation produced by extrinsic motivators.

He refutes the suggestion intrinsically motivated individuals or those who are motivated by the task itself should ignore the product. “To be sure, our society encourages a preoccupation with the product, the bottom line, the practical result.” However, he argues, “it is important to consider the content of our work, what it means beyond the pleasure it may provide” (Kohn 1993: 295). Content is still a primary consideration even when no external motivators are present.

Kohn continually reasserts the superiority of intrinsic motivation over extrinsic. He also argues satisfaction with the product falls on the intrinsic side of the fence. “Satisfaction in the doing is different from satisfaction in the having done, but both might reasonably be classified as intrinsic. The later is more similar to the former than it is to doing something for a reward” (Kohn 1993: 295-296). As long as students are intrigued by the process or satisfied by the product, their interest in the activity will be maintained.

## ***2.7 Objections to Kohn***

Kohn expresses disappointment “the principle response to these challenges is silence” (Kohn 1993: 297). In reading critics of Kohn, I have come to the conclusion few are willing to do the background research it would take to offer a serious challenge to his ideas on motivation and learning. Kohn correctly summarizes the categories most of his critics fall into. They argue rewards are necessary, effective, or harmless. Few offer any

support for these claims. They also suggest Kohn is, himself, motivated by money and therefore proof of the power of rewards. However, in expressing their opinions in publications that do not pay for their submissions, they prove their own motivation to write is intrinsic.

Most base their criticisms on what is presumed to be blatant common sense. One of the most frequently quoted arguments against multilevel collaborative learning is a statement by Rochester. He states that Kohn “apparently thinks you can put kids whose I.Q.s range from 70 to 130 in the same classroom, when some are reading Plato and others Pluto, and not miss a beat in terms of the level of education going on” (Rochester 1998). However, Rochester offers no evidence to the contrary, apparently confident the world will laugh along with him at Kohn’s naivety.

Rochester makes the same assumption a short while later. This time it is even more obvious he is basing his argument solely on the assumption his audience shares his scorn. “Any 10-year-old can understand the logic, wisdom, and justice of merit-based education, but it seems to have escaped Kohn” (Rochester 1998). He then compares multi-level collaborative education to putting Kohn on a basketball court with Michael Jordan. “Would we expect Michael's game to improve as a result of playing against Alfie?” he asks, “Do we really think Michael would gain leadership, sensitivity, and team-building skills as a result of working with Alfie?” (Rochester 1998). However, Kohn has already answered these questions. First, he has written an entire book on the negative effects of competition. He agrees Jordan’s game would not improve. Would Jordan gain leadership, sensitivity, and team-building skills? If the reader pauses to

consider this statement for a moment, I think I can safely assume Rochester's appeal to common sense has already worked against him.

I think it can also be deduced that Rochester has not experienced much success with his own approach to education. Later in the article he decries the condition he finds his students in.

As a college professor, I cannot say that I am exactly shocked by the survey results. For many years I have witnessed a decline in academic preparation on the part of students entering my own university, and I have heard similar complaints expressed by colleagues at other institutions throughout the country, including elite schools. What is evident in today's student body is a poor work ethic, an aversion to reading and to listening, an inability to write polished prose consisting of complete words and sentences using standard English conventions, an ignorance of history, an entitlement mentality regarding good grades, a devaluing of traditional notions of scholarship and knowledge, and a disrespect for the teacher/student relationship and for learning itself. (Rochester 1998)

However, he is very quick to blame Kohn and a long list of others for the sorry state of his students.

Ironically, a fellow critic, Chance, accuses Kohn of excusing teachers of responsibility for student learning.

This [Kohn's] philosophy renders the teacher essentially impotent and leads ultimately to the conclusion that, when students fail, it is their own fault. If Students do not learn, it is because of some deficiency in them: lack of ability, lack of motivation, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder - we have lots of choices. The failure is never due to inadequate teaching. Learning depends, after all, on things inside the student, well out of the teacher's reach. (Chance 1993)

This statement describes Rochester's perspective much more accurately than it does Kohn's. In fact, Kohn's work is aimed primarily at teachers and he is often quite harsh in his criticism of their practices. At the same time, both Kohn and I firmly believe the classroom teacher is the only real hope for change.

In Chance's defense, he does present the most serious challenge to Kohn that I was able to uncover. Most of Kohn's critics appear to have read little of his work because they criticize him for views he does not actually hold or points he addresses very thoroughly in one of his many books. Chance, however, has read Kohn carefully enough to identify a few of the researchers on whose experiments Kohn bases his arguments. Chance argues "Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, Mark Lepper, and David Greene... reject [Kohn's] view" (Chance 1993). He then quotes a single line from each researcher that implies they value rewards under certain circumstances. However, he again ignores Kohn's many comments on this issue. Kohn recognizes the power of rewards. His argument is with the undesirable nature of the system they create.

Chance reveals he is still firmly entrenched in the behaviorist mindset by his description of the parent-child relationship. In arguing rewards are natural, not manipulative, Chance states, "As for control: a parent rewards a baby's crying when he or she offers a bottle, and the baby rewards the parent's action by ceasing to cry. Each controls the other" (Chance 1993). The characterization of this loving moment in terms of control exposes the many preconceptions Kohn's opponents bring to the table.

One charge critics do not often bring against Kohn is one to which he is likely the most vulnerable. That is the charge of idealism. As I mentioned previously, Kohn spends the better part of each work criticizing the traditional system but offers few concrete alternatives. Instead, he presents a utopian dream of a world where students actually enjoy learning and working together. Rochester's solution stands in stark contrast to this idealistic vision.

Let's do a better job of convincing the next generation that learning is hard work, that there are no short cuts or panaceas, that failure will not be rewarded, but that the quest for success is truly worthy of one's supreme effort. (Rochester 1998)

I am just not sure what Rochester hopes to accomplish by this approach other than the status quo. This generation is already well aware learning is strenuous and failed attempts are punished. Most are also convinced they don't have what it takes to succeed in the current system. I think a little of Kohn's idealism might prove an antidote to the poison of behaviorism.

### **3 Csikszentmihalyi: Motivational Flow**

Psychologists like Csikszentmihalyi are still a rarity in their field. In the same way behaviorists transformed their observations of rodents into theories on human behavior, many modern day psychologists base their claims about the psyche on studies of the mentally ill. Csikszentmihalyi is among the minority of psychologists who have devoted their time to the study of the healthy human mind.

While Kohn presents what is largely a meta-analysis of existing research, Csikszentmihalyi bases his theories largely on his own observations or studies carried out in cooperation with colleagues and students. Unlike behaviorists, he relies largely on his subjects' self-evaluations of their own mental states. However, Csikszentmihalyi elicits this information in unique fashion that removes a great deal of subjectivity from the equation. He has his subjects carry a beeper around with them set to go off at random times during the day. When the beeper sounds, the subjects are instructed to stop and journal about what they are doing and feeling at that specific moment. This instantaneous reporting, Csikszentmihalyi argues, removes opportunity for self-analysis over time and increases the level of objectivity. At the same time, it allows the researcher to study some

of the deeper thoughts and emotions that affect motivation in addition to the outward behavior.

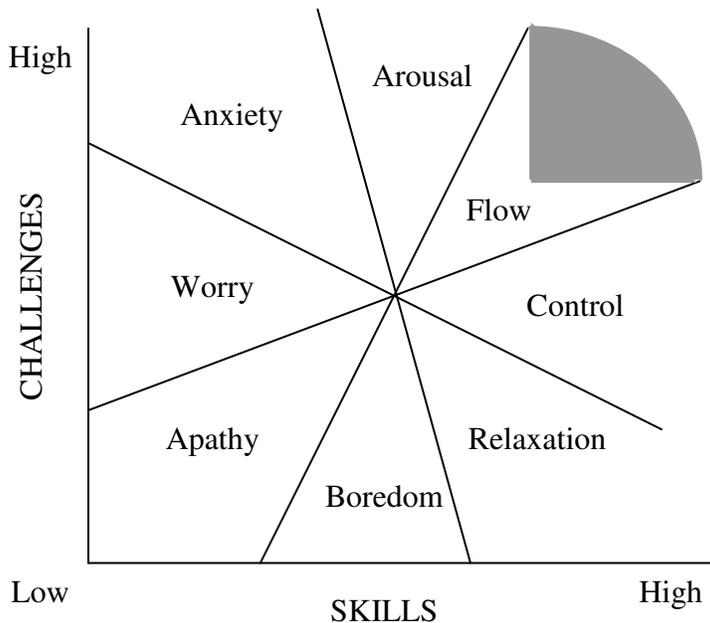
Csikszentmihalyi is also an accomplished theoretician. He goes beyond the simple reporting of his findings to develop elegant but accessible theories on a wide range of subjects. Although he does not apply his theories directly to education or conduct all of his research among students, his findings are very applicable to the classroom context. Many of Csikszentmihalyi's theories are extremely relevant to the study of motivation even though he does not analyze motivation directly. His ideas on attention, emotion, intention, and learning are unique in their focus on contextual human experience. While he does not discuss the nature of motivation, Csikszentmihalyi describes in detail the context in which it occurs. This context is an optimal state of mind he terms *flow*.

### **3.1 The Flow Experience**

Despite the breadth of his many publications, Csikszentmihalyi is best known for his research on optimal experience. Early on in his career, Csikszentmihalyi set out to uncover the origin of happiness. In the process, he found the moments his subjects remembered as the best times of their lives were not necessarily moments in which they described themselves as happy. Instead, they were times in which their level of involvement was so intense they experienced a deep sense of satisfaction as an aftereffect.

Csikszentmihalyi began to analyze these experiences in detail and developed a theory on optimal experiences which he christened flow. He proposed skill and challenge as the two main components of flow. Csikszentmihalyi concluded his subjects experienced flow when they were faced with a challenging activity for which they were

equipped with an equal level of skill. They derived a deep sense of satisfaction from this flow experience.



(Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 31)

In situations where the level of challenge exceeded the level of skill, participants failed to achieve an optimal state. If their capabilities were high but the level of challenge was slightly higher, they entered the unpleasant state of arousal. However, if the challenge was far higher than current skill levels, the participants experienced extreme anxiety. Lower levels of challenge that exceeded even lower skills levels produce the less intense feelings of worry.

On the other hand, when the level of skill exceeded the level of challenge, participants also failed to enter into flow. If their skills were exceptional and the level of challenge moderately high, they would experience the sensation of control. This was pleasant but not as satisfying as flow. If their level of challenge was lowered even further while the skill level remained high, participants experienced a sense of relaxation—once again pleasant while it lasted but not fully satisfying. If the skill level was moderate and the challenge low, participants became bored.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, the antithesis of flow is apathy. In situations where the level of challenge was nonexistent and the participants possessed no relevant skills, the participants became apathetic toward the activity. As a result, they were completely apathetic towards the experience. Csikszentmihalyi summarizes the flow experience itself in this manner:

Flow tends to occur when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a challenge that is just about manageable. Optimal experiences usually involve a fine balance between one's ability to act, and the available opportunities for action... If challenges are too high one gets frustrated, then worried, and eventually anxious. If challenges are too low relative to one's skills one gets relaxed, then bored. If both challenges and skills are perceived to be low, one gets to feel apathetic. But when high challenges are matched with high skills, then the deep involvement that sets flow apart from ordinary life is likely to occur. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 30)

The flow model is intuitively appealing on many levels and applicable to many aspects of life, especially in the field of education.

Csikszentmihalyi also defines other elements of the flow experience. He argues all flow-inducing activities are *autotelic* in nature. "An activity was assumed to be autotelic (from the Greek *auto* = self and *telos* = goal, purpose) if it required formal and extensive energy output on the part of the actor, yet provided few if any conventional

rewards” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 10). In this, Csikszentmihalyi appears to be in agreement with Kohn’s opinions on rewards.

Unfortunately, without identifying which data set he is referring to, Csikszentmihalyi falls into the same behaviorist assumption Kohn rails against so vehemently: “The data suggests, however, that in real-life situations extrinsic and intrinsic rewards need not be in conflict. Money, status, or a sense of service can certainly enhance the enjoyment derived directly from the activity” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 22). While Kohn benefits from Csikszentmihalyi’s research and refers to his theories several times, Csikszentmihalyi did not integrate Kohn’s findings, likely because they were published several years after Csikszentmihalyi’s foundational works. I would suspect Csikszentmihalyi would find Kohn’s conclusions on rewards quite relevant to his own research, given the many other similarities between their ideas.

Csikszentmihalyi proceeds to define the nature of the flow activity more specifically. “The underlying similarity that cuts across these autotelic activities, regardless of their formal differences, is that they all give participants a sense of discovery, exploration, problem solution—in other words, a feeling of novelty and challenge” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 30). However, he again falls into disagreement with Kohn when he states:

Whatever the specific structure of an autotelic activity is like, it seems that its most basic requirement is to provide a clear set of challenges. These can be of two types: the challenge of the unknown, which leads to discovery, exploration, problem solution... or the more concrete challenge of competition...  
(Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 30)

Kohn would agree the challenge of the unknown is desirable. However, he would sharply dispute the assertion that competition is on an equal standing.

In this case, I think Csikszentmihalyi's own theory can eliminate competition as a reliable element of flow inducing activities. On consideration, it is obvious both parties in a direct competition cannot experience flow simultaneously. Competition always produces a winner and a loser. As soon as one of the participants achieves the upper hand, the other will experience a sense of anxiety because their skills are no longer equal to the challenge. Meanwhile, the dominant participant will fall out of flow and into control. Even when the participants are equally matched and a tie results, it is unlikely either will achieve optimal satisfaction from the experience because their skills were not up to the challenge of winning the competition.

Another essential element of the optimal experience is a combination of instruction and evaluation. According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow "usually contains coherent, noncontradictory demands for action and provides clear, unambiguous feedback to a person's actions" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 46). The activity should be challenging, not the comprehension of instructions. As well, the feedback must be instantaneous. "[I]n flow, one does not stop to evaluate the feedback; action and reaction have become so well practiced as to be automatic. The person is too involved with the experience to reflect on it" (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 46). It is no wonder flow experiences are relatively elusive.

The remaining elements of the flow experience are all the result of intense focus on the task at hand. First, action and awareness merge until all attention is centered on the activity itself. Second, the stimulus field is limited to the present. Awareness of past, future and the passage of time fade away completely. Third, awareness of self also dissipates. The participant loses the capacity for self-consciousness because all of their

attention is consumed by the activity. Csikszentmihalyi summarizes the concept of flow best in the following paragraph:

When goals are clear, feedback relevant, and challenges and skills are in balance, attention becomes ordered and fully invested. Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes. When a person's entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake; living becomes its own justification. In the harmonious focusing of physical and psychic energy, life finally comes into its own. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 31-2)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, this—not relaxation—is the ideal state. Leisure may seem more enjoyable at the time but it does not produce the sense of lasting satisfaction complete absorption in a challenging task can generate.

### **3.2 Attention as a Resource**

For Csikszentmihalyi, attention is not a vague quality or an elusive state of mind. It is a commodity—and it is in short supply! Csikszentmihalyi typically uses the term *psychic energy* when he discusses attention. It is important to define what he means by this term because of its obvious and misleading occultic connotations.

Because attention determines what will or will not appear in consciousness, and because it is also required to make any other mental events—such as remembering, thinking, feeling, and making decisions—happen there, it is useful to think of it as *psychic energy*. Attention is like energy in that without it no work can be done, and in doing work it is dissipated. We create ourselves by how we invest this energy. Memories, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by how we use it. And it is an energy under our control, to do with as we please; hence, attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience. (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 33)

Although he acknowledges the influence of eastern mysticism on his thinking, this concept is firmly rooted in western capitalism. Csikszentmihalyi uses the term *psychic* in

reference to the mind, not palm reading, and his use of the term *energy* has more in common with gasoline than it does with karma. Later, he refers to psychic energy as “the basic fuel upon which all thinking depends” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 27-8).

Like oil, this resource of the mind is limited and already in high demand. Because optimal experiences demand total focus, we must carefully reserve as much attention as possible for these activities. If our attention is consumed by less than optimal experiences, we will find ourselves unable to enter into flow when the opportunity presents itself.

The capacity to control attention is also essential. Attention that wanders constantly is unlikely to produce positive results, no matter how unstructured the activity may be.

To pursue mental operations to any depth, a person has to learn to concentrate attention. Without focus, consciousness is in a state of chaos. The normal condition of the mind is one of informational disorder: random thoughts chase one another instead of lining up in logical casual sequences. Unless one learns to concentrate, and is able to invest effort, thoughts will scatter without reaching any conclusion. Even daydreaming – that is, the linking together of pleasant images to create some sort of mental motion picture – requires the ability to concentrate, and apparently many children never learn to control their attention sufficiently to be able to daydream.” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 27)

Focus and concentration are crucial elements. However, they are not the product of will power alone. “Usually the more difficult a mental task, the harder it is to concentrate on it. But when a person likes what he does and is motivated to do it, focusing the mind becomes effortless even when the objective difficulties are great” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 27). The effect of flow appears to be cyclical. The sensation of flow allows the participant to enter even further into the flow experience by enhancing focus.

### **3.3 The Emotion Factor**

Emotions have a significant impact on our capacity for attention. Csikszentmihalyi uses the terms negentropy and entropy for the positive and negative effects of emotions respectively.

Emotions refer to the internal states of consciousness. Negative emotions like sadness, fear, anxiety, or boredom produce ‘psychic entropy’ in the mind, that is a state in which we cannot use attention effectively to deal with external tasks, because we need it to restore an inner subjective order. Positive emotions like happiness, strength, or alertness are states of ‘psychic negentropy’ because we don’t need attention to ruminate and feel sorry for ourselves, and psychic energy can flow freely into whatever thought or task we choose to invest it in. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 22)

The cyclical effect of flow is again evident as positive emotions free up attention for optimal experiences, which in turn produce more positive emotions.

Once again, however, Csikszentmihalyi differs slightly with Kohn on the nature of activities that produce optimal experiences. And again, he does not specify the evidence to which he refers.

Quite a bit of evidence shows that whereas people feel best when what they do is voluntary, they do not feel worse when what they do is obligatory. Psychic entropy is highest instead when persons feel that what they do is motivated by not having anything else to do. Thus both intrinsic motivation (wanting to do it) and extrinsic motivation (having to do it) are preferable to the state where one acts by default, without having any kind of goal to focus attention. The large part of life many people experience as being thus unmotivated leaves a great deal of room for improvement. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 23)

This time, I believe, it is more a difference of definition than a difference of opinion.

While Csikszentmihalyi defines extrinsically motivated activities as those which one has to do, Kohn defines them as activities for which one is rewarded for doing or punished for not doing. While the preservation of personal autonomy is important to Kohn, he

would agree the absence of punishments and rewards reduces the negative impact of a required activity.

However, Csikszentmihalyi is likely correct in stating both required and voluntary activities produce a more positive emotional response than the third alternative. In my experience, most students are in a much more positive mental state after I force an unpopular activity on them than they are if I give them a block of free time to occupy in whatever way they wish. Obviously, both Csikszentmihalyi and Kohn value intrinsically motivated action above either alternative.

### **3.4 Good Intentions**

Csikszentmihalyi associates motivation with the concept of intention as a product of positive emotion. However, he still differentiates between the two terms.

When we choose to invest in a given task, we say that we have formed an intention, or set a goal for ourselves. How long and how intensely we stick by our goals is a function of motivation. Therefore intentions, goals, and motivations are also manifestations of psychic negentropy. They focus psychic energy, establish priorities, and thus create order in consciousness. Without them mental processes become random, and feelings tend to deteriorate rapidly. (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 22)

Intention differs from motivation in that it only provides the impetus to begin the activity. Motivation is more similar to commitment from Csikszentmihalyi's perspective.

Csikszentmihalyi does attribute a negative effect to extrinsically motivated activity at another point.

Less extreme but more widespread interference with control over attention occurs whenever people feel forced to attend to tasks against their present intentions in order to secure some future goal. Students who sit in a classroom when they wish to be out playing football lose control over the psychic energy invested in their immediate intentions because they fear the even greater loss that would result from failing the course or dropping out of school. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 9)

He notes the fear or anxiety that results from the presence of extrinsic motivators causes inner conflict which destroys focus.

It is equally important individuals do not have contradictory goals at war within their minds. This also reduces the ability to focus.

The optimal state of experience for the individual is one in which intentions are not in conflict with each other. In this state of inner harmony people can freely choose to invest their psychic energy in goals that are congruent with the rest of their intentions. Subjectively, this is felt to be a state of heightened energy, a state of increased control. The experience is considered challenging and enjoyable. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 9-10)

Csikszentmihalyi expands this concept beyond the individual to include the community.

It follows that to achieve a vital community, the psychic energy of individuals must be congruently structured. This congruence can result from either historical or environmental pressures... or it can be achieved by cultivating common values, ideals, or interests. In either case, harmony exists among the goals held by individuals in the community. This implies, in turn, a restructuring of attention, a partial reallocation of psychic energy that will be invested willingly in goals that might not benefit each individual directly. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 11)

This is an important extension to Csikszentmihalyi's ideas as most of his theory is focused on the individual, not the group.

However, the individual still maintains and develops an independent identity with the larger group.

A truly vital community, however, does not become more homogeneous. People are so different from each other genetically and experientially that, in order to reflect such differences accurately, individuals must structure their attention differently, thus building selves that diverge from each other in a variety of ways. However, it is possible for each individual to cultivate goals without producing conflict in the community. This would result in an integrated group of people pursuing a common goal while contributing their own unique perspectives to that goal. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 11)

It is unfortunate Csikszentmihalyi does not expand further on this topic as most educational settings involve group instruction of some kind. Still, the application of his theories is certainly not restricted to individuals.

### **3.5 Learning as a Product of Flow**

The flow experience is closely related to learning. Csikszentmihalyi argues flow “acts as a magnet for learning—that is, for developing new levels of challenges and skills” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 33). In order to maintain flow, the level of challenge must be steadily increased to match the individual’s level of skill, which is constantly increasing due to the ideal learning environment flow creates.

Flow theory also provides ideas on how to overcome common obstacles to the learning process. While states of arousal and control are not negative, they are not ideal for learning either.

So how does one get back to flow? By increasing challenges. Thus arousal and control are very important states for learning. The other conditions are less favorable. When a person is anxious or worried, for example, the step to flow often seems too far, and one retreats to a less challenging situation instead of trying to cope.” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 32-3)

One can optimize the learning experience by increasing either challenges or skill levels. If skill levels cannot be increased enough to meet the challenge, the challenge must be reduced to a manageable level.

At this point, Csikszentmihalyi agrees with and compliments Kohn perfectly. Like Kohn, Csikszentmihalyi argues “It is not only *what* should be taught to children that is important but also *how* it should be taught” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 205). In the same way Kohn places the emphasis on the interest children show in learning, Csikszentmihalyi highlights their enjoyment.

The studies of flow activities suggest that anything can be made enjoyable as long as certain structural conditions are preserved. If educators were to start with the question “How can learning be made more enjoyable?” the students’ gains in performance should increase tremendously. It is crucial to remember, however, that one does not make learning more enjoyable by trivializing it—by making it easy, or pleasant, or ‘fun.’ The hardships and dangers of rock climbing are probably a better model for enjoyment in learning than the gussied-up educational techniques based on a hedonistic escapist notion of what enjoyment is. (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 205)

However, Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges the challenges educators face in the present educational system.

In theory, it is simple enough to make any learning task enjoyable: find out what the student’s skills are and what their level is... then devise limited but gradually increasing opportunities for the expression of those skills. The learning will then become intrinsically motivated. Of course, any good teacher or textbook writer already knows this. The problem is that mass education is too impersonal and rigid to allow the application of this simple recipe. (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 205)

Unfortunately, Csikszentmihalyi does not provide many suggestions on how to reform the system.

Despite their refusal to provide a simple solution to the motivational dilemma, Kohn and Csikszentmihalyi are excellent starting points. Kohn firmly closes the door on behaviorist pedagogy as a possible method to motivate writing and Csikszentmihalyi opens a window on the nature of an intrinsically motivating experience. Together, they offer a clearly defined foundation on which to build a new pedagogy for the teaching of writing.

### **3.6 *Objections to Csikszentmihalyi***

Unlike Kohn, Csikszentmihalyi does not spark much controversy with his theory of flow. He is widely read, widely quoted, and has a reputation akin to Santa Claus in that few are

offended by his ideas on how to achieve happiness in life. The most serious criticism I have come across is that there is nothing with which to disagree.

Historically, Csikszentmihalyi's critics contend his theory has nothing new to offer. British psychologist Oliver James remarks that Csikszentmihalyi's theory is "just tautology." In his opinion, Csikszentmihalyi is just giving fresh terminology to something already commonly understood. "If people are very absorbed in something," James continues, "it stands to reason that they are going to be happier - a drug addict would be absorbed with pursuing cocaine" (James as quoted by Chittenden 1997). Ironically, this reference to drug addiction foreshadows a later round of criticism.

Recently, critics have questioned Csikszentmihalyi's apparent reluctance to rephrase his theory in cognitive terms. According to Marr, Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow can be fully explained by recent findings in cognitive science.

The neuromodulator dopamine, a neurochemical that modulates or activates global areas of the brain (neocortex) is released when an individual (and this includes our mammalian cousins) perceives a positive discrepancy in its environment that was heretofore imperfectly predicted. This has recently been empirically demonstrated through simple brain scans (fMRI) that have detected heightened levels of dopamine in a variety of flow producing tasks, from game playing to creative behavior. Further, elevated dopamine levels not only result in subjective reports of euphoria or pleasure, but also in increased levels of 'synaptic efficiency' that lead to heightened mental capacity. (Marr 2009)

According to Marr, the entire flow experience can be explained by an increase in levels of dopamine.

Marr readily acknowledges the application of hard science to flow theory deadens its effect.

As scientific explanations usually do however, the literary breathlessness that accompanies common descriptions of flow (e.g. undreamed of state of consciousness, psychic energy) is replaced with a more down to earth and slightly

sinister explanation. Namely, the vaunted flow experience is little different from a cocaine high, which depends also on elevated dopamine levels. (Marr 2009)

Marr argues “flow is not science because it does not embrace the explanatory comprehensiveness of science” (Marr 2009). He concludes, “Until the literature on flow does this it will always remain what it has always been, merely literature” Marr 2009).

While this may be of some comfort to cognitive scientists, I do not think it is necessarily helpful to the majority of educators. Like many English teachers, my interest quickly wanes when brain chemistry is presented as a key to learning. It is too intangible for me to appreciate and implement.

I am personally grateful Csikszentmihalyi began writing on flow before we had the technological capacity to study chemical changes in the brain. I do not think the concept of flow would have made the inroads it has into our culture if it had been introduced in scientific terms. By phrasing his findings in the language of laypeople, Csikszentmihalyi has made flow accessible to the masses. Scientifically challenged English teachers can implement flow-based approaches in their classes. They can also explain optimal experience to their students because Csikszentmihalyi has presented his findings in terms students are already familiar with. I appreciate Marr’s efforts to base flow firmly on scientific fact. However, I believe Csikszentmihalyi’s simplistic terminology is more useful than ever.

## **SECTION TWO: Writing**

This section explores the nature of writing. It begins with a discussion of the basic elements of writing. Following this, it investigates the relationship of writing to reading, speech, listening, and grammar.

### **4 Basic Elements of Writing**

Writing is generally considered an important skill for students to master. It figures prominently in the back to the basics mantra: “reading, writing, and arithmetic.” However, like the proverbial middle child, writing is frequently misunderstood and neglected. It typically receives less attention than reading and it doesn’t get its own room like arithmetic.

It is essential to develop an understanding of writing itself before any attempt is made to educate others in the art. If we, as educators, operate from an incorrect assumption as to the nature of good writing, we will point our students in the wrong direction. When they do not arrive at the objective we’ve set for them in our minds, we will become frustrated and disillusioned. Frequently, we will blame our students for their lack of progress when we are the ones who sent them off with a set of directions that leaves them as confused and disappointed as we are. Understanding the nature of writing is the first step in developing a curriculum and a pedagogy will guide students through their development as writers.

From hieroglyphics to Braille, writing has been an important part of many communities for thousands of years. On the most basic level, writing is the act of producing visible or tactile symbols. The means by which these symbols are produced is

relatively insignificant as long as they are recognizable and it is possible to differentiate between them.

These symbols are generally assumed to have meaning, both to the writer and to the intended audience. Unlike other creative activities, communication is most often the primary purpose of the act. The assumption of meaning presupposes the act of interpreting symbols, or reading, as an inextricable element of writing. Writing is written to be read.

There are circumstances in which writing is produced without the intent to communicate but these are rare. One example that comes to mind is the taking of notes during a lecture. The act of writing itself, apart from reviewing, is a key element in the retention of information. In my undergraduate years, I often took extensive notes during lectures as a way of retaining the information I was acquiring audibly. However, I rarely read over my notes before a test. Writing and listening simultaneously was often enough to ensure adequate retention to succeed on examinations. As I became more aware of my learning style, I began to take notes with no intention of reading over them at a later date. In fact, most of my notes are illegible, even to myself.

In a similar way, many people keep journals or diaries in which they record their thoughts and experiences. These texts are often very private and contain sensitive information. Diary writers generally have no intention of ever sharing their entries with anyone and some do not even read over previous entries themselves. The act of writing in a diary is a way of processing thoughts and experiences; its primary purpose is not communicative. However, most texts are written with the understanding that either the writer or another individual will read it at some point in the future.

While all language is essentially symbolic, written symbols are generally distinguished from other forms of linguistic symbolization by the fact they can be perceived visually, as opposed to audibly. There are many other forms of communication that can be perceived visually, such as sign language, body language, or Morse code. However, writing is arguably the most advanced form of visible communication. The visual nature of writing introduces a distinction between writing, or visual symbolization, and speech, or verbal symbolization.

Most visual symbols are commonly understood to be part of a standardized system of communication. In contrast to speech, the level of standardization is generally quite high. This is largely due to the fact speech is most often produced and received in a common context, with the opportunity for immediate clarification. Writing, on the other hand, is generally read in a different context from which it is produced. Therefore, an increased level of standardization is generally required in order to ensure clarity. Writing systems come to be standardized in a variety of ways ranging from normalization over time to the appointment of linguistic experts by political entities.

While this thesis will focus on the English language, it is important to appreciate graphic systems because the earliest and most basic forms of writing were pictographic. Although the English writing system is not pictographic in any way, we are still in effect drawing ‘word pictures’ onto paper or some other medium for another individual to decipher at a latter point and time. This aspect of writing is little changed from the earliest cave drawings.

In the absence of vision, due to blindness for instance, writing is extended into the realm of touch perception. Braille is an example of a touch-based system. However, the

same basic characteristics exist in that writing systems for the blind employ a variety of two-dimensional patterns in order to communicate. In other words, only the pattern changes. The third dimension is only utilized to make the pattern accessible to touch. The third dimension, in itself, is not a variable. The height of the bumps does not convey meaning. Other characteristics that are only perceivable through touch such as fuzziness, wetness, stickiness, or temperature are not varied either.

However, writing is much more than the production of meaningful symbols. By many, writing is considered an art form of the highest order. In the case of calligraphy, the design of the symbols themselves stands alone as a field in visual art. Many cultures have developed their symbol systems into highly stylized designs. Graffiti is another example of writing as a visual art. Commercially, the style of script used in an advertisement is as important as the wording. Graphic design teaches the incorporation of script into commercial art. Companies will pay millions for a new font or logo.

The appreciation of writing as an art form goes far beyond the visual appeal of script design. The art of writing more often refers to the oral qualities and semantic aspects of the skill. Authors truly are artists. Even in phonemic scripts, authors are able to paint scenes in the minds of their readers that make the images of the eye seem nothing more than shadows. The sophisticated computer imagery used in the most recent screen adaptations of well-written novels still leaves viewers feeling they lost a purer vision of a world they first glimpsed through the black and white pages of a novel.

#### ***4.1 The Oral Dimension***

On a basic level, writing and reading are connected through speech. Students are often taught to inscribe a letter alongside of an image that emphasizes the phonemic quality of

the symbol. For example, students learn to write the letter “A” next to a picture of an apple. The letter “A” looks nothing like an apple. The connection is not apparent until both symbols are spoken.

In teaching writing and reading, we often forget speech is a language skill. Our culture is so dependent on text we assume students know nothing about language until they begin to recognize and reproduce alphabetic symbols. In fact, much of their grammatical and phonetic systems are already fully intact at this point. Learning to read and write is more akin to language transfer than language learning. Students already have language, they are just learning to express themselves through a new medium.

When writing their first words, students are encouraged to sound out the individual letters in the same way they sound out letters when reading phonetically. However, the many variables in English orthography make this a challenge in either direction. A child who encounters a ‘c’ while reading does not know whether to pronounce it as a /s/ or as a /k/ as it can represent both sounds. When writing a word that begins with the /s/ sound, a child does not know whether to mark down an ‘s’ or a ‘c’ since both symbols represent the same sound.

Of the two tasks, reading is definitely easier in this regard. If the child has already encountered the word orally, it is relatively easy to recognize which pronunciation is correct from the context since there are limited options. When it comes to writing, however, there is no way to determine which symbol should be used to represent the sound since the rationale is often historical rather than phonemic. Unless the child remembers which symbol is used from a previous encounter with the word in writing, it is a fifty-fifty gamble.

Even words that are closely related semantically can use different symbols. One would assume 'cat' and the term for its offspring would both be spelt with the same letter as they both begin with the same sound. However, 'cat' is spelt with a 'c' while 'kitten' unexplainably uses 'k' for the same initial consonant. I am sure there is a plausible explanation but likely not one a five-year-old could remember and apply. It would be much more practical to do away with the letter 'c' entirely.

English spelling is essentially an arbitrary, nonsensical system and should be a relatively trivial matter when it comes to adolescent writing. However, I am constantly surprised by how closely it is associated with skill in the English language. I am often questioned as to how I can be an English teacher when I still struggle with English spelling. Many adolescent students feel they cannot write simply because they find English spelling a challenge.

Pictographic languages like Chinese are an obvious exception to this in that semantics, rather than speech, serve as an intermediary between writing and reading. One must know what the symbol means in order to pronounce it. As a result, the same symbols with the same meanings can be used for multiple dialects.

The English language does have a similar element. When it comes to homophones, one must know the intended meaning in order to spell the word correctly. As well, there are a small number of words in which the pronunciation is dependent on the meaning even if the spelling is the same. This represents an insignificant proportion of the vocabulary. However, many of these words are common enough to intimidate an insecure writer when too much emphasis is placed on spelling.

## **4.2 Writing at the Word Level**

As speed in both writing and reading increases, common sight words are read and written as single units. Studies have been carried out that prove readers are not hindered by the reordering of letters within words as long as the first and last letter is the same and all of the letters are present, preserving the overall appearance of the word. In the same way, as I type this sentence, I am not thinking in letters but in words. When I want to write a word, I think the word and my fingers type it without any conscience thought as to the individual letters of the word. Only longer words or words I am not as familiar with require thought as to the individual letters they contain or the order the letters are in.

Typing errors are a good example of word level writing. Typing errors generally consist of a mistake in the order of letters in a word as opposed to the deletion of a letter. These mistakes are so common many word processors are designed to automatically correct simple mistakes in letter order without even consulting the user.

Typing errors bring to light an additional connection between reading and writing. Typing errors are generally made because the writer is thinking of the word as a whole, not of individual letters. However, they are also missed during proofreading because the reader is reading words as a whole, not as individual letters.

In the computer age, proofreading generally takes place both during and after the initial composition. The writer often glances back a few words or sentences before proceeding with the next thought. At this point, the writer will often correct any obvious errors immediately rather than waiting until the end of the document. This is due to the ease with which corrections can now be made. There is no need to write a second draft or

even wait for the correctional fluid to dry. Modern spell checkers underline mistakes immediately after they are made have reinforced this brief backward scan.

### **4.3 Grammatical Sound Checks**

Grammar is another area in which there is interplay between writing and reading and speech. Most native English writers do not think in terms of grammar rules. Rather, they write as the words, phrases, and sentences come to them, perhaps reading through the line in their mind before typing it out. Once it is on paper, they rarely analyze it in terms of grammar either. Instead, they read over it out loud or in their minds and listen to how it sounds. If it sounds right, it stays. If it doesn't quite fit, they run through alternatives in their minds until they come up with one that seems to click.

The fact writers go by what sounds right instead of grammar rules is evidenced by frequent mistakes with the first person pronoun as a direct object. Writers don't think through the rule. Instead, they hear their parents and elementary school teachers correcting with "Bob and I" every time they said "Bob and me." This is so strongly reinforced in the subject position many adults continue to use the subject form in direct object position even though they would never make the same mistake if the pronoun was used alone. For example, many adults will say, "Sue is going to the store with Bob and I," even though they would never say, "Sue is going to the store with I." They write it as they hear it in their minds when they read it. This interplay between writing, reading, speech, listening, and grammar will be investigated more thoroughly in the following chapters.

## **5 Writing and Reading**

Writing and reading are exact opposites and yet intrinsically related. It is important for educators to understand the relationship between the two skill sets. Reading is receiving, comprehending, and assimilating. Writing is creating, conveying, and expressing. Both rely on the same systems of grammar and vocabulary, spelling and script. However, to assume the two activities are parallel in every way is to miss important aspects of each. It is crucial to understand how they differ in relationship to one another in addition to what they have in common.

### ***5.1 Reading Emphasized Over Writing***

Despite carefully crafted and well-balanced definitions, modern literacy is more often associated with the ability to read than with the skill of writing. Even in the more even-keeled descriptions of literacy, reading is generally listed ahead of writing. We are all familiar with many different reading initiatives but few could name a single writing initiative. When faced with the initials USSR, Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading would come to the mind of most educators before Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. However, few educators would identify SSW as Sustained Silent Writing simply because writing initiatives do not get the attention reading programs do.

In addition, uncountable studies have investigated issues surrounding reading. Numerous materials have been produced that claim to engage students in reading. Countless government grants, programs, and private sector initiatives have been aimed at improving reading. However, few are offered that focus on writing. For example, the BC Literacy Directory ([directory.literacybc.ca](http://directory.literacybc.ca)) for the Surrey-Guildford area has a category for reading, writing, and math programs. However, most of the programs are reading

clubs. Although we can assume students can get help with their writing through the few tutoring programs that are offered or through the literacy coordinator, writing is not even mentioned in the description for any of the programs.

On the Government of British Columbia web site, writing also takes a back seat to reading. Writing is scarcely referred to except in the phrase “reading, writing and math skills.” However, links to several reading focused literacy programs are provided such as ReadNow BC, Kindergarten Books, Books for BC Babies, and ReadOn BC. Numeracy is given its own category but writing is ignored. Even the most recent news release proudly proclaims a “\$27-Million Plan to Improve Reading” but there are no news releases about writing (*Literacy* 2009). A search for writing programs on the government web site turns up only seven leads while a similar search for reading programs produces fifty-four results.

Even common expressions reveal this bias. We are all familiar with the traditionalist mantra: “reading, writing, and arithmetic.” While arithmetic is likely listed last because it is the longest word, it is no accident reading is listed before writing. Both words are the same length and both would fit equally well at the beginning. It is a statement of priority and value. When paired, reading almost always comes before writing. It is much more common to hear someone “can’t even read” than it is to be told they “can’t even write,” though both are probably true in the majority of cases.

To illustrate this, we can return to the web site for Literacy BC. As already mentioned, the literacy program category in the BC Literacy Directory is titled “reading, writing & math.” As well, the graphic for literacy on the web site shows a book to the left in a white square and a pencil to the right placing the symbol for reading first in left to

right reading order. Even the toll-free number for the directory is listed as 1-888-Read-234. (*BC Literacy Directory* 2009) This all suggests both a conscious and a sub-conscious prioritization of reading over writing.

## **5.2 *Reasons for the Focus on Reading***

Why do we, as educators, emphasize reading over writing? Is it simply a pre-existing mindset or a reflection on how we became literate? Or are there other more complex reasons for this perspective?

In most instances, it is not merely a matter of sequence. Writing and reading are often taught simultaneously. Children learn to form the letters of the alphabet as they learn their names. They frequently learn to write words they cannot read as they compose short stories with the help of an adult. Speech, not reading, comes prior to writing.

Perhaps it is because it is more convenient to throw a book at illiteracy than a pen. As an educator, I can attest assigning students to read is much simpler than assigning them to write. If the material is of an appropriate level, students will generally remain quiet and on task until they have read through to the end.

Writing assignments usually require much more effort on the part of the teacher. First, students generally have a lot of questions as to what exactly is expected of them. Second, they usually find it difficult to begin. Third, there are frequent questions about spelling, grammar, and other mechanical aspects of the task. Fourth, students constantly ask for feedback on the quality of their work and on whether it is complete. Finally, teachers are left with a mound of poorly written manuscripts they feel obligated to correct for spelling and grammar with their little red pencils.

In contrast, throwing a large number of books at class actually has a positive result. Literacy programs known as “book-floods” have achieved remarkable progress simply by increasing the number of books available to students. However, increasing the number of writing assignments does not necessarily have a positive result. As already noted, it can actually have a negative effect on the quality of student work.

Teachers may even hope that providing students with quality literature will inspire their writing. Extensive reading often has a positive effect on writing but students are seldom given the opportunity to emulate their favorite authors. Most classroom writing is restrictive and prescribed. In addition, many students who are avid readers see writing as time away from their favorite pastime.

Perhaps reading is emphasized because it is simply easier to assess reading ability than skill in writing? Multiple choice tests of reading comprehension can be administered and marked by a computer or even an individual with no knowledge of the language in which the test was written. Traditional testing methods can easily determine if students understand what they have read. However, it is much more difficult to assess writing ability. Even the mechanics are difficult for a computer to mark. Evaluations of higher level skills quickly sink into subjectivity. Marks are difficult to determine since student work frequently fails to fit into set categories.

Or are we simply more interested in what we can insert into illiterate minds than in what might come out of them. This is perhaps the most controversial motivation behind the emphasis on reading. Writing is a means of self-expression and most power structures are simply not interested in what the individual has to say. They are much more

focused on ensuring their subjects are able to understand and obey their directives than on what their subjects think or feel about the situation.

Equally sinister is the commercial aspect of the disparity. No one makes money from student writing. Publishers may sell a few books to teachers on instructional strategies or sets of grammar workbooks to schools. However, these profits are negligible when compared to the industry that supports and profits from student reading.

This disparity is largely due to the fact writers produce while readers consume. Writing programs can exist on little more than pen and paper. Few schools purchase materials to improve and support writing. However, reading programs cannot exist without a constant supply of fresh reading materials. Significant portions of school budgets go towards the purchase of reading materials. Public libraries spend thousands on books for children. Parents and relatives also contribute to a child's personal library on gift-giving occasions.

Therefore, publishers are always more interested in initiating and supporting programs that encourage students to read. The more students read – the more publishers profit. However, most publishers see little reason to invest in student writing. After all, it takes time away from student reading and students won't need to acquire a new book quite so soon if they are occupied by writing their own manuscript.

There is also the tendency to see the acquisition of knowledge as the end goal. Knowledge is acquired through reading. Writing may be a useful way to demonstrate knowledge has been acquired but there is no need to write exceptionally well in order to prove acquisition. Reading is emphasized over writing for a myriad of reasons.

### **5.3 Repercussions of Underdeveloped Writing**

Regardless of the reasons, writing has repeatedly placed a distant second to reading in terms of priority. This neglect of writing can have serious repercussions on many aspects of the educational process and on society in general. However, these effects are not always obvious and they may be difficult to trace back to a lack of emphasis on writing.

One effect that is obvious is the inability of students to demonstrate their understanding if their writing skills are less developed than other abilities. In my experience, students are frequently able to prove their grasp of a passage when questioned verbally even though their written response was woefully inadequate. This suggests reading skills were developing while writing skills were neglected. There is no doubt both their verbal and written responses would improve if writing were emphasized.

Students also lose the beneficial side effects of writing development. Teaching students to write well is, in effect, teaching them to process information and express their opinions. If students are only taught to read, they may comprehend the content on one level but they will do little more than regurgitate it when tested. Teaching them to write high-quality responses forces them to digest the information on an entirely different level. By way of crude illustration, cows would die of malnutrition if they brought up their cud and spat it out. The process of producing an original and powerful piece of writing forces students to chew, swallow, and regurgitate information until it is fully digested.

Walter Ong, author of the revolutionary work, *Orality and Literacy*, concurs with this perspective.

Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness. (Ong 1982: 78).

While many disagree with Ong's position, the extensive development of writing ability must have some effect on mental development. It is inconceivable that thirteen years of daily immersion in the school system would have no effect on the way students think.

The source of the disagreement is likely the idea that the literate mind is superior to the illiterate mind. This is, of course, not the case. However, it would be difficult to argue literacy does not give individuals significant advantages in other aspects of a literate society. This is not to say a literate mind is more developed than an illiterate mind. Instead, a literate mind is more developed in patterns of thought that dominate all aspects of a literate society. On the other hand, the opposite is equally true. Oral minds are assuredly more developed in patterns of thought that dominate oral societies. Still, it must be acknowledged that certain thought processes critical to success in literate societies remain underdeveloped if writing skills are not mastered.

While it can be argued people in oral societies are our equals in terms of intelligence and reason, our students are not living in an oral society. If their thinking abilities are not developed along with their writing, they are seldom developed at all. Our society is not structured in a way that enhances the oral aspects of intelligence. Literacy is so foundational to our way of life that thought processes have little opportunity to develop apart from writing processes.

Students who never learn to write well seldom develop their ability to express themselves verbally either. Most students are never forced to listen to themselves talk. As a result, they seldom reflect on the effectiveness of their presentations. The process of producing a high quality piece of writing requires students to read over their work repeatedly. Their teachers and peers also have opportunity to provide feedback. This

intense scrutiny of their written expression becomes a habit they will eventually apply to their oral expressions as well.

## **6 Writing and Speech**

Perhaps one of the most common misconceptions among educators is that writing is simply transcribed speech. This understanding is applied all the way from the word level up through to paragraphs and even essays or narratives. As in all fallacies, there is some truth. However, it is important to recognize ways in which writing and speech differ. Ignoring these will lead to frustration on the part of both student and teacher.

When it comes to spelling, teachers often direct students to “write it like you say it.” The approach to sentence writing is similar and similarly ineffective. Students are expected to say the sentence in their mind and transcribe it on paper. The results are disappointing for students and teachers alike. The same disparity occurs in longer constructions. Since it is common to “write a speech,” it is assumed one can “speak a writing” with equal success. There are many reasons why writing well is not as easy as transcribing speech and there are important, yet subtle, differences between writing and speech of which educators are often unaware.

### **6.1 Categories of Differences**

The differences between speech and writing fall into several fascinating categories. These are important for both the educator and the student to understand. Both must recognize students are learning a different form of the language when they learn to write. This will reduce frustration when students make mistakes in their writing. In *From utterance to text: The bias of language in speech and writing*, Olson explores some of the ways in

which speech and writing differ. Walter Ong comments on similar topics in his book *Orality and Literacy*, although he is mainly dealing with the differences between completely oral culture and literate cultures.

First, written communication is perceived by the eye while speech is an audible phenomenon (Olson 1991). This is an important distinction. Many students neglect the way in which their words appear on the page. They need to be taught poetry and even prose have a visual element that can affect both meaning and impact. Ong states, “Since the shift from oral to written speech is essentially a shift from sound to visual space, here the effects of print on the use of visual space can be the central, though not the only, focus of attention” (Ong 1982: 117). At the same time, students must pay attention to the way text sounds when it is read aloud or in the mind. Tone and volume can also affect meaning and impact. They must also recognize that “In a text even the words that are there lack their full phonetic qualities” (Ong 1982: 101). Therefore, they must write in a way that communicates what cannot be communicated through intonation.

The fact writing is perceived visually also distinguishes it from speech in another way. Speech is usually produced and received instantaneously, as is sign language. Writing, on the other hand, is only read and understood after a significant delay ranging anywhere from a few seconds to several millennia. In speech, listeners often have a good idea of what speakers wish to communicate before speakers even finish their utterances. In writing, however, a reader must wait for the writer to finish the statement and expose or deliver it in some way to the reader before it can be read and understood.

In any case, writing systems are tied quite closely to oral systems. Writing systems are used to transcribe speech and most inscriptions can be read out loud as oral

communication. Some forms of writing can even be read aloud in multiple languages while communicating roughly the same meaning.

Chinese is a good example of a written language that can be read in multiple languages or dialects. Reading a writing system like Chinese depends on semantics. While the reading of phonemic writing involves a transition from text, through speech, to semantics, graphic systems like Chinese transition from text, through semantics, to speech.

Next, we must recognize that writing and speaking are produced in different mediums and that they result in different forms of discourse (Olson 1991). Students who can give powerful speeches are not always capable of achieving the same effect in their written work. At the same time, powerful writers do not necessarily make powerful speeches, even if they have the opportunity to write their speech in advance. Therefore, students must learn and master both styles of communication even though both can be written down and spoken aloud. Not only does writing use a different medium than speech, it also requires the development of different skills (Olson 1991).

As Ong points out, it is also important to keep in mind that writing is essentially artificial. It is a technology that, unlike speech, does not come naturally to human beings. “Writing or script differs as such from speech in that it does not inevitably well up out of the unconsciousness. The process of putting spoken language into writing is governed by consciously contrived, articulable rules” (Ong 1982: 82). Orwell agrees with this assessment. He argues language is “an instrument which we shape for our own purposes” (Orwell 1946: 348). However, Ong insists, this does not make it any less human. He uses the technology of a musical instrument to illustrate this point. “The fact is that by using a

mechanical contrivance, a violinist or an organist can express something poignantly human that cannot be expressed without the mechanical contrivance” (Ong 1982: 83). Not only do humans shape self expression with technology, they are also shaped by it. Ong suggests “The use of a technology can enrich the human psyche, enlarge the human spirit, intensify its interior life. Writing is an even more deeply interiorized technology than instrumental musical performance is” (Ong 1982: 83). While writing is essential human, it is also a skill that must be taught and one that transforms the learner in the process.

A unique quality of writing is it enables reflection on language, just as language enables reflection on life (Olson 1991). It is difficult to analyze a spoken text because it exists only in memory and the exact words are often more difficult to recall than the meaning of the utterance. Even when speech is recorded and played back, the listener must refer to a memory of what was said, even if it was played back only seconds before. “Sound is an event in time, and ‘time marches on’, relentlessly, with no stop” (Ong 1982: 76). Written words, however, continue to exist in physical form. They can be analyzed and referred to in the present or future.

Another interesting aspect of writing is it must describe reference points that are obvious in a spoken context. Speakers can refer to him, her, it, or that woman without describing who or what they are talking about because the listener can usually sense the same stimuli as the speaker. Of course, this is not the case in situations where the listener does not have the same vantage point as the speaker such as in a phone conversation or in a situation where the listener is blind or lacking in one of the five senses. However, in

most cases, writers must describe what they are writing about because their readers are usually in a different context and the reference points are not physically present.

Another difference is writing is temporal while speech has a spatial dimension. What is written is written at a certain time and cannot be clarified or explained in most situations. As Ong states, “If you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get an explanation; if you ask a text, you get back nothing except the same, often stupid, words which called for your question in the first place” (Ong 1982: 79). A speaker is immediately accountable for what they say.

This is not always the case, however. When a speech is being made, especially by an important person and in a large crowd, it is often impossible or improper to ask or get an answer to a question. On the other hand, important people often respond to comments made on their blog or webpage by ordinary people even if their readership is much larger than any gathering. Still, in most face-to-face speech contexts there is more accountability for what is said than in an online environment.

In addition, texts can be read in contexts very different from the place in which they were written. Speech is spatial. Conversations are limited to a specific place. As Ong states, “Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than words” (Ong 1982: 101). Although speech occurs at a certain time it also occurs over time whereas a complete text exists in physical form, all at one time.

As well, most feedback to writing is delayed while feedback to speech is immediate. Even in an instant messaging context, a few seconds pass while the response is composed. More importantly, numerous other cues are hidden from the writer such as

facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. On the other hand, the speaker is usually able to hear and see their audience while they produce each utterance. This provides them with a wealth of instantaneous feedback in addition to whatever the listener may say in response. Therefore, it is important to provide opportunities for feedback for writers.

Finally, writers may never meet their audience while speakers are in direct contact with their listeners in most situations. For example, we read the words of people we have never met on a daily basis. As Ong states, they “may very well be dead” (Ong 1982: 102). Therefore, writers must imagine their audience and readers must imagine the writer, or at least their present state of mind. However, most speech takes place in a person to person context. Once again, of course, technology is creating new possibilities. Radio and television broadcasts deliver speech to people who are far removed from the speaker in distance and audio recordings can now put several decades of time-delay between speaker and listener. Still, it is important to appreciate the differences that exist in the historical and cultural context.

## **6.2 Significant Similarities**

It is important to recognize writing and speech are inextricably linked to one another. Writing is so often paired with reading speech is ignored. Educators forget speech is primary. As Ong points out, “Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality” (Ong 1982: 8). Because writing has its origin in orality, there are many similarities between the two forms of communication.

First, both involve some use of similar grammatical structures. Speech is, of course, more loosely controlled. Many languages have a much more formal standard for

writing and many words used in day to day speech do not even have a standard spelling because they are never written. Still, the same grammatical patterns are utilized to similar effect.

As well, both writing and speech use the same vocabulary to a large extent. Depending on the audience, the same individual will likely employ more formal and academic vocabulary in writing than in speech. However, the opposite is true when it comes to an instant messaging context.

In addition, both writing and speech are communicative acts. They are both primarily intended for communication with another individual or a group of individuals. Speech does have its counterpart to the diary. Many people talk to themselves when they are upset or trying to think through something, either in their minds or out loud. Still, like the diary, this can be seen as one aspect of a person's consciousness communicating with another aspect. Therefore, both speech and writing are communicative acts even if the audience is the conscience of the speaker.

### **6.3 *Electronic Communication***

Historically, there were a number of ways in which visual symbols could be produced. Marks could be made on a variety of surfaces with an array of instruments that either scour the surface or leave a residue that contrasts in color or shade with the surface. Alternatively, materials could be arranged to form the intended symbols. The materials could then be fixed in place or rearranged to form new symbols. Great advances were made when paper was combined with printing technology and multiple copies of written materials could be produced quickly and inexpensively. For the first time, authors could

produce works that could be read privately by their fellow commoners. Later, the typewriter enabled writers to form entire symbols with the single stroke of a key.

Modern technologies are quickly blurring many of the distinctions between writing and speech to a significant extent. First, the capacity to record and playback speech has altered the way in which it is received. Voice messaging systems allow individuals to exchange comments with delays of hours or even days between responses. Even long-distance phone conversations in which there is a time-lag push speech closer to writing as the listener must wait until the speaker has finished before they are able to respond. In addition, technology has enabled us to communicate audibly even when we are physically out of earshot of one another. This means the participants are often in different contexts even if there is no perceivable delay between speaking and listening.

On the other hand, writing has become increasingly like speech. Beginning with the telegraph and progressing through to the modern phenomenon of instant messaging, written responses can now be received in a matter of seconds. In many cases, especially among adolescents, text messaging has become a more common forum for conversation than phone calls.<sup>26</sup> Students will text one another even in contexts when they are able to have a verbal phone conversation.

Recently, modern electronic technology has rapidly transformed the way in which written communication is produced, stored, delivered, and viewed. Books can be written, published and read with out a single drop of ink or scrap of paper. Arguably, the vast majority of written work is now published and viewed in the medium of light. Even the

---

<sup>26</sup> I was living in a dormitory when email first became popular. Two of my dorm-mates used to send emails to each other and then call across the hall to see if the message had been read yet. Now it is common to see students writing text messages to other students during their lunch hour when they could walk down the hall and converse verbally.

diary has mutated into the blog, a form that is the antithesis of private. It is often easier to contact someone by email or text than by making a phone call. Written words are more prevalent than ever in the technological world.

In fact, many of the technologies themselves are constructed with, and controlled by, the written word. Even the simplest software consists of line after line of carefully written text. Programming languages are used as an interface between humans and their machines. Such a precise and exacting form of written communication has never had cause to exist until the advent of the computer.

Technology has made the production of written text even more accessible. It is relatively simple to teach an individual of average intelligence how to form a standard set of symbols in a way that conveys meaning. With the advent of typewriter technology, writers no longer require even the ability to transcribe the basic symbols by hand; simple symbol recognition is enough. Even those with severe physical disabilities can produce text with innovative new technologies. Given enough time, every instructional method will produce individuals who are able to write on a basic level.<sup>27</sup>

With the advent of instant-messaging, the speaking-writing continuum has shifted drastically. Many of the differences between writing and speech are nullified in an instant-messaging context. At the same time, new phenomena have emerged.

Like a spoken conversation, an instant messaging exchange may even occur in the same place and time, eliminating even the need for reference. I have often caught my students text messaging one another during class. They are making eye contact and communicating in the same way they would if they were whispering across the room to one another but their thumbs are wagging instead of their tongues.

As I mentioned earlier, writing is usually more formal than speech. However, the opposite is true if writing is occurring in an instant-messaging context. Incomplete sentences and slang are probably more common in an instant-messaging context than in even the most informal conversation.

Much of this is due to the limitations of the electronic communication devices most often used in ‘texting’ or instant-messaging. Most cell phones do not have a full keyboard and producing over two-thirds of the letters in the alphabet requires two or three keystrokes for each letter. For this reason, it quickly became standard practice to abbreviate even shorter words or form acronyms from common phrases. Weak typing skills and a desire for speed over correctness may also have played a role as these short forms are also used when a full keyboard is available.

In this, speech also played a dominant role. For example, the word ‘you’ was quickly shortened to ‘u’ in the instant-messaging context. The word ‘see’ fell to a similar fate, becoming simply ‘c’ while ‘are’ is represented by ‘r’ in a similar fashion. In these three instances, the fact the name of each letter is identical to the pronunciation of each word in speech allowed their free association in the text-messaging context. Text messaging conversations often end with ‘cu’ as the final salutation.

One of the most common acronyms in the text-messaging world presents an even more interesting interplay between writing a speech. The acronym is ‘lol’ and it stands for ‘laugh-out-loud.’<sup>28</sup> I would presume the phrase originated in speech. However, it quickly became a way for individuals to express a reaction in the text-messaging

---

<sup>27</sup> Of course, other factors like learning disabilities need to be taken into consideration.

<sup>28</sup> I recently heard a standup comedian tell how he had begun using ‘lol’ in email interactions with his teenaged son. He assumed it meant “lots of love” until his son caught him using the acronym at the end of a comforting email to his sister who was devastated over the breakup of her marriage.

environment that would be conveyed audibly or through body language in a speech context.

Ironically, the phrase rapidly found its way back into speech as an acronym. Students often say “l-o-l” when they find something funny during a conversation. It is also used sarcastically. The full phrase is sometimes spoken but the acronym is more common.

As a result of the text messaging revolution, students are writing far more than ever. It is often more difficult to get students to stop writing in class than it once was to get them to stop speaking. News reports of adolescents sending a thousands of text messages within the time span of a single month are not uncommon.<sup>29</sup>

While the motivation to write has obviously increased, many educators feel quality has declined even more rapidly. This assessment is undoubtedly biased by the tendency to see language change as a decline in quality. For example, many educators are horrified when a ‘u’ shows up in place of a ‘you’ in a homework assignment. In actuality, however, the spelling of ‘you’ does not determine the overall quality of the piece. It has no more effect on overall quality than the use of ‘I’ to represent the first person singular. Still, students are showing an increasingly casual attitude towards other aspects of writing that does appear to result in a lower level of quality.

This casualness is partially born of familiarity. That is not a bad thing. Students are much more comfortable with the keyboard than they ever have been before. There is a lot of potential in that fact alone. However, educators must learn to guide and direct the instant-messaging phenomena rather than condemning it as a sign of the end.

The advantage is the heightened motivation students feel when instant messaging. Students who struggle through a paragraph in class will spend the whole lunch break instant-messaging with their friends. In the morning, the classroom is often buzzing with talk about what was written online the evening before.

Indeed, many educators are beginning to see the internet as a new way to interact with their students through the medium of the written word. However, most appear to be a few steps behind their students. This is not a bad thing. An opportunity for your students to teach you something should not be missed. However, it does require teachers to put themselves in slightly unfamiliar territory and possibly outside of their comfort zone.

Of course, there are inherent dangers and pitfalls teachers need to be aware of and avoid. Any extracurricular communication with students must be open to scrutiny from parents and administrators alike.<sup>30</sup> Objections from either parents or administrators should be respected. The teacher should find ways to make the interaction as transparent as possible and to ensure interactions are always appropriate and educational. If students are writing about sensitive topics, it might be best to keep it on paper. This preserves its privacy and there is automatically a lower level of suspicion given it was produced in a traditional manner. Despite the high level of sensitivity surrounding internet communication, the opportunity should not be passed up. It is the medium in which most adolescent writing takes place.

---

<sup>29</sup> The Daily Mail reports that one teen sent 14,528 messages in one month or 1 every two minutes: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1113062/Fathers-horror-daughter-13-racks-14-528-text-messages-ONE-month-thats-minutes.html>

<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, in today's world, good parents need to be suspicious when teachers take too much interest in their children outside of school hours. Prior communication can alleviate concerns.

## 7 Writing, Listening, and Grammar

Paradoxically, the reason we have lost the beauty of the written word is our failure as writers to recognize and listen to its oral qualities which still play in the reader's mind even though we more often read in silence. Our failure results from an analytical approach to editing rather than an aesthetic approach. The final result of an analytical process is often grammatically correct but of vastly inferior quality.

### 7.1 *The Impact of Sound Quality*

We need to listen to the oral qualities of language again if we are going to improve the overall quality of our writing. Language is fundamentally oral and the beauty of language is still firmly rooted in the oral realm. There are several aspects of both prose and poetry that are only discernable in an oral context.

The elements of poetry are equally important in prose. Well-written novels, articles, and speeches all employ poetic elements to their full effect. Portions of Martin Luther King Junior's famous speech are filled with rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration. If careful attention is not paid to how and where these features are used, their accidental presence can be as damaging as their absence.

The most obvious example of this is rhyme. An unintentional rhyme can cause a piece of writing to appear childish or trivial, even in prose as any author knows. In poetry, it can confuse a rhyme scheme or produce an awkward break in the rhythm. Near rhymes are difficult to catch on paper. Their effect cannot be appreciated unless the piece is read aloud and listened to carefully.

Rhythm is also important to appreciate in both poetry and prose. It is one of the basic elements in poetry but it can also have a positive or negative effect on prose that is

not apparent until it is read out loud. The intended audience may associate the underlying rhythm with a specific genre of poetry or music, which may or may not be in the writer's best interest. Adolescents will often pick up on unintended rap rhythms and repeat the phrases in which they are contained.

Alliteration and assonance are also aspects all accomplished authors apply adeptly. They can be used intentionally in both poetry and prose. At the same time, if they occur accidentally, they produce a decidedly childish effect. Even worse, if the piece is delivered orally, their unintentional occurrence can turn a phrase into a torturous tongue twister that will severely embarrass the speaker, especially if it results in the production of a word that is inappropriate or humorous in some way.

Onomatopoeia is an equally fascinating phenomenon. It can only be appreciated orally. Indeed, the meaning of a word becomes synonymous with its sound. The listener can hear the scratch of the pen or the click of the keys as they read.

Homophones are also difficult to detect, especially if the spelling is different. English speakers, especially, are often unaware of the many homophones that fray our phrases. If the context is not clear, these can be confused with their counterparts, resulting in misunderstandings or embarrassing situations. On the other hand, they are a basic ingredient in most puns. Some mothers deep end on phrases rather than individual words. Used properly, they can be witty and even subtle.

## ***7.2 Listening to Revise and Edit***

Learning to listen to one's work can make the revision process creative and enjoyable rather than analytical and painful. Most students hate revision because they see it as the application of a complex and restraining rule system to their creative process. The fun is

over. Their imaginations no longer have a role and the words that flowed so freely now become a source of torment as they struggle through them with rulebook in hand.

It doesn't have to be that way. Wilbers, who presents several pages of editing checklists, first directs his readers to "Listen to the sound of your language" (2000: 246). In my opinion, this is the most important stage of the revision process. Not only does it eliminate many of the other stages; it also is very enjoyable.

The best analogy is that of a composer. He sits for hours scratching away at his music sheets, plunking out parts on his dusty piano. Finally, it is time for the first run through. He leans back and folds his hands behind his head. His eyes close and the orchestra in his mind begins to play. This is a moment of sheer joy. He does not sigh like our students do when we ask them to revise. He is not looking for mistakes; he is listening for perfection. Often, when he reaches a stanza that does not meet his standard, he is already hearing a new version in his mind.

Sadly, this stage is missing from most secondary writing manuals. Students are asked to go directly from draft to draft. First they are asked to revise and then edit. Rarely are they given the opportunity to sit back and listen to what they have produced.

If we teach students to listen well, they will look forward to revision. They will not need to struggle through checklists or question every line of their work. Instead, their minds will play an even more powerful melody than they have on the page and they will rush to write it down. Small mistakes in grammar or punctuation will sound like discord and the correct note will ring true in their minds before they even think of the rule. In short, listening can make revision back into the creative process it was meant to be.

### **7.3 The Role of Grammar**

Grammar is undoubtedly the most painful and boring aspect of most English curricula for both educators and students alike. However, grammar, rules systems and structure often dominate the subject. While their importance is indisputable, this does not necessitate a corresponding emphasis on their direct instruction. Instead, strategies can be adopted that allow for the development of skills and ability in this area without the drudgery of drills and worksheets.<sup>31</sup>

Another analogy from the arts comes to mind when I think of the editing process. Wilbers suggests taking multiple passes at the final draft when editing (2000: 224). On the first pass, he simply asks if it looks right. On the next pass, he asks if it is effective and complete. Next, he listens to how it sounds. Finally, on the fourth pass, he asks if it is correct. For me, this is like a painter stepping back to appreciate the results.

In art class, our teacher showed us how to view our work from a distance to appreciate the overall effect. We would set the painting up in a long hallway and walk to the far end. If we were nearsighted, we would take off our glasses to remove even more detail from our perspective. Finally, we would squint to blur the image even further.<sup>32</sup>

These steps are necessary because our eyes are constantly drawn to the details. When we look at our work critically, we immediately go into detail mode. When we read over our work, our attention is captured by spelling errors, typing errors, and comma splices. We then begin looking for more errors on this level. In doing so, we start at the wrong end of the stick and create unnecessary frustration for ourselves.

---

<sup>31</sup> Many English teachers feel they are failing their students if they do not teach a unit on grammar complete with worksheet after worksheet on nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, etc. However, I consistently encounter students in senior grades that still cannot tell me what a verb is.

<sup>32</sup> My art teacher also managed to protect our budding creativity from the grading system.

Returning to the art analogy, imagine an artist carefully painting in all of the delicate details in the foreground. She spends hours ensuring every blade of grass is defined and every petal is in place. But when she steps back from the piece, she discovers the entire foreground is the wrong shade. Perhaps it is too dark and doesn't contrast enough with the shadows. Imagine her frustration as she paints over hours of detail with her widest brush, wishing she had looked at the big picture first.

Now imagine a fresh canvas. The artist paints with broad strokes, washing in the background. She walks to the end of the hall and squints at her work, taking in the pleasing shapes and shades. Then she returns to her easel, brushing a little more color into the background and brightening the foreground slightly.

Next she paints in the outlines of trees, a lake, and a mountain peak rising in the background. Again she walks to the end of the hall but stops a few steps short this time. She returns to the easel and brushes some shadow onto the mountain before leafing in trees and painting waves onto the smooth surface of the lake.

This time, she only takes a few steps back from the canvas. Her eye is painting the leaves, adding a few ripples to the waves, and brushing blades of grass into the foreground. When she returns to the easel this time, she paints with confidence, knowing her work will not be wasted.

A parallel analogy is that of an archeologist carefully excavating buried ruins. If he began with a brush, he would spend a lifetime removing the topsoil and never see the results of his work. Instead, he begins with a shovel or even heavy equipment until he has cleared away the layers that contain nothing of value. Only then does he employ increasingly delicate techniques to reveal the details.

The same principles apply to revising and editing our writing. If we get distracted by details on our first pass, we may spend hours perfecting the spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax of a paragraph we eventually decide to eliminate altogether. Worse yet, we may keep whole sections that hamper the flow of our work simply because we put so much time into the editing. If friends eventually point this fact out, our frustration will be directed at them and we will alienate ourselves from potential editors.

Instead, we should skim over our work, eliminating extraneous paragraphs before we edit them and adding sections where something is missing. The editing and adding in of details should only begin when the overall flow of the piece has been established. Then our work will not be wasted.

Our students are similarly de-motivated when they begin editing the details before the overall shape of the work has been established. Many get lost in the details and never recognize the need to shape their piece as a whole. They are extremely disappointed when they receive a less than satisfactory grade because they put so much effort into the editing. Others may recognize large-scale inconsistencies in their work before they turn it in. However, they are often so exhausted by corrections at this point they have no desire to realign the entire piece.

As educators, we need to respect motivation as a rare and limited resource. We must spend it carefully. If we waste it on low level corrections, our students will run dry before they finish. However, if we use it to achieve large-scale transformations in our students' work, motivation will increase as they work their way down to low-level corrections.

## **SECTION THREE: Writing Well**

This section attempts to uncover qualities that make a piece of writing exceptional and the various approaches educators take to the art of writing. It begins with a discussion of the nature of good writing. Following this, it examines several popular approaches from a motivational perspective and recommends further development of the contextual aspect.

### **8 What is Good Writing**

What then is good writing? Is it merely a matter of appropriate verb tense, correct sentence formation, and proper paragraph structure or is there something more. The answer is not as straightforward as it may seem.

#### ***8.1 Setting Our Sights***

The importance of properly defining literacy cannot be overstated. If literacy is our target, we have to ensure we are not shooting at decoys. Perhaps a major reason for disillusionment is our programs are often aimed at a more common prey than the elusive prize we are hunting for. The main reason we have failed to achieve our dream is we have set our sights far too low.

In fact, the field of literacy has become so broad many organizations refuse to define literacy all together, stating simply there is no one definition for literacy. As a world leader in literacy development, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reflects the many transformations our understanding of literacy has gone through over the years. The UNESCO Recommendation of 1958 concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics states, “a literate person is one who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement

on his or her everyday life” (UNESCO 2004: 12). The expectations of this definition are extremely low and a program aimed at this level of literacy would likely not produce high-quality writing. In 1970, UNESCO suggested “a functionally literate person is one who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for the effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development” (UNESCO 2004: 12). While an improvement over the previous definition, the emphasis is on effectiveness and development, not power and beauty.

The Education for All 2000 Assessment flashed back to the 1950s with the statement, “Literacy is the ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement related to one’s daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and often includes also basic arithmetic skills (numeracy)” (UNESCO 2004: 12-13). Only the word continuum hints higher-level writing abilities. Finally, in 2003, a new definition was proposed which states:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (UNESCO 2004: 13).

This definition contains terms that hint at higher expectations with reference to the development of “potential” and full participation in varying contexts.

However, UNESCO backs even further away from the issue in an introductory statement on the current version of their literacy homepage (UNESCO 2009). It states “UNESCO does not advocate a single ‘model’ of literacy” because the “understanding of who is literate and who is illiterate has evolved considerably.” It goes on to state

“UNESCO’s concept of literacy has moved beyond the simple notion of a set of technical skills for reading, writing and calculating to one that encompasses multiple dimensions of these competencies.” UNESCO concludes with a rather vague assertion that “Literacy is central to all levels of learning, through all delivery modes. Literacy is an issue that concerns everybody.”

As teachers of English literature, we are not inspired by the goal of basic literacy for all. Instead, we dream of mentoring the next Shakespeare, Coleridge or Poe. We dream of inspiring our students to literary greatness, not meager sufficiency. However, we still begin with basic literacy skills as a first stage in the process. Our educational systems are all built upon the assumption basic literacy is the first step. In our desire to achieve basic literacy for all, we have failed to inspire the few who can lead the way into fulfillment.

However, the formal definitions of literacy and official policy statements are relatively unimportant. The crucial element in the development of quality in writing is the mindset of the classroom teacher, not the mission statement posted on the wall.<sup>33</sup> What teachers, principals and superintendents say about literacy is not nearly as important as what they believe. Many teachers believe their adolescent students are simply not capable of powerful and beautiful writing. No matter how lofty the mission statement is, they aim for basic literacy because it is the most they expect their students to achieve. This belief is often based on years of trying to push through basic skills like grammar and paragraph structure. When the students lose motivation because the only thing in their sights is

---

<sup>33</sup> Because school mission statements are often formed by consensus, they are typically so broad as to be virtually meaningless. Therefore, they have little or no impact on the methods of individual teachers. Rather than singling out a specific school or district for criticism, I suggest searching the website of the local school district. It should provide numerous examples of vague and meaningless mission statements.

another grammar exercise, teachers assume they are not capable of writing anything more significant.

Before we have a shot at producing students who are literate in the finest sense of the word, we must locate the target. If our aim is to develop basic skills, there is no reason to expect literary prowess. In fact, even the development of basic skill levels will elude us. Students are not inspired by the basics. They are not motivated by spelling, grammar, or paragraph structure in and of themselves. Some students may never become great writers. However, they will definitely learn basic survival skills in their quest for literary greatness. On the other hand, if they never set off on the quest, little else will motivate them to develop their literary abilities. Perhaps basic literacy is not a stepping stone in the path to literary greatness but a step in the wrong direction.

So what is the Holy Grail of literacy? It is certainly not the ability to read, as necessary as that is. I cannot think of a single post-secondary venue where reading comprehension is recognized and celebrated in its own right. On the other hand, post-secondary students receive constant recognition for their writing. Even in the business world, powerful and persuasive writing opens doors to higher levels of power and influence.

Students must understand the words they write are the keys to their futures. From resumes to proposals, the ability to write persuasively is the only means most have to advance themselves. Even careers in which physical abilities appear paramount, one's written presentation of oneself in initial communications, proposals and estimates opens the door to the consideration of one's physical qualifications for a contract.

How then should we define our goal? It must be more than the ability to comprehend and respond. True literacy is the ability to thrive, not just survive, in a world where the written word is the basic element of existence. To do so, students must be able to write with passion and power. They must be able to convey thoughts and emotions in a way that focuses and intensifies their impact even more than in a face-to-face encounter. The full force of their personality, expertise, and professionalism must be conveyed in two-dimensional text. If they fail at this, they may never have the opportunity to bring their other qualities into play.

At the same time, good writing must be far more than persuasive. One can present a persuasive argument in writing without producing anything close to an exemplary text. A sawed-off shotgun is persuasive and powerful but certainly not beautiful. On the other hand, a skilled swordsman presents an equally persuasive argument. However, he is also beautiful in his persuasiveness. This combination of beauty and power produces an impact that far exceeds the brute force of a bullet. In the same way, good writing is a potent mixture of beauty and power that only occurs when passion is applied to every detail.

From a critical perspective, I know the vast majority of my students will never be recognized for their writing. I know many of them will be fortunate to attain even basic levels of fluency by the time they graduate, if they graduate. However, I am convinced we can do more for them when it comes to writing. If I can just get my students to think about how they write instead of if it's right, I will have accomplished something. If I can get them to care about how it sounds, consider whether it has beauty, or weigh its power I

will be satisfied. If my students just rewrite a piece once in a while because they believe it can be better, all of this will be worthwhile.

## ***8.2 Identifying the Target***

As essential as it is to aim higher than basic literacy, it is even more important to identify the target for which we are shooting. Thus far, I have identified good writing as having impact in the form of beauty and power. But what gives a piece of writing impact; how are beauty and power conveyed.

I believe two core elements produce both beauty and power in a text. These elements are originality and precision. Either element is a valuable quality in a text. A piece written with precision can be entirely lacking in originality but still powerful and beautiful in its execution of an established form. This is similar to the way in which a figure skater can impress judges in the short program simply by executing the required jumps perfectly. In the same way, an author writing in a prescribed style or specific format must conform their thoughts to the expected structure exactly. A well-written legal argument or poetry written in a traditional manner can impress by the precision with which it follows the reader's expectations.

Structural and grammatical precision must be carefully taught and practiced. Writers must learn the conventions of the style they wish to write in so thoroughly it becomes part of their mindset when they write. This takes time and effort. However, educators must be careful to teach structural and grammatical conventions in a way that preserves and enhances student motivation. Often, these aspects are drilled so thoroughly students become bored with the style and put in little effort when it is finally time to

write.<sup>34</sup> As a result, the compositions lack precision even though the students know the structure well.

On the other hand, a piece can have impact simply as a product of the author's originality. In this, there is hope for even the most inexperienced writers. As I mentioned elsewhere, I have seen pieces written by students of English as a second language that were powerful and beautiful simply because they were unique. They used vocabulary a native English speaker would never use in their context. They also employed sentence structure and grammatical arrangements that were unique to the English language. Of course, there are many error-ridden pieces that are neither powerful nor beautiful. Therefore, it is best not to leave the creative impact of piece simply to chance.

At this point, the question arises as to whether originality can be taught. Can students learn to write creatively or is creativity simply innate? If it can't be taught, educators should simply focus on precision and hopefully students will stumble into creative territory. However, if there are elements of creativity that can be produced intentionally, we have an obligation to teach our students how to do so.

### **8.3 Advice from an Elephant Hunter**

George Orwell is the author of the classic secondary school novels *1984* and *Animal Farm*. He is also well known for his narrative essays, the most famous of which is a piece titled, "Shooting an Elephant." In both his novels and essays, Orwell displays a passion for power and beauty. However, he is less well known for his essays on language itself.

---

<sup>34</sup> By this point, the students are well aware that the teacher is not at all interested in what they write as long as they put it into proper essay format. In my undergraduate studies, some of my classmates used to throw random paragraphs on cheeseburgers or other nonsense topics into the middle of their essays to prove that their professors did not actually read more than the introduction. One student even stated exactly that in the middle of an essay and received it back without comment.

These provide a wealth of insight into his development as a writer and even into the mental processes that have had such powerful and timeless results. He is also a harsh critic of writers who are not driven by the quest for power and beauty.

In his essay, "Politics and the English Language," Orwell suggests the English language is in a downward spiral that is taking our clarity of thought to the bottom as well:

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. (Orwell 1946: 349)

However, Orwell argues it is possible to reverse the process.

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think more clearly is a necessary first step... so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. (Orwell 1946: 349)

Surprisingly, Orwell does not go on to rail against grammar mistakes, spelling errors, and the improper use of the semi-colon; instead he faults "staleness of imagery" and a general "lack of precision" (Orwell 1946: 350).

Orwell also points out "prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house" (Orwell 1946: 350). When I consider the writing I see on a daily basis in the classroom, this description is quite accurate. Students do not write with words. They put together stock phrases that are often so common place they have no impact on the reader's consciousness at all. Orwell proceeds to illustrate several ways in which writers avoid constructing their own phrases.

The first of these is the use of “dying metaphors” or metaphors that have become relatively common place and are well on their way to becoming clichés. Although he acknowledges the metaphorical quality of all language, he argues a cliché or a “dead” metaphor “has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness” (Orwell 1946: 350). Basically, it has an established meaning specific enough to preserve the precision of the piece. On the other hand, a “newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image” (Orwell 1946: 350). Its originality startles the reader into thought and allows the author to illustrate and elaborate on the concept under discussion. However, many writers make a halfhearted attempt at creativity by drawing their phrases from “a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves” (Orwell 1946: 350). These metaphors provoke no image in the readers mind because they have become too familiar; on the other hand, they do not have an established meaning specific enough to communicate their intentions clearly. Mixed metaphors often go unnoticed because neither the image nor the meaning are strong enough to clash.

The second avoidance strategy is to expand the text and make it appear more substantial than it is by replacing single words with lengthy phrases (Orwell 1946: 351). According to Orwell, this strategy takes several forms. Verbs are replaced with a stock phrase made up of a verb and a noun or adjective. The phrases are often redundant and less precise than a single verb. The passive voice also expands the construction without adding to precision. As well, various phrases like “not unkind” or “not unexpected” replace straight forward verbs with an apparent attempt to sound not unprofound. Stock

phrases also replace gerunds, conjunctions, and prepositions without enhancing the meaning. In addition, long and relatively meaningless phrases are often tacked on to the end of sentence to give them more weight than is warranted.

The third way writers attempt to impress their reader is through the use of “pretentious diction” (Orwell 1946: 351). This is often the first strategy adolescent writers employ when they try to improve their writing. They attempt to use long words in place of the vocabulary they are familiar with, often lifted straight from a thesaurus. Typically, they are unsure of the exact meaning of the word or the context in which it is appropriate. Errors in grammar and usage often occur. The result is awkward and usually unclear.

Finally, Orwell decries the use of “meaningless words” (Orwell 1946: 352). Like dying metaphors, these words have been used so often and in so many different contexts they are stretched beyond recognition. These words are often popular catchphrases chosen more for their positive or negative connotations than for their meaning. For example, the term “facilitate” is still making the rounds in educational circles. Teachers never teach, educate, or instruct their students anymore. That would be poor pedagogy. Instead, they facilitate learning. It looks just like teaching, educating or instructing used to but it is much more professional. Recently, the term “fundamentalist” has applied to everyone from suicide-bombers to creationists. Students succumb to this temptation as well. Most swear words are used for any and every situation. It is quite likely the majority of students, even in the senior grades, are entirely unaware of their literal meaning. They are simply used to express strong emotion.

To combat this sloppy use of language, Orwell encourages writers to ask themselves six questions as they write (Orwell 1946: 355). In this short list, precision, power, creativity and beauty come to the fore.

- 1) What am I trying to say?
- 2) What words will express it?
- 3) What image or idiom will make it clearer?
- 4) Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?
- 5) Could I put it more shortly?
- 6) Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?

Good writers are concerned their message is conveyed accurately and efficiently, reflecting a desire for precision. They are also concerned with the “effect” their pieces will have, or their power. They want the images to be “fresh” which requires creativity. Finally, they evaluate the beauty of the piece as a whole and attempt to eradicate anything that is “ugly.” It is even more interesting to note what Orwell does not mention. Spelling, grammar and sentence structure are not even listed. Mistakes like these may fall into the category of “avoidably ugly,” but even here is concern is more with beauty than with correctness.

Orwell then presents a list of rules he hopes will save the English language from its decadence (Orwell 1946: 359). In this, he insists he is not advocating “archaism” or the establishment of a “standard English” dialect.

- 1) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- 2) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- 3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- 4) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- 5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- 6) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

At first glance, Orwell appears to be encouraging minimalism. However, his concern is more for clarity of word and thought. Even then, Orwell makes allowance for beauty by giving authors full artistic license.

While Orwell's chief concern in this essay is the negative effect of politics on language, his recommendations are especially empowering to those who have not been trained to write in the decadent styles he condemns. They put powerful, precise, creative and beautiful writing within range of the vast majority of high school English students. If we, as educators, identify Orwell's ideal as the target we want our students to shoot for, they will bag the prize. However, if we ask them to aim for shadows on the horizon, they will never bring home anything of substance. On the other hand, gopher hunting activities like grammar exercises will soon bore them and they will lose interest in writing altogether.

Orwell also offers some general advice on preventing phrases from taking over during the writing process. Visualization plays an important role in this process.

What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. In prose, the worst thing you can do with words is to surrender to them. When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning. Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. Afterwards one can choose – not simply *accept* – the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impression one's words are likely to make on another person. This last effort of the mind cuts out all stale or mixed images, all prefabricated phrases, needless repetitions, and humbug and vagueness generally. (Orwell 1946: 359)

Once again, this is a process well within the capacity of any high school student. It doesn't require an extensive vocabulary or an academic background. In fact, writers

from an academic background may even be at a disadvantage. Stock phrases have already become so familiar they are in the perfect position to hijack the process.

Orwell encapsulates what it means to be a master writer. However, he does so in a way that is accessible and achievable. He does not hide behind fancy phrases or glower down on the lowly masses from a perch atop his monumental achievements. Instead, he shares his simple passion for precision and originality in writing. If, as educators, we can inspire students to become Orwells instead of Websters and writers instead of grammarians, we may experience unprecedented levels of success.

## **9 Approaches to Writing**

In this chapter, existing approaches to the teaching of writing will be presented. Three approaches have been selected to represent a range of eras and perspectives. The first, the product approach, is a more traditional approach to writing. The second, the process approach, is more progressive. The third approach, the contextual approach, has grown out of a recent trend in literacy. Each approach will be analyzed from a motivational perspective, which emphasizes the enhancement of student interest in the discipline and their passion for quality. The chapter concludes with suggestions on how to combine helpful aspects of each approach with a particular focus on contextualization.

### **9.1 *The Product Approach***

The product approach is based on a more traditional pedagogy. It is conformist in that the product is expected to mimic model texts as accurately as possible. The emphasis is on the final product and on how well the ideas it presents are organized. Techniques are

taught and practiced prior to production. Students are generally expected to achieve perfection in a single draft.

The product approach does involves steps with are usually strictly regimented by the instructor. First, the model text is presented and taught. The teacher points out important features or techniques employed by the author. Next, students practice the techniques in isolation. Generic worksheets are commonly employed for this purpose. Then it is time to organize ideas according to the genre that is being taught. Little effort is spent on the production of ideas but proper structure is paramount. Finally, students produce a piece of writing that demonstrates their ability to write in the prescribed manner and employs the techniques they practiced effectively.

## **9.2 *The Process Approach***

The process approach comes out of the whole language ideology and is seen as a more progressive technique. It is creative rather than conformist and the emphasis is placed on the quality of ideas over and above the structure of the piece. Writing is a cooperative process rather than an individual activity. Students write several drafts of the piece, responding to feedback, before the final product is submitted. The format of the product is generally judged on how well it presents the ideas as opposed to how well it fits a specific genre.

The stages in the process approach are not strictly linear. Students are expected to cycle through the stages in any order as often as necessary. The first half of the writing process is spent on the development of ideas. Students brainstorm ideas together and give feedback on their quality and arrangement to one another. Once the ideas are roughly organized, students begin writing drafts. They exchange their work with one another

frequently and respond with comments and suggestions. Even the final draft is critiqued and students offer a response of some kind. Students are encouraged to continue the revision process even after the piece has been submitted for evaluation.

### **9.3 *The Contextual Approach***

The contextual approach is a more recent development in the field of literacy. Similar to the way in which the process approach rejects the product approach's insistence techniques be learned in isolation, the contextual approach rejects the teaching of writing apart from its natural context. It encourages the inclusion of the students' background and the larger social context in which the writing is produced.

The contextual approach begins by identifying the skills, knowledge, and experiences the students are able to bring to the table in the first place. It then looks for purpose and inspiration in the immediate context or surrounding social environment. The effect a piece may have on society when it is presented is also an important aspect of the approach. In short, the contextual approach is holistic in its perspective on writing.

### **9.4 *A Motivational Perspective***

Each of the three approaches to writing contain elements that have motivational potential. At the same time, certain aspects of each approach would also hurt or hinder student motivation to write. It is important to appreciate and assimilate the positive elements of each approach while guarding against the unintended emergence of the negative aspects.

At first glance, the product approach appears to contain little of motivational value. Students have little choice in how they write and conformity is encouraged. Practicing skills out of context is meaningless and boring. Little importance is given to

what students think while the majority of time is spent studying, practicing, and organizing. The actual act of writing is a test and students are not free to experiment.

On the other hand, there are some aspects of the product approach that could enhance motivation in the right context. First, the expectations are very clear, which is a crucial element of the flow experience. As well, students are taught the skills they need to meet the challenge. This is another essential aspect of flow. Students who have already experienced flow in writing may find the individual nature of this approach conducive to flow when they eventually reach the writing stage.

In contrast, the process approach seems to have much more to offer motivationally. The students have a lot of personal autonomy and are able to take their writing in many different directions. They are not evaluated formally on their many drafts, which frees them from the pressure of the teacher's expectations. They are also free to simplify or enhance their writing to meet their skill level since the assignments are idea-based. Still, some students might find peer editing intimidating and the frequent interactions may interrupt flow experiences. Overall, however, the process approach is quite compatible with the motivational ideals that were presented earlier.

The contextual approach is not on the same continuum as the product and process approaches. It is not as prescriptive with regards to steps and strategies. However, it widens the field considerably when it comes to finding sources of inspiration and motivation. Students are also welcome to bring all of their skills and experience to bear on the writing task. The challenge is also considerable since they are addressing real world issues that do not have simple solutions. At the same time, feedback may be

elusive or exceptionally harsh in a real world context. The lack of progress could also become discouraging and students may not feel equal to the challenge.

### **9.5 *Writing for Impact***

The ideal approach is likely a compilation. Aspects deemed to increase motivation should be emphasized. Other elements can be used to moderate and temper the more extreme aspects of each approach. By combining, varying, and balancing each of the elements, it may be possible to create an approach that exceeds the expectations of all three approaches. More importantly, students may develop a passion for written expression that stays with them beyond the end of the term.

What would such an approach look like? It would most likely alter its shape and form to suit the context of the educational setting. However, several factors would remain constant. Primarily, this integrated approach would remain focused on producing writing that has impact. Students would continually strive to produce writing that conveys their thoughts with beauty and power. To do so, they would aim for originality and precision in every aspect of their writing. However, the emphasis would not be on a finished product. Students would be free to walk away from a piece at any point and start fresh as long as they are learning from their attempts.

Ideally, students would learn from, appreciate, and even model their work on writers whom they admire. However, these writers would not be forced on the students as examples. Students would discover appropriate models in their natural context. They could come from a student's own background or from the context in which, or into which, they are writing. Of course, students should be introduced to writers outside of

their immediate context in order to expand their perspective. Still, they should be encouraged to contextualize these examples as much as possible.

Students would also analyze texts for techniques and features that make it effective. However, they would not be forced to reproduce these aspects in isolation. Instead, they would be encouraged to incorporate them in their drafts when effective. Rather than simply mimicking a model text, they would be encouraged to adapt and alter each technique to suit their individual styles and purposes. The sample texts would be seen as starting points, not standards to achieve. Conformity would be discouraged and creativity respected. Writing would be seen as an intrinsically creative act.

The importance of ideas would still be emphasized but the effective communication of ideas would become the new ideal. Writing would be judged not only on how original the ideas are but also on how powerfully they are communicated within a given context. As English teachers, we must remember our calling is not only to teach students to think but to teach them to form their thoughts into spoken or written language that is effective. Many excellent ideas are lost because the originator is unable to communicate them effectively.

Students would be encouraged to write several drafts. However, more control over each draft would be given to the authors. Students would decide when and with whom they share their work. The benefits of peer feedback and cooperative writing would be promoted but students would not be forced to reveal their work until they are ready. This would allow students access to feedback as needed without the pressure of a formal session. It would also give students the freedom to work individually and enter fully into flow without interruption or evaluation.

As well, students would be free to start at any point of the writing process and move through the stages freely and without restraint. They would, however, be encouraged to separate the creative stages from the critical stages to ensure their writing does not suffer from an internal conflict between the two aspects of writing.

Instead of brainstorming for topics, students would develop their ideas in response to a specific context and for a specific context. The context might be their individual backgrounds, the shared context of the classroom, school, and community, or a more distant context students can experience and interact with through a variety of media and communications technology. Students should be given the opportunity to select a context both individually and as a group. Once again, the context should serve as a starting point and it should inspire, not restrict the writer.

## **10 Developing the Contextual Aspect**

Of the three approaches, the contextual approach is the most challenging to implement and the most unfamiliar to most educators. Therefore, if contextual aspects are to be emphasized in a combined approach, it is important to identify and understand their implications. Brian Street, founder of New Literacy Studies, presents a wealth of examples in a collection of articles by educators who have attempted to implement a contextual approach in a wide variety of settings. These experiences are summarized below and I have drawn lessons from each experience or collection of experiences educators should find useful in a variety of contexts.

If we want students to master the art of written communication, we must give them a reason to do so. Quality itself is not reason enough. Instead, motivation must be

found in the context in which the writing is taking place or in the context for which it is intended.

Students can achieve a great deal of skill in writing in a remarkably short time and with relatively little instruction if it meets an obvious need. A study of the spread of literacy among the Cree reveals the importance of need-based motivation (Bennett and Berry 1991). The Cree quickly mastered a new script without the aid of formal schooling or teachers of any kind. The authors conclude the rapid spread was due to a felt need for an alternative form of communication. First, the large geographic area occupied by the Cree made written communication a very convenient way to exchange information when face-to-face communication was impossible due to distance. Second, the Cree cultural contained many taboos that made face-to-face communication very complex, difficult, and potentially embarrassing. Written communication side-stepped all of these pitfalls.

The authors also acknowledge a familiarity with trail signs and a remarkably economical script were also contributing factors. However, ease of mastery and familiarity with other systems of symbolism alone do not provide adequate motivation in most circumstances. Therefore, motivating need can be considered the primary factor in this situation. The more difficult the script is to master, however, the more motivation it takes to persevere.

In the high school classroom, students must develop an awareness of their need to master writing. It is not enough to give them a list of reasons why they must write well or to explain why they need to master written communication. The students must feel the need, both individually and corporately. The teacher may create an artificial environment in which the need is emphasized. However, the need for good grades would already be

enough motivation if this were adequate. Instead, the students must become aware of real needs that can be satisfied through skill in written communication. The difficulty is that the needs are different for every student and that even the same need is felt with varying levels of intensity by different students.

Researchers must recognize the importance of individualized and situational instruction in writing. Like adults, many adolescents are not satisfied by the generic reasons teachers give for mastery. Instead, they need to know why they, as an individual, need to master written communication in their current life situation.

This is a difficult question and it requires a great deal of time on the part of the instructor to develop an individual and situational sense of need in each student. However, it does not necessitate one-on-one sessions with each learner. This is impossible for time and organizational reasons in most educational contexts. Instead, teachers can present generic lessons to the students that teach them to discover their own needs for skill in writing. Once again, motivating them to make these discoveries is the challenge (Rogers, with Uddin 2005).<sup>35</sup>

### ***10.1 Appreciating Youth Literacies***

A major factor in student motivation is teacher disdain or disregard for writing produced by the youth culture. Most teachers simply ignore the literary value of lyrics, poetry, articles, and other written elements of youth culture. Others openly express their dislike or their low opinion of its quality. Still others attempt to use it as a segway into classical literature or scholastic writing. Few see it as a valid example of quality writing.

---

<sup>35</sup> A case study in which students were encouraged to identify their individual needs.

In response, students show little regard for classical literature and do not associate the writing produced by their idols with any sort of skill they could develop in a classroom context. Some are inspired enough by the lyrics to attempt written works of their own outside of class and many could recite the lyrics orally or even produce impromptu renditions out loud. However, their literary activity outside of class has little effect on their academic writing.

The obvious solution is to openly acknowledge the literary value of youth culture in class. Many of the literary techniques that are present in classic literature are also present in youth literature. Writing instruction should go to it as a source of examples and students should be encouraged to write in a similar style.

Educators may meet some resistance over this transition from their colleagues. It is important to recognize a high school English class does not stand on its own. It is part of a large system. Students are expected to move successfully on to higher levels of high school English and then into college or university degrees and even post graduate programs. Most of these courses will include classical literature or other forms of literature that fall outside of youth culture. For this reason, most educators see familiarity with the classics as essential.

Some may argue whole systems should be changed and high schools, colleges, and universities should all recognize the literary value of works produced by youth cultures. However, it is unrealistic to expect this change to occur during the academic careers of the students who populate our classrooms today. It is even unlikely this change will ever occur as there are also strong arguments for the status quo.

Therefore, it is best to include a mixture of texts from youth culture and classical literature in high school courses. This will help students connect their literary experiences outside of academia with the classical literature they most often encounter in the classroom. As mentioned previously, it is essential youth culture is not simply used as means to lure them into the classics. Students will recognize the inequality immediately and the positive effects of its inclusion will be lost.

However, other factors are present in youth cultures that make its inclusion difficult. The most obvious is the explicit sexuality present in most of the lyrics.<sup>36</sup> Objectively, the lyrics may be an excellent example of an important literary technique but using them may send messages the teacher, parents, and the administration all object to on the grounds of morality, ethics, or even health. It takes an extremely dedicated teacher with a lot of free time to find quality lyrics in today's youth culture that are acceptable in the educational context.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, Shakespeare doesn't set a much higher moral standard either. If his plays were written in modern English, there would be many more objections from parents and the administration. I quickly became aware of the lack of morality in Shakespeare when looking for a play that was acceptable to teach in an Islamic school.

Likewise, educators must not assume their students have no values or morality of their own. In fact, most adolescents have already inherited a very strong value system from their parents, whether positive or negative. They are in the process of personalizing

---

<sup>36</sup> When I ask students to name singers that they feel are talented writers, they often refer me to Eminem or Chris Brown. Their material is full of rhythm, rhyme, allusion and other poetic qualities. However, the message is often not one that a responsible teacher would want to validate. Search lyrics online for specific examples.

<sup>37</sup> Teachers also need to understand that even seemingly innocent lyrics may have inappropriate connotations that are obvious to all of the students. Internet searches help to reveal unwanted elements.

this system but this does not mean they are less committed to it in any way. In fact, many are more strongly committed to their family's values than they will be at any other point in their lives. As a result, the students themselves may have serious objections to the use of texts from youth culture that they view as immoral or unethical in some way.

Still, the more value educators place on the literary aspects of youth culture, the more value youth will place on writing skills and ability (Low 2005).<sup>38</sup> Therefore, despite the complications presented by morality issues and the potential objections from parents, the administration, other teachers, and even students, this is a worthwhile avenue to pursue to whatever extent is feasible in a given situation.

For writing specifically, the benefits are numerous. First, teachers no longer need to set up Shakespeare or other classical writers as models. Instead, the students arrive in class with their own literary models and heroes. The students already want to be like their role models from youth culture. It follows automatically that they would want to write works of the same quality.

Second, teachers do not need to introduce students to unfamiliar material. Instead, they can send students into their own collections of texts from youth culture to discover techniques, themes, and other aspects of literature buried in their favorite songs, movies, or novels. This vastly increases the resources available to the teacher.

Third, teachers do not need to struggle to make classical literature relevant to the lives of their students. Instead, the students bring in material they already find relevant and meaningful. Because they are free to bring in texts of their choosing, the teacher does not need to worry about students to whom the material may be meaningless.

---

<sup>38</sup> A case study in which instructors welcomed youth culture into the classroom.

Fourth, the sample texts themselves become a means of self-expression. Students choose texts that reflect who they are or what they are experiencing in life. From this point, it is a natural step to self-expression through their own writing.

Fifth, little instruction is needed as the students are learning by discovery. The teacher does not have to share constantly from his or her own knowledge or experience as the students all have knowledge and experience of their own to share. This will be explored further in the next section.

Sixth, self-expression is addictive. Once students have begun expressing themselves in their own way and once teachers have recognized and valued their individual and cultural forms of self-expression, they will be eager to continue. They will also more readily appreciate self-expression in other forms, even in classical works.

In addition to an appreciation for youth culture, educators should also recognize and value the literacies and cultural backgrounds students bring with them into the classroom. Studies have shown teachers often ignore the linguistic and cultural knowledge students have already absorbed through their previous experiences, educational and otherwise. Teachers do not acknowledge life literacies, allow students to draw from their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, or value first language abilities.

First, teachers miss a great opportunity by overlooking the skills and abilities students have developed outside of the classroom. Simon (2005) refers to these as life literacies in his study on literary practices at an innovative high school. The teachers and administration at this school have committed themselves to the recognition, valuing, and exploration of the life literacies students bring into their educational experience.

By recognizing the skills and abilities students already have, teachers make a

connection with their students' prior knowledge and draw it into an educational context. In this way, students are able to build on what they already know. This is especially significant in terms of student confidence. In addition, the educational experience of the other students is enriched by the contributions of their peers. They now have the opportunity to learn from the life experience of hundreds of other individuals over the course of their high school years rather than drawing on their teachers' knowledge and experience alone. Their writing will be of educational value for the other students.

Second, teachers seldom give their students the opportunity to draw from their own cultural backgrounds (Davis, Bazzi and Cho 2005).<sup>39</sup> Apart from the occasional multicultural day, students are usually expected to conform to the patterns of the dominant culture. Students without a background in the dominant culture often feel they have nothing to contribute.

If a teacher recognizes and values the cultural background of the students, they will make connections with their prior learning and experiences. In this way, they will build from where they are at rather than beginning all over again. They will also feel free to write from their own experience rather than making up alternate histories that fit with the dominant culture.

In addition, their families can also play a role in the educational context. They can share of their knowledge in person or through their children. They will also appreciate the efforts their children make to share their cultural heritage in written form.

Third, teachers rarely acknowledge the linguistic skills and abilities students already possess in their first language or additional languages (Leung and Safford

---

<sup>39</sup> A case study in which educators took the time to learn from students' cultural backgrounds

2005).<sup>40</sup> This is rather ironic in a western context where most educators are fluent in only one language. Many of their second-language students are already fluent in one or more languages when they enter the classroom. By the time they become fluent in English, they have amassed twice or even three times as much vocabulary as their teachers. They have also mastered two or more grammar systems, verbs systems, and sets of connotations while the teacher often has only one at his or her disposal.

Yet second language students are often viewed as beginners, without any linguistic ability at all. They are often forbidden to speak in their first language and are discouraged from bringing any first language materials into the classroom. When they do so, it is often seen as laziness or a lack of dedication to language learning. This can discourage a natural process of transition between languages and force students to build their skills and abilities in the new language from the ground up.

When first language abilities are recognized and appreciated, the possibilities for new learning experiences are endless. Students who lacked confidence in their English grammar become authorities on the differences between English and their other languages. The discovery of onomatopoeia in English leads to entertaining examples of the same phenomenon in their first language. Legends or short stories from their cultural background can be translated into English and analyzed for story structure and other elements. In short, new worlds come into existence in the space created between English and the languages represented by each learner. Students have newfound confidence to enter these worlds and to write out of their first language experiences.

---

<sup>40</sup> A case study in which educators recognized and valued students' ability in other languages

## **10.2 Writing in the Real World**

In addition to the experiences students bring with them into the classroom, teachers can provide new experiences through fieldtrips and other excursions. Writing can be used as a means to prepare for, record, and process these experiences. Not only will students get more out of a fieldtrip by writing, they will also have more to write about when they return.

Every teacher knows fieldtrips take a lot of time and effort to prepare and are often exhausting experiences due to the increased levels of risk and responsibility. However, most teachers find themselves so busy with class work they spend little time preparing their students for the experience and even less time reflecting on it afterward. As a result, the massive amount of time and effort that went into preparation returns very little of educational value.

One researcher has found writing is the key to making fieldtrips more than a brief visit to the outside world (Larson 2005).<sup>41</sup> Writing gives students an active role in the world they enter. At the very least, they are observers and recorders of what they see. After the fieldtrip, they can develop a long-term relationship with the world they experienced through writing. Letters can be sent back into the situation they witnessed on the fieldtrip and their observations can be brought into their written responses. They can process the experience by reflecting on it in journal form or express the emotions it aroused in them through poetry. In short, students are no longer just tourists on a tour of the world; through writing, they are participants who affect and are affected by the world

---

<sup>41</sup> A case study in which students were encouraged to respond to field trips by writing letters.

they experienced. This gives purpose to the writing and increases its value and importance.

Field trips are not the only way to give students a role in the world. Many teachers subscribe to the illusion students only exist in the classroom. They forget all students leave school at the end of the day and enter the real world. Often they are passive participants in the trials their parents experience. We forget they are also affected by these hardships at a very deep level. These experiences often leave them with a lot of anger but also empathy for people in similar situations. Through writing, these experiences and emotions can be brought into the classroom.

In a case study from South Africa, a teacher invited her students to share their life stories in the classroom (Stein, Pippa and Mamabolo 2005). These personal narratives opened the teacher's eyes to the many social issues impacting her students on a daily basis. She saw beyond their struggles with literacy and into their homes where they sat helpless in the face of hunger and poverty. This motivated her to enter the community and start social action initiatives on behalf of her students.

Her active involvement in the community brought her into direct contact with parents, extended family members and community leaders. In the past, family and community members had avoided direct contact with the school. However, many responded to the teacher's efforts in the community by becoming more involved with their children's education. As a result of the teacher's extracurricular initiative in the community, students received more support in their schooling from the community and their literacy levels improved significantly.

This case study suggests writing is a way to bring social issues into the classroom. In response, teachers are able to model social action by responding to the needs revealed through the life stories of students. Meeting these needs may result in the community's increased participation in the educational experience of their children. Higher levels of interest in education in the home and the community encourage progress in writing and other areas.

Another case study suggests students can respond to social needs through writing (Heffernan 2004). It involved a writers' workshop focused on social action through narrative story telling. The participants wrote narratives centered around social issues from their communities as their themes. This brought new depth and relevance to their writing that was missing in their personal narratives. An exercise of this nature would also create more empathy for others who are facing the same social issues. This provides motivation for additional writing tasks that begin to address these issues directly.

A third case study illustrates the way in which writing can be as a vehicle for social action on a number of different fronts (Cucchiara 2005). The study focuses on a Freirean literacy project that encouraged literacy in response to social issues as diverse as nutrition, justice, and oppression. Participants learned to address these issues directly by planning, writing letters and creating information packets. These tasks had immense relevance for the participants and empowered them to take action through literacy.

### ***10.3 Writing to Peers***

Writing can also gain increased relevance within the academic context if it creates an opportunity for interaction with peers. Students often care more about their writing if they know other students are going to read it than if its is to be read by the teacher alone. This

is especially true if writing is the only way for students to communicate with their peers, as the following case study illustrates.

In this study, the author explored the way an online conference for students brought new life, motivation, and quality to student writing (Christian 1997). The conference was centered on the Anne Frank Diary, common reading material for adolescent students. Students at schools across the country were presented with an opportunity to communicate their thoughts and ideas on the novel with their peers through an online exchange. Because the conference was presented online, students had to express themselves entirely in writing. This motivated them to write, as they had no other outlet for their ideas.

It also encouraged quality as they knew their responses would be read by many other students across the country. Adolescents are very concerned with their appearance. If the only aspect other adolescents will see is their writing, they put more effort into ensuring it is of the highest quality.

Because all of their energy was focused on social interaction through their academic work, the conference brought new life to their writing as well. Their natural need for self-expression could not be satisfied through any other means so writing became the primary outlet. If anything, these factors are even more relevant now than when this conference occurred. Today, most adolescents are more at home in an online environment than they are in the classroom. They are capable of more complex electronic interactions than ever before.

On the other hand, computers and online communications are no longer a novelty. Students are not always motivated by the chance to interact in an online environment.

This does not negate the potential of online forums. However, it does mean the forums have to be of a high enough quality in themselves to attract student interest and participation.

As well, the online environment may not encourage quality the way it did a decade ago. Adolescents have become accustomed to brief online exchanges that are often no more than greetings. Online language has developed into a casual slang that encourages short, immediate responses formed without reflection or forethought. Long, carefully structured and well-thought out responses are a rarity in most adolescent interactions. Steps would have to be taken to ensure depth and thoroughness are encouraged. Still, the potential for quality and motivation remains.

Another option is to create real situations within the school environment in which writing plays an essential role. There are many opportunities for this in most school settings. However, these tasks are usually undertaken by teachers and administration. If they can be relegated to the student domain, with staff oversight and guidance, the importance of writing well would become apparent to all of the participants.

One example of this is student government. A student government makes decisions, plans events, and takes on tasks that would normally be left to the teachers or administration. In a case study by Cox and Robinson-Plant (2005), it soon became apparent participation in student government had a positive effect on student writing. Students were encouraged keep minutes of each meeting which were then distributed to the other members and the administration. This provided both motivation and an audience of peers.

They were also required to present all proposals and resolutions in writing to the administration for approval. They soon learned the writing itself had to impress the administrator or the content would be ignored. Because they were not given recourse to verbal interaction, the students were forced to improve their written communications.

#### ***10.4 Responding to Art***

Throughout this thesis, I have presented writing as more of an art form than an academic exercise. One way to reinforce this in the classroom is to combine writing with other art forms. The following studies illustrate various ways in which this can be accomplished.

First, writing fits in well with the visual arts. Both are forms of self-expression. Students often enjoy art and resent written work because they experience a creative freedom in art class they are not permitted in their composition exercises. It could be argued students suffer from a lack of constructive criticism in most art classes while most of their compositions are subjected to frequently destructive assessment. Bringing more creative freedom into composition assignments would certainly benefit student motivation, just as it does for their art work.

There are many ways in which writing can be integrated with the visual arts. A common exercise is to use writing as a way to respond to the visual arts. Students are exposed to a work of art and are asked to respond to it in writing, often in prose but occasionally in poetry. This can have varying levels of success, often determined by the restrictions placed on the response. The fewer the restrictions, the more creative the response will be.

Ehrenworth (2003) presents a teaching strategy in which the visual genres are paired with written genres. Students first study a visual genre and analysis several pieces

of artwork for style and technique. Students then respond to visual stimuli in a written genre that has similar characteristics. She claims the writing her students produce in response emulates some of the artistic beauty and emotion prevalent in the visual arts.

Cowan (2005) takes a slightly different approach. He combines an appreciation of art with an appreciation of both youth culture and ethnicity. In his study, Cowan encourages his students to analyze Latino “low-rider” art, expressing its themes and messages in written form. He then directs his students to create their own “low-rider” pieces and describe what they were attempting to communicate in writing. In doing so, he validates self-expression in youth culture, acknowledges the role of ethnicity, and encourages a transition to more academic forms of self-expression.

Oldham (2005) also encourages the appreciation of media literacy. She suggests the ability to obtain information from media is undervalued in the classroom. She encourages written responses to media as a way to abstract information and present it to others.

### ***10.5 Writing in a Family Context***

The home environment is also a crucial to the development of quality in adolescent writing. Early development in literacy is important. However, support is even more important as learners begin to see writing as a means of self-expression in their teen years. Adolescents are at a very sensitive stage. If their first attempts at self-expression through composition are ignored or harshly criticized at home, they may see writing as a mundane task rather than an art form. At the same time, excessive affirmation at home without regard for quality may result in an early overconfidence that is undercut when the same level of praise is not received from educators or peers. Ideally, the family will give

ample praise to the adolescent writer mixed with constructive criticism that recognizes quality over quantity (DeBruin-Parecki and Krol-Sinclair 2003).<sup>42</sup>

In addition to supporting traditional forms of home based literacy development such as home reading programs and homework assignments, teachers should also encourage more natural forms. In the home environment, multigrade literacy is common and natural. Multigrade literacy encourages interaction between siblings from different grade levels. Older siblings read books to younger siblings and write for them during playtime. Children even play “school” with the older children as teachers and younger siblings as students. This multigrade interaction is beneficial for the younger children as they get personal instruction and practice outside of school time. It is also helpful to the older siblings as they review and assimilate what they are learning in school as they teach their younger brothers and sisters at home.

However, schools force literacy into restrictive grade-level environments that model a regimented and unnatural form of development. Parents instinctively look to the school for guidance and restrict home environments to reflect the school environment. They segregate their children when they work on their homework and restrict younger children to the materials provided for their grade level. Often, the older children are so weighed down with homework they don’t have time to interact with their younger siblings. This eliminates many of the natural benefits students experience in a multi-grade home environment.

A study by Ames (2005) suggests schools should reinforce the natural inclinations of parents in fostering a multi-grade environment at home. Homework can be assigned

---

<sup>42</sup> DeBruin-Parecki and Krol-Sinclair give many excellent suggestions as to how a love for reading and writing can be planted and nurtured in a family context, apart from and in support of school contexts.

that involves the whole family or requires interaction between siblings. Parents can be taught to encourage their children to write and read through newsletters and workshops. Home visits by teachers and other school staff are also a powerful way to impact the home environment.

Finally, teachers can reduce the emphasis parents place on spelling or grammar by eliminating homework of this nature.<sup>43</sup> Often, the only English language arts homework parents see for the first several years of a child's schooling are spelling tests and grammar exercises. In many cases, the only indication parents receive of their child's progress in language learning between report cards are the scores on their weekly spelling tests. It is no wonder parents pounce on every spelling and grammar mistake they see in their child's work for the remainder of their educational experience.

Instead, parents can be encouraged to include their children in household writing activities. Children can begin by writing shopping lists or reminder notes to post on the fridge. They can write in cards for special occasions like birthdays or Christmas. Corresponding with relatives or pen pals is also beneficial. With careful supervision, children can even start their own email account or learn to use a social networking site. Letters to the editor or a politician on issues that affect the family can elicit responses and spark conversations about the impact of well-written prose. Parents can also encourage their children to keep a diary or start a blog. Students may even write poetry and short stories in their free time. Older children might enjoy writing and illustrating picture books for their younger siblings. Even commercially published photo albums of family vacations are affordable with today's technology. Children can provide the captions and

---

<sup>43</sup> This may meet resistance as parents expect spelling and grammar homework. If parents insist on homework of this nature, teachers can recommend websites from which they can download worksheets.

even write a journal to accompany the photographs. Older students may even begin a novel or a family history.

Teachers can spark this kind of interaction by sending home suggestions or assigning them as homework. Of course, the extent of their implementation will depend on the health and language ability of the parents. Students with an unsupportive home environment or parents who have limited English language abilities will need special attention. They can be encouraged to interact with classmates outside of school or in an online environment in place of interact with their parents.<sup>44</sup>

### ***10.6 Adapting to Academia***

One of the major de-motivating factors for adolescents is confusion about expectations for their writing. They receive many messages about what their writing should be like and the messages they receive before their assignment are often different than what they are told through the assessment. The problem is most adolescents do not understand the academic culture to which their teachers belong. As a result, they do not understand the expectations their teachers have for their writing (Burke and Hermerschmidt 2005).<sup>45</sup>

Writing is playing an ever-increasing role in youth culture. However, the expectations of youth culture for writing are very different from the expectations of academic culture. To some extent, teachers need to appreciate and value the role of writing in youth culture. However, it is unrealistic to expect all of academia to accept the standards of youth culture for writing. Students are going to encounter traditional academic expectations frequently during their academic careers. Therefore, teachers must introduce them to academic culture and act as interpreters and guides. Eventually,

---

<sup>44</sup> For this reason, it is important to be as familiar as possible with a student's home situation.

especially if they enter post-secondary education, students will have to become part of academic culture themselves.

However, academic culture is constantly changing. There are few hard and fast rules for writing that apply across the board. Instead, every institution and every instructor has slightly different expectations. Rather than teaching adolescents the rules of academia, teachers must train their students to discover and adapt to the expectations of every academic situation they enter.

I can remember my grade twelve English teacher drilling us on the expectations for essay writing. She was very demanding and appeared to be the absolute authority on essays in our adolescent eyes. We practiced the structure constantly and became experts in filling out the formula. I can still remember her mantra, “Say it; prove it; say it again.”

However, I received a “D” on the first essay I wrote for my first university English professor. She stated the structure was far too repetitive and formulaic. I quickly realized that my high school English teacher had no authority here and that I would have to adapt to the new environment.

At the end of the spring semester, a friend and I stopped by our old high school to visit our favorite teachers. We dropped in on our grade twelve English teacher and one of the first questions she asked was whether the formula she had taught us for essay writing was acceptable at the university level. I can remember how unsure of herself she suddenly seemed.

As I moved through academia, I quickly learned to discover and adapt to the specific expectations of each professor in addition to the broader expectations of the department, the institution, and academia in general. In a sense, we must teach our

---

<sup>45</sup>A case study that analyzes the expectations educators have of their students.

students to adapt to and survive in a foreign culture where text messaging is the most grievous of sins and numerous pages are required to state the obvious. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of writing instruction. While we can change the goals and expectations in our classrooms to a certain extent, the establishment still demands adherence to its own set of standards.

## **SECTION FOUR: Motivating Good Writing**

This section will focus in on the various ways a teacher can impact the quality of student writing. It begins with the impact a teacher can have on student writing. Next, it applies Csikszentmihalyi's ideas on attention, emotion, intention, learning and flow to the art of writing. It then applies Kohn's concept of discovery learning to writing instruction.

### **11 Musing: The Role of the Writing Teacher**

The role of the writing teacher is crucial in motivating adolescents as writers. Teachers are often the only real source of encouragement adolescents have towards written prowess. Initiatives by the larger educational system and higher levels of government have no real impact on students unless they are implemented enthusiastically and skillfully by classroom educators. Therefore, it is essential to consider ways in which teachers can influence the motivation of adolescent writers. What exactly can a teacher say and do in the classroom that will increase student motivation to write well?

#### ***11.1 Attitude and Atmosphere***

Attitude and atmosphere are likely the most important aspects in student motivation to write well. The best activities and strategies will fail miserably if negatives attitudes and a discouraging atmosphere prevail in the classroom. However, these aspects are often overlooked during the planning and implementation stages.

Attitude is best seen as individual in nature while atmosphere is collective. Of course, there are many individual attitudes towards writing that can impact a classroom. The students all begin the year with their own attitudes toward writing. Teachers, assistants, department heads, administrators, and other support staff all have their own

attitudes as well. The attitudes of parents also have an impact on the classroom atmosphere.<sup>46</sup> However, the teacher's attitude is of primary importance, all the more so because it is the only attitude over which the teacher has any direct control. Therefore, I will begin by considering the teacher's attitude towards students and their writing.

The teacher's attitude is demonstrated through her actions and words, both spoken and written. Even more importantly, it is conveyed through the absence of actions or words at crucial moments. Everything a teacher says and does, or does not say and does not do, communicates her attitude to the students.

It is essential this classroom attitude be consistent with a teacher's words and behavior outside of class as well. Adolescents are all too aware of false fronts. Many are already paranoid someone is talking about them behind their backs. Most wear their own false fronts constantly. Experience has already taught them it is not safe to reveal who they really are. At the same time, they want to believe their teacher genuinely cares about them. If a teacher's attitude towards them changes when they leave the classroom, students may feel so betrayed that they carry resentment through to the end of the year.

### ***11.2 Passion for Writing***

What should a teacher's attitude towards student writing be? Positive is the first word that comes to mind, more by association than by thought. However, I would argue merely positive attitudes are as much to blame as negative attitudes for the passivity of students towards their writing. If a teacher is always positive about student writing it will have no more effect on quality than if a teacher is always negative. Students will soon realize they get the same response whether they put effort into their work or not. Arbitrary reactions

---

<sup>46</sup> Teachers often feel pressured to teach in a certain way because of excessively proactive parents.

based on the teacher's mood for the day produce the same sense of resignation because students soon realize they have no control over the results.

Instead, teachers should nurture an inner passion for student writing. Passion is the opposite of the passivity so common among adolescent writers today. Even better, passion is contagious. If a teacher demonstrates passion for student writing, students will soon feel a similar passion growing in them as well. Passion is the quality most often associated with greatness. Great teachers are seldom acclaimed for how positive they are.

What does a passion for student writing look like exactly? I would equate passion with love constantly demonstrated through word and action. Passion is not the kind of love one holds deep in one's heart, never allowing it to show. Instead, passion is constantly spilling over into everything one says and does.

Students should become aware of a teacher's passion for writing from the moment they walk into the class on the first day. The room should already reflect a teacher's attitude towards writing because passion will have splashed out as the teacher set up the room. Bare walls do not convey passion. Neither do pictures from last year's calendar. Instead the walls should be covered in writing. Quotes from famous works both current and classic, favorite lines or passages from the teacher's own poetry and prose, in addition to excerpts from master pieces by previous students should be strewn around the room. Everywhere students look, they should see beauty and power.

As well, passionate teachers will immediately tell their students about their passion. When one meets a passionate person, it doesn't take long to figure out what they are passionate about. You may even learn about their passion before you learn their name. Don't be like parents who love their children but never tell them so. Tell your

students you love writing just in case they haven't picked up on it yet. Let them know in words. Deeds alone are not enough if you are truly passionate.

Assignments should also give value to quality over other competing attributes. If quality is more important than quantity, completion, correctness, and conformity, our assignments should reflect this emphasis. The directions and criteria should leave students free to invest their limited time and energy on the quality of their written expression instead of pressuring them to write a certain number of paragraphs, finish the story, check their spelling, or format their work in a certain way. Quality is illusive and students will focus first on aspects of the assignment they can nail down like length and correctness if they are pressed for time. If we as educators want our students to write well above all else, we need to communicate this through the directions and criteria that come with our assignments.

We also need to teach our students what quality looks like. We teach students how to identify correct spelling, grammar, paragraph structure and essay format but we seldom teach them to recognize quality. Of course, it is much more difficult to describe power and beauty than it is to define the parts of speech, mostly because quality is subjective and relative. Still, if we want our students to write well we must help them to determine if they are meeting our expectations. Students are capable of recognizing power and beauty in a piece of writing. They are impacted by these qualities as deeply as anyone. They simply need to be taught to evaluate their response to a piece and trust their own intuition. Group discussions can give students confidence their assessments are valid. They can also draw out some of the elements that combine to give a particular piece impact.

### **11.3 Passion for Students**

Passionate teachers never accept mediocrity. From the first assignment, students should be aware only their best efforts will earn them recognition. Praise is not given lightly or indiscriminately. They must put their personal best into every piece.

Passionate teachers always recognize effort over accomplishment. They are far more impressed by a student who tries their best and fails than they are by a student who achieves excellence at half steam. Mere excellence does not suffice when perfection is in reach.

Passionate teachers are fair but they do not treat their students equally. They do not compare students to one another or even to performance standards. Instead, they compare a student's present achievement to what they are capable of achieving at their best. Progress is the chief indicator of accomplishment.

Passionate teachers are always encouraging. They see potential everywhere. Giving up is not an option. Their encouragement takes many forms. Some students need praise and others need a "kick in the pants" to encourage greater effort. Encouragement is not encouragement if it excuses passivity.

How does one acquire a passion for student writing? For most teachers, it is not a matter of acquiring passion but of rediscovering a passion buried by years of neglect. The obligations and stresses of day to day life as a teacher can slowly suffocate passion. Even teachers who do not feel passionate about writing can discover passion for student writing in themselves if they search carefully.

Every teacher who meets the basic criterion for teaching can discover a passion for student writing. I would argue the basic criterion for teaching is a passion for students

themselves. Most would agree teachers who have no love for their students should not be teaching. Any teacher who loves their students can acquire a passion for student writing because a passion for student writing is a passion for students. Student writing should be the purest expression of who a student is inside. Therefore, if teachers love their students they already have a passion for their writing.

Nurturing a passionate, personal attitude towards student writing as a teacher is only the first step. If student attitudes are negative towards writing, the atmosphere of the class will be toxic as well. Passionate teachers help but passion alone is not enough.

The key to changing attitudes towards writing is to remember writing is an expression of who one is as a person. Writing apart from self-expression is meaningless. However, by the time most students reach secondary school, their sense of personhood has been seriously compromised. They have been forced to conform their writing to limited expectations for so long it has lost all of its artistry and power. When they attempt to express themselves through writing, they are often wounded and repressed by harsh critiques from teachers and peers.

A passionate teacher may actually intimidate students. At first students will carefully attempt to conform their writing to perceived expectations. They are afraid to take risks. They are afraid their efforts will be for nothing. They are afraid they will be ridiculed if they put themselves into their writing. Or they may not know how to express themselves on paper because they have never had the opportunity.

It takes time to create a place of safety in which students feel free to express themselves through their writing. Students may have negative attitudes towards their own writing or the writing of others. These can reopen old wounds if they are expressed in a

harmful way. Often, it is best to expose and deal with these negative experiences at the beginning of the year. This is an opportunity for teachers to learn who their students are and where they are coming from. Once these negative reactions are aired, the air can be cleared and progress can be made.

## **12 Finding Flow in the Writing Classroom**

I am convinced flow is the key to developing an intrinsic motivation toward quality in writing. If students enter flow while writing, they will develop a healthy addiction to the art that can only be satisfied by increased levels of skill and challenge. However, flow is not an easy state to create or maintain. Writing teachers must apply Csikszentmihalyi's thoughts on attention, emotion, intention and learning before they attempt to guide their students into flow.

### ***12.1 Reserving Attention for Writing***

The writing teacher must give special consideration to Csikszentmihalyi's characterization of attention, or psychic energy, as a limited resource. According to Csikszentmihalyi, students do not have an infinite capacity for attention. They are only able to focus their attention on a limited number of tasks at one time. If this number is exceeded, they ignore additional tasks or lose focus all together.

All too often, teachers direct student attention to so many different activities they are unable to focus when it comes time to write. Most class sessions are filled with constant transitions from one activity to another. Many students are still trying to process one activity when their attention is directed to the next activity in the sequence. If

students do not move on to the next activity, they are often disciplined or forced to complete unfinished activities during their free time.

Ironically, many teachers feel constant transitions are necessary in order to maintain student attention. They argue students have been conditioned to constant transition by fast-paced television shows and video games. Unfortunately, this addiction to transition is only reinforced by teachers who subscribe to this perspective. By the time students become adolescents, they have been exposed to constant transition both in and out of school for most of their lives.

Instead of surrendering to this trend, teachers must help students conserve and focus their attention. Rather than breaking the writing process down into a series of small tasks students are herded through at a breakneck pace, teachers need to present writing as a world students can enter and lose themselves in.

Teachers also need to eliminate the many distractions that are a part of the writing process itself. Student attention is often so absorbed by the mechanical aspects of writing they are unable to focus on the impact of the piece as a whole. They are distracted by paragraph structure, grammar, spelling, and even punctuation. There is always time to focus attention on these aspects later. They should not distract from a focus on impact during initial composition.

Attention needs to be respected as a rare and valuable commodity. It shouldn't be used up on details or meaningless assignments. If teacher do not help students to develop their ability to focus attention on writing they will never experience flow in a writing classroom.

## **12.2 The Emotional Aspect of Writing**

Emotion is another important variable in flow. Negative emotions can block a student's ability to experience flow in writing. These emotions can arise from hurtful past experiences with writing. They can also result from a harmful classroom atmosphere. Csikszentmihalyi describes this state of emotional disorder as entropy. On the other hand, positive emotions result in a state of emotional order or negentropy which is conducive to flow.

For many students, the subject of writing itself is enough to throw them into a state of entropy. All students have had previous encounters with the subject and each of these encounters affect their emotional response. Some students have struggled with writing and others have been bored by it. Many have received such negative responses to their effort they are afraid to express themselves in the same medium again. Their lack of confidence in their ability to write is magnified by their negative emotional state. This combination makes it impossible for them to enter flow when they write and results in another negative experience which adds to their dread of writing.

Writing teachers need to be very aware of the feelings students have towards writing. They need to ensure initial experiences with writing in their classes are as positive and comfortable as possible. At the same time, these experiences need to challenge students who consider writing boring. Teachers should resist the temptation to hand out a writing assignment until they know their classes well-enough to design an assignment that will strike this balance.

Cole touches on the role of emotions in her book, *Toxic Feedback: Helping writers survive and thrive* (2006). She finds it helpful to demystify the writing process by

revealing the humanity of literary giants (145). She exposes the tricks they used to make their writing great rather than focusing on higher level aspects like theme. She also discloses trade secrets like the number of drafts certain writers had to write before they got it right. This helps students feel less threatened by the subject.

Teachers also need to ensure students do not feel threatened by their personality. There is a fine line between motivation and intimidation. Teachers must ensure students feel safe in their presence. For Cole, faith and honor are the base elements of motivation (2006: 144). Teachers must demonstrate faith in their students' abilities and honor their efforts. However, students must be appreciated in ways that suit their unique needs and personalities.

Positive relationships between students are also important. Students need to become aware of their prejudices towards other members of the class. This is an extremely important stage in developing an atmosphere conducive to writing. It is essential to create a safe place in which students can share who they really are.

As portrayed in the experiences of the Freedom Writers, inner-city secondary students in Los Angeles, the prejudice can be racial (Freedom Writers 1999). This story is a great illustration of the way in which a teacher was able to draw her class together by revealing their commonalities. She used several different activities to create a safe place in which they were finally able to share their writing with one another.

However, prejudice can also take other, less obvious forms. Discrimination based on physical size or appearance can leave students feeling unsafe. They may respond by refusing to share their writing or by trying to fit into a stereotypical role like the "funny

fat-kid” or the “dumb-blonde.” Their writing may reflect the expectations of their peers rather than their own personalities.

As well, discrimination can result from recent or longstanding conflicts between students that carry over into the classroom. Rumors often leave students feeling like everyone is laughing at them or angry with them. Physical assault or intimidation can continue with verbal threats or an aggressive physical presence in class. These forms of discrimination can leave students feeling unsafe to share their writing or take their focus entirely off of writing altogether.

In each of these instances, it is essential an atmosphere of safety prevail. Well-designed activities and assignments can bring greater self-awareness and empathy for others. However, in many cases, teachers may have to uncover and deal with the root issues. This requires extra time and effort on the part of the educator but the results can be very rewarding. Students who were reluctant to open their mouths in class can blossom into poets and orators. Classes that were a war zone can become a place of safety where students can lower their defenses and take off their masks for a while. Bullies and vicious gossips can suddenly show real concern for their classmates and begin standing up for the students they used to intimidate or ridicule. Even better, students are often willing to express these individual transformations in writing if given the opportunity.

Creating a classroom atmosphere and nurturing attitudes that are positive towards writing are essential steps in developing the negentropy, or positive emotional energy, necessary for flow. If teachers are able to heal past wounds from harmful responses to student writing and prevent fresh attacks from occurring, students will feel secure enough

to lose themselves in the writing experience. Emotional entropy will no longer absorb all of their attention and they will find themselves enjoying the opportunity to express themselves in powerful and unique ways.

### ***12.3 Developing the Intention to Write Well***

Although attention and emotion are crucial elements of flow, students will never experience it unless they develop the intention to write well. This is the most difficult aspect of flow to direct. According to Csikszentmihalyi, intentions are already present. However, they can be cross purposes with other intentions in the same individual. This results in frustration for students and teachers alike. In addition, differing intentions can cause conflicts between group members.

Often students enter class with preset intentions. These take various forms and are the result of their previous experiences. Many of their intentions are positive. However, if they are at cross purposes with other positive intentions, the result is still negative. It is up to the teacher to direct the intentions of individual students and those of the class as a whole. To do so, the teacher must discover what existent intentions are. Often, both students and teachers will have to adjust their mindset before their intentions align.

One area in writing where intentions are often at cross-purposes is the initial composition of a piece. Students often attempt to write and edit their work simultaneously. Cole directs her students to turn off the editor and allow the creator in them to write (2006: 145). The urge to edit while writing a first draft is a motivation killer because intentions are in conflict. Freeing her students from this false obligation allows them to play as they write.

Teachers also need to discourage students from forming their primary intentions around spelling, grammar, and paragraph structure. So much emphasis is placed upon these elements that motivated students are often motivated solely in this direction. Instead, students need to be encouraged to focus their initial intentions on writing with impact. Once they produce a piece that has beauty and power in its raw state, they can move on to low level editing. Intentions need to be prioritized and sequenced so they do not create internal conflicts.

Intentions also need to be considered in group settings. The intentions of group members do not have to be identical. However, they must not be in conflict. It is also important to have similar primary intentions to ensure the group as a whole is motivated in the same direction.

#### ***12.4 Learning to Write in a State of Flow***

Once students have set appropriate intentions, reserved adequate attention, and entered a state of negentropy, or positive emotional energy, they are ready to experience flow in writing. According to Csikszentmihalyi, learning occurs naturally during flow because skill levels are constantly challenged to their limit. When students are faced with a writing task that demands all of their skill, they will advance in their writing ability as they work to complete it.

At the same time, however, learning poses the greatest obstacle to flow. By learning, students increase their skill level. Unless the level of challenge is increased to match their newly acquired level of skill, they will fall out of flow and into the less satisfying state of control.

This is the most challenging aspect maintaining flow in writing instruction. First, the teacher must determine the exact skill level of each student. Then she must create assignments or activities that challenge each student to the full extent of their abilities. Most difficult of all, she must continue to provide assignments or activities that present increasing levels of challenge to each student without surpassing the rate at which their skills are developing.

These are clearly impossible objectives. Even the determination of exact skill levels is unrealistic, especially given our emphasis on the subjective qualities of beauty and power. Designing challenges that would match each student's skill level exactly would take far more time and energy than any teacher has to offer. If the student to teacher ratio were one-to-one, this approach might be feasible. However, that is highly unlikely given the current financial state of western education.

Fortunately, there is a superior and more manageable alternative. Wilbers unknowingly provides a recipe for flow when he lists five essential attributes in the development of writers (2000: 6-7). Because he is writing a self-help book for writers instead of a teacher's manual, he assumes developing writers will apply these principles to themselves. However, there is no reason to place this responsibility into the hands of the teacher when Wilbers' attributes are applied to high school students.

Wilbers' first attribute is confidence in one's ability to learn and develop skills. In this, Wilbers presents a revolutionary shift of focus. He does not encourage students to base their self-confidence on their current level of knowledge and skill. Satisfaction with what one has already achieved results in apathy. A student can demonstrate what they already know without learning anything. Instead, Wilbers bases self-confidence on one's

ability to learn. In this, every student can have confidence because every human has the capacity to learn, to a certain degree at least. Students can feel confident in their ability to improve their skills even if they are well below the other students when they enter the class. Even better, the demonstration of one's ability to learn results in further development because one can not demonstrate this capacity without learning.

Next, Wilbers encourages students to develop self-knowledge of their current state of ability. This simplifies the teacher's attempt to create flow significantly. Instead of constantly assessing each individual student's level of ability, students are taught how to take their own pulse. This also eliminates the need for constant reporting as the students are already aware of where they are at and how far they have progressed.

Wilbers then builds on the first two attributes by describing a learning mode in which students confidently improve their level of ability. This is the point at which students can experience flow. They know their skill level and they are eager to meet the next challenge. It is now up to the teacher to provide an assignment or activity that will create a place for flow to occur.

It is essential the assignment challenge students without defeating them. The assignment should stretch students to the full extent of their ability but it should not leave them exhausted and discouraged. Struggle without the satisfaction of achievement leads to frustration, not motivation. At the same time, the assignment should not be so easy it leaves students in a state of boredom. Only an even balance of challenge and ability will allow students to experience flow.

This is a delicate balance to achieve. Fortunately, writing is an open-ended activity. Students should be taught to seek flow by modifying each assignment to suit their skill

level. Of course, careful coaching will be required at first or students may overestimate their prowess. On the other hand, students who have not gained an appreciation for the flow experience may set the bar too low. However, once students are aware of their own abilities and the feeling of satisfaction flow produces, they should become adept at setting each assignment to the optimal level. Of course, the teacher should provide suggestions for modification and approve each variation.

To maintain flow, it is also important the activities and assignments have clearly defined directions and objectives. Students often put their best effort in at the beginning of a new assignment. However, if they are unclear on how to proceed, they will quickly become disillusioned with the process.

This is even more likely if they are required to discard the product of their initial effort and begin again. It is discouraging to get sent back the starting line, especially if students felt they were doing well before the whistle blew. The sheer effort required to start again can seem beyond their capacity.

Even students who are willing to try again and again suffer in the end. If clear guidelines are not provided, they will become increasingly dependent on their teacher for assessment. They will begin to distrust their own capacity to understand the assignment and evaluate their progress independently. Teachers are far too outnumbered to provide constant assessment and evaluation to every student. Students will grow increasingly frustrated as they wait endlessly for approval from their teacher. They will become discouraged at the pace of their progress and give up even if they are on the right track.

Wilbers next recommendation is that students develop commitment and determination. This is a good suggestion but difficult to implement. Commitment and

determination are more commonly seen as aspects of character and it is difficult to teach character into existence. However, if commitment and determination are defined as motivation directed by appropriately orientated intentions, this attribute becomes teachable. As Kohn suggests, motivation is innate. Students are always motivated in one direction or another. If students experience flow while developing their writing skills, their motivation in this direction will increase until it looks increasingly like commitment and determination.

More importantly, if students experience flow a significant number of times, they will not be thrown off if an assignment or two are either beyond their skill level or not challenging enough. Instead of directing their motivation elsewhere, they will press through to the next opportunity for flow. If they develop a history of consistent flow experiences over time or if they have had exceptionally powerful experiences, their intentions will hold their motivation steady even through long dry spells.

This is also an opportunity for further instruction. When students experience failure after high levels of success, they will want to know why. Cole empowers her students by teaching them writer's tricks (2006: 145). These allow their writing to flow more freely and prevent frustration or discouragement. When they encounter an obstacle, they have the confidence to surmount it. Students are open to learning these techniques when they are struggling.

Thus far, Wilbers has described a way in which students can create flow experiences for themselves in the classroom. First, they need to be confident in their ability to meet challenges. Second, they need to be constantly aware of their current level of ability. Third, they create flow by modifying assignments and activities to a level that

will challenge them. And fourth, they need to rely on the motivation produced by previous flow experiences to carry them through dry spells. Wilbers' fifth attribute, however, is redundant.

Wilbers' fifth attribute is the development of abilities through practice. From my perspective, practice is the antithesis of flow. Practice is what happens when an activity fails to challenge a student. When students practice, they simply do what they already know how to do over and over again. No learning occurs because the students are not being challenged. Even worse, motivation is consumed by practice leaving students without any desire to participate when the next activity is introduced.

Many would argue practice is necessary for the development of skills. I would suggest skills do not develop unless they are challenged. Instead of forcing students to practice at or below their current level of ability, teachers should encourage them to move on to the next challenge. The reason practice is so common in the modern classroom is teachers are still attempting to satisfy the needs of every student with a generic assignment. This is impossible. If students are taught to modify the assignments to challenge their current level of ability, as Wilbers suggests initially, practice will no longer be necessary.

### **13 Discovering the Writer**

One of Kohn's most helpful suggestions is the idea of discovery. As I mentioned in the first section, an excitement surrounds the concept of discovery that is highly motivating. More importantly, it puts success and failure in an entirely new light. In a traditional learning situation, the learner is expected to master a set of knowledge or skills the teacher already possesses. If they fail, they are typically punished in some way and have

to begin again. If they succeed, they are rewarded and usually lose interest in the subject. However, in a discovery model, the student sets out to explore the subject with the support of the teacher. They may fail at first to find exactly what they are searching for but they will discover new aspects of the subject along the way. Even if they succeed in their quest initially, they will be motivated to explore the topic further. As Kohn states, discovery allows students “to see success and failure *as* feedback” and this “requires teachers (and parents) to stress the task itself, not the performance” (Kohn 1993: 211). This is especially significant in writing because perfection is always beyond reach and failure is never absolute. In this chapter, I will apply Kohn’s five characteristics of discovery to the writing classroom.

### ***13.1 Discovery Writing is Active***

If asked to envision a writing class, most would picture rows of students hunched over their desks with the scratching of pencil and eraser as the only sound. The teacher is at the front lecturing on technique or marking stacks of submissions with a red pen. There is no conversation except for the occasional question. This cannot be the case with discovery writing.

Discovery writing is active. Students move around the classroom, consulting with one another, reading aloud their attempts and pouring over papers together. There is a loud hum of conversation and frequent laughter. Some students retreat to a quiet corner and enter into flow while others congregate in larger groups to discuss new ideas or techniques.

The teacher circulates through the room taking part in discussions and reading over drafts with individual students. If students are not actively involved, the teacher talks

them individually to determine the reason for their withdrawal. Together they come up with an alternative that will satisfy both the requirements of the course and the needs of the student. The teacher never forces a student to participate against their will or read their work out loud.

### ***13.2 Discovery Writing is Purposeful***

In many English classes, students complete worksheet after worksheet without any explanation as to their relevance. They wander aimlessly through the pages of grammar workbooks because grammar is important. They write stories and essays to develop their skills. They even write haiku, limericks, and year after year because we can't neglect poetry either. If students are given reasons for an activity, they are generally not very good and they usually are not relevant to the students' lives.

Discovery writing is purposeful. Every activity has a reason that makes sense to the students. More importantly, students need the skills they develop to complete meaningful assignments. Even better, students and teachers collaborate on the selection and preparation of activities. They rationalize the requirements of government curriculum and produce a plan that meets both their felt needs and the expectations of the educational establishment. Students then present the activities to their peers along with an explanation as to why it was chosen. The students are then given the freedom to modify the activity until it is meaningful to them.

In a discovery setting, the purpose of every activity is discovery, not production. If students are developing new skills and learning more about the subject and themselves from the experience, they don't have to produce an errorless, final copy of every assignment. It is much more important that they are able to recognize and express the

extent to which they have achieved their purpose. Most teachers are all too familiar with the color-laser title pages and shiny-new report covers that enclose no evidence the student has discovered anything more than how to cut-and-paste from the internet.

Discovery writing is focused on meaningful objectives.

### ***13.3 Discovery Writing is Driven by Curiosity***

From childhood, students are taught “curiosity killed the cat.” Students are constantly chided for asking too many questions, touching fascinating objects, and not following directions. Teachers are disciplined when their classes are not under control and parents are ashamed when their children explore their world a little too rambunctiously. Curious George is constantly chided for being “too curious.” But how dull our bedtime stories would be if our favorite little monkey just did what he was told.

Students don't have to be taught to be curious. Their curiosity will motivate them to explore other aspects of their world if the writing activity fails to entice them. As teacher, our task is to ensure the lesson is mysterious enough, strange enough, or unusual enough to direct their curiosity into writing development. If an assignment captures student imagination, students won't have to be tempted with grades or threatened with failures. Their curiosity will drive them to discover new techniques and develop relevant skills.

Mystery fits naturally into writing development. Students can write in response to an unusual object or experience, expressing their thoughts and emotions. They can also write to create mystery and suspense for their classmates. Students are often more fascinated by which of their classmates wrote a piece than they are by what it contains. Writing can also be used to form theories, pose queries, or explore the possibilities that surround curious circumstances. Writing is the perfect outlet for curiosity.

### ***13.4 Discovery Writing is Modeled***

Most students see teachers as people who have nothing left to learn. Most teachers cultivate this image whether they intend to or not. Writing instruction typically consists of a lesson in which the teacher lectures on a technique they have mastered perfectly. This is followed by examples, often student writing samples, in which there are errors the students must correct. Next, the students complete an assignment that is submitted to the teacher. The teacher then highlights all of the errors the students have made and assigns them a grade that emphasizes their inferiority.

In discovery writing, the teacher intentionally exposes their own journey of discovery. They make it clear they have not reached the destination. They describe how they got to where they are and the many setbacks they had along the way. They invite students who show interest in an area to teach them and the class new techniques. They also expose their own drafts to student criticism and reveal uncertainties to their students. They never pretend mistakes were made intentionally for the benefit of students.

As I already mentioned, students often question whether I am qualified to be an English teacher when I make a spelling mistake on the board. I have come to welcome this opportunity to expose myself as a fellow learner. I want students to see I am confident in my ability to learn, not in my vast store of knowledge and ability.

One of the most rewarding writing sessions I have ever been a part of took place in a small grade nine class. The students and I each wrote a poem and then passed it around the circle. Each poem, including mine, was critiqued by the other group members. When my poem came back to me, it was obvious the students had accepted me as a fellow

learner. It was covered with insightful comments and suggestions. By incorporating these in my next draft, I demonstrated my acceptance of the students as critics.

### ***13.5 Discovery Writing Values Mistakes***

Teachers generally recognize the negative impact large red 'X's tend to have on student motivation. To alleviate this effect, many have begun marking wrong answers with green circles. However, error-free submissions are still held up as examples while those that still require a lot of editing are quietly passed back to the owner to avoid drawing attention to their shameful performance. In reality, however, the submissions with the most mistakes are likely those with the most potential.

Discovery writing values mistakes, especially those that are a result of risk taking. Writing teachers should be much more excited by pieces filled with misspelled but advanced vocabulary or error-ridden but complex grammatical structures than they are by safe and simplistic submissions. Cole welcomes bad writing as a necessary step in the process (2006: 149). Especially in adolescent writing, error-filled drafts generally prove students are challenging their own limits. This should be celebrated. Students that are motivated to this level will eagerly turn their errors into opportunities for further discovery.

If teachers attempt to eliminate the potential for errors in student writing, they may be a little too successful. Most adolescents are capable of writing in a simple enough manner to avoid mistakes altogether if they choose to do so. However, the submissions will likely be void of potential in every area. If the emphasis is on error free writing, students will lower the level of their work to meet it.

Of course, some students make mistakes because they are not motivated enough by the task to care. However, these types of errors are easy to recognize by the general lack of effort that went into the piece. The answer in this case is not to focus on the errors. They are not the problem. Motivation is and it needs to be addressed on another level.

## **SECTION FIVE: Principles of Motivational Writing Instruction**

This section will apply Kohn's three principles of motivation to writing instruction. First, it describes the way in which collaboration can motivate students through community. Next it emphasizes the importance of meaningful assignments and activities. Finally, it discusses the way in which the freedom to choose can enhance student motivation to write.

### **14 Collaborative Writing**

In the first section, I introduced three principles on which Kohn bases his recommendations for motivated learning. These principles can be summarized as collaboration, content, and choice. In the remainder of this section, I will describe how these principles can be implemented in a writing classroom.

In the implementation, there is significant overlap between the three categories. Therefore, I will attempt to organize my ideas by use of the following criteria. First, in the section on collaboration, I will include all discussion pertaining to choices made by groups of students. I will also include discussions on the selection of content by groups. In the section on content, I will only deal with the nature of meaningful content, not its selection. Finally, in the section on choice, I will refer only to choices made by individual students, not groups. This arrangement will cover all aspects of implementation without becoming repetitive.

As Kohn states, most instructional models create environments where students are either "taught to ignore everyone else" or "set against each other" (Kohn 1993: 214). This is especially true in the teaching of writing. In general, writing is a solitary activity.

Students sit in separate desks and write silently. They then revise silently, edit silently, and complete a final draft silently.

Writing is also competitive. Although teachers attempt to mark according to set standards, most fall into the habit of establishing a grade for the first paper and then grading the other papers by determining if they are higher or lower than the first.

Teachers often read the best submissions out loud and encourage students to enter essay contests or poetry competitions.

Collaborative learning has made some inroads. Many writing assignments now begin with a large group session of brainstorming. However, this technique is often used to narrow possibilities down to a single topic. It is usually directed by the teacher who accepts and records suggestions. Students are encouraged to collaborate on revision as well. They are told to exchange and edit papers. Typically, students simply check for spelling mistakes and return the papers to their partners without comment. However, collaborative writing needs to go far beyond this in order to motivate quality in writing.

### ***14.1 Creative Community***

More than in any other discipline, collaboration in writing must occur within community. Students are afraid to collaborate because they don't trust one another and they don't trust their teacher. Collaborating on writing in this type of environment is frightening. Students are basically being asked to expose their inner thoughts to strangers or even enemies.

For this reason, Cole encourages the creation of a nurturing learning environment (2006: 144). She emphasizes community over competition. This motivates students to

find their own voice rather than imitating winners or winning styles. It also provides students with a safe place to share their ideas and experiment with their writing.

This type of community is difficult to establish. However, a creative community can foster quality writing like no other approach or strategy. At its core is the element of belonging. Creative communities in which a sense of belonging is strong are often referred to as families. Their members feel a bond to one another that goes beyond friendship. What they are experiencing is a little of the unconditional love that should be a part of every family. What it means for writing is students will be accepted and appreciated for who they are no matter how well or how poorly they write. This frees them to try new things and fail without risking their identity within the group.

### **14.2 Core Values**

Every creative community should establish a core set of values. These values should be developed and agreed upon by the community as a whole. However, the teacher can guide the formation of values toward the following five areas (Cole 2006: 144-146). This ensures the statement of values is comprehensive enough to both protect and motivate. I have adapted Cole's suggestions to fit a classroom context.

First, a creative community should value the potential to learn, develop, and succeed that lies within every member. The community will hold steadfast to the belief that each member has potential even if no demonstrable sign of it is displayed throughout the year. The community will never give up on a member. At the same time, they will not express their faith through well-intentioned harassment or motivational ridicule. When potential is demonstrated, it will not be greeted with exclamations of surprise but with pride in the member's accomplishments.

Second, a creative community should value effort and determination. Even if a member does not produce work worthy of recognition, the effort and determination they showed during the process should be recognized. Effort and determination should be praised as highly as success within the community. This also reinforces faith in the potential of everyone to develop and learn over time.

Third, a creative community should value excellence in self-expression. While recognizing effort and determination, the community should also applaud the accomplishments of its members. When individuals do produce work of the highest quality, their achievement should be celebrated. A celebration of success is appropriate if it is inclusive and inspiring rather than exclusive and belittling.

Fourth, a creative community should value insight or feedback from its members. While affirmation is important in a creative community, it is not everything. Affirmation without constructive criticism encourages mediocrity. The community must recognize the value of feedback and show appreciation for members who are able to discern flaws and weaknesses in a piece of writing. It is important good feedback be appreciated whether it comes from a member who has achieved excellence in the area in question or not. At the same time, feedback should never be malicious or hurtful in any way.

Fifth, a creative community should value instructional sessions and activities that develop potential. This is likely the most difficult value to instill in a classroom community. Instruction is seldom fun and students rarely have patience for it. However, a creative community will remind its members of the crucial role instruction plays in the development of a writer's potential. Rather than banding together against the teacher when instructional activities or lessons are introduced, community members will

encourage each other to persevere. Of course, the teacher should ensure instructional sessions are designed to facilitate learning, not boredom.

Ultimately, writing teachers wish to instill the same passion they have for writing in the hearts of their students. An overwhelmingly positive atmosphere and an inspiring experience with writing in the context of a creative community can change attitudes towards the discipline. Positive attitudes can then develop into passion as students begin reaping both the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of self-expression through writing.

### ***14.3 Planning Together***

When students feel safe and have a sense of belonging, they are much less resistant to collaboration in writing. Their participation and motivation can be increased even further if teachers demonstrate they are willing to collaborate with students on planning as well.

This is an area of great insecurity for most teachers. Teachers generally feel more confident if they have the whole year planned in advance. However, by exposing themselves in this vulnerable area and inviting the students into the planning process, teachers can become a part of the community as well.

This is not to say all advance preparations should be discarded. If anything, even more preparation is needed to ensure collaborative planning sessions are successful. To complicate matters further, most students are not accustomed to planning the year with their teachers. They may be resistant to the idea at first and reluctant to participate. Teachers may have to start by teaching students what it means to collaborate.

However, the writing class is an ideal setting for collaborative planning. From the beginning of the year, students will have the opportunity to work together on the composition of plans, proposals, and value statements. They will become comfortable

with discussing ideas together and deliberating with one another over wording. This will prepare them for the work they will do in smaller groups throughout the remainder of the year.

The process of collaborative planning can also give teachers insight into what is important to students. Their suggestions and responses are clues to their values and priorities. Through planning, the teacher has the opportunity to encourage the expression of these ideas both verbally and in written form. Ensuring these ideas are respected will give students confidence when they experiment with more personal forms of self-expression later in the year.

#### ***14.4 Supportive Structure***

Group work requires adequate structure to support the students in their learning. Group work often seems like a good idea. Students are generally enthusiastic about group work, even if they are more motivated by the social interaction than by the assignment.

However, if the teacher does not supply clearly defined roles and goals for each stage of the process, the motivation quickly fades.

Roles are the most important aspect of group work. Students might know what to do and how to do it. However, if they are not told who is to do what, few students are willing to step out and set the process in motion. This is especially true of adolescents who can be extremely self-conscious and unwilling to risk alienating themselves from the group by taking a leadership role voluntarily.

Even if roles are provided, a lack of clear objectives can result in a lack of motivation. The group members may understand what they are to do. However, if they

don't know why they are doing it and what their efforts will accomplish, they are less likely to persevere.

Stages are equally important. If a project is not broken down into stages, students will be overwhelmed by the size of the task. They won't know where to begin. They may know what they are to do and why they are to do it but they will be discouraged if they don't know how to start.

Even worse, they may make a false start on a stage of the project that is based on a prior planning or research. When they are told they must discard their work and redo it once they have completed the initial stages, they will be frustrated they were not instructed to do so in the first place. Feelings of anger or resignation do not contribute to healthy motivation.

Group work without structure is chaos. Students are seldom motivated towards quality in their writing by chaos. Group work without clear roles, goals, and stages will cause students to become disillusioned with the collaborative writing process as a whole.

However, if students are made a part of the planning process, they will have a much clearer understanding of the need for roles and structure. They will become skillful at designing and implementing group strategies. In addition, their writing will improve as a result of the constant interaction and feedback from their peers.

## **15 Writing that Matters**

Kohn's second principle is that motivating content is relevant to the students. In a writing class, it is the topic or the activity that needs to matter. Activities and assignments are the most direct way in which teachers can impact student motivation. Judging from the chorus of sighs and groans that often erupt from high school classes when writing

exercises are introduced, they often have a negative impact. Although student opinion isn't everything, it should not be ignored.

It would seem most writing instruction is designed with the intent to improve student writing. However, this approach is sure to fail with adolescents. Secondary students *will* allow teachers to improve their writing. In fact, they often *expect* teachers to improve their writing *for them*. When they ask their teacher how their writing can be improved, they want a word-for-word answer they can copy straight onto the page. The suggestion they should make an effort to improve their own writing is met with disbelief and even outrage.

Instead, writing instruction for adolescents should be designed with the intent to improve student motivation to improve their writing. However, it is difficult to find activities and assignments that actually accomplish this on an ongoing basis. In fact, there is evidence poorly designed activities and assignments are largely responsible for the motivational deficit many students find themselves in by the time they reach high school.

### ***15.1 Assignments that Kill***

Students should develop commitment and determination. There are some aspects of the writing process that are difficult and time-consuming. Students must develop the maturity required to press through these stages. However, this does not excuse the spirit-killing, mind-numbing, time-eating writing exercise many students are put through on a daily basis. Teachers need to consider and take more seriously the negative effects their writing lessons have on student motivation. The end cannot justify the means if it is never achieved. Student motivation to write is far more important than a grammar point or

paragraph structure. Writing itself is a powerful and exhilarating form of self-expression. Writing activities and assignments should be powerful and exhilarating as well.

Writing can be abused by teachers from other disciplines as well. Science teachers may force students to copy endless pages of notes from the board or overhead. History teachers often demand students answer numerous questions in full sentences from the box at the end of each chapter, most of which are so obvious and trivial they are not worth the paper they are written on let alone the hours students spend transcribing them into their notebooks.<sup>47</sup> To be fair, the questions are written by textbook authors but teachers are still responsible for assigning them. Even art teachers sometimes make students write reports about art which sets up writing as a barrier between students and their passion.

In addition, teachers should avoid using writing for discipline purposes. This goes back to the classic punishment in which students were required to copy lines onto the blackboard under the glaring supervision of their ruler-waving schoolteacher.<sup>48</sup> Like the slap of the belt on the palm, lines were meant to reinforce the lesson through painful repetition. However, the lesson they taught was that writing was punishment. Worse yet, what made lines so painful was the pointless concentration accompanied by sheer boredom. By the hundredth line, the brain was focused on the mechanical aspect of the work alone and the mind had drifted into a state that neared unconsciousness.

Other forms of written punishment are equally damaging when it comes to motivation. Teachers often assign additional questions or essays as a consequence. I suppose the premise is that students might as well learn something while they serve their

---

<sup>47</sup> Cutting and pasting has been an issue long before the internet became available. Students often copy sections directly from the textbook into their notebooks in response to chapter questions. Often, they simply matched a phrase from the question with one in the text and assume that the sentence in which it is contained will satisfy their teacher even if they demonstrate no understanding for either question or answer.

time. However, this practice often results in feelings of animosity towards both the subject and writing in general.<sup>49</sup> This can be compared to the way the wooden spoon has a decidedly negative connotation for many children despite its more common role in cooking their favorite dishes.<sup>50</sup>

## **15.2 Pointless Practice**

It is true practice is redundant by nature. However, practice without the opportunity to perform is pointless. Few students would sign up for a basketball team if all they did was practice free-throws and never played a game. In the same way, students quickly opt out of writing practice if there is no opportunity for them to put their skills into use. When men and women enlist in the army, they do so for many reasons. Learning how to march is not one of them. In the same way, writing drills do not motivate students.

Some students do get a sense of satisfaction from completing worksheet after worksheet as quickly as possible. When I taught grade three, my students were issued grammar drill books by the administration.<sup>51</sup> Many looked forward to grammar time because they enjoyed racing through the drills and gained a sense of pride and accomplishment from how many pages they could do in a period.<sup>52</sup>

However, grammar skills did not improve as a result. Even more disturbing, students would take the same approach to writing as they did to the drills. They focused solely on quantity and neglected quality, even in the areas they had drilled most

---

<sup>48</sup> Teachers are still assigning lines as consequences for lateness, missing homework behavior, etc.

<sup>49</sup> Being guilty of this myself, I can testify that a student who has spent lunch hour writing an essay about classroom conduct will have a very negative attitude towards writing for the entire afternoon.

<sup>50</sup> My cultural heritage substituted the wooden spoon for the belt or the switch.

<sup>51</sup> Administrators feel the same pressure to ensure students are learning grammar.

<sup>52</sup> The students' goal was to complete the worksheets, not to write well. Making corrections in their own writing was not quick and there were no straightforward answers.

extensively. This cheap thrill lost its appeal as students moved into high school. I taught the same students in grade eight and grammar exercises were considered torture.

This sentiment is reflected in a question I hear more and more often from secondary students as they move onto higher grades. Students frequently ask, “When are we ever going to use this?” If they never have a meaningful opportunity to use the strategies they have practiced, they will assume their efforts are all for naught. It is impossible to persuade students otherwise unless they are presented with a real opportunity to implement the strategy.

My hometown in the interior of British Columbia took the Cold War very seriously. The city and many of the outlying areas were equipped with steel towers five stories high topped by air raid sirens as part of a strategy to warn the community in the event of an attack. Drills were run periodically but the sirens were never employed to warn of a real danger. Now, in a time when the global situation is becoming ever more chaotic and dangerous, the city council has had them dismantled and removed.<sup>53</sup> Since the strategy was never implemented, it was deemed unnecessary and rejected. In the same way, students will disregard strategies that are not applied to a real situation.

### ***15.3 Reading the Waters***

Creating assignments and activities that motivate students is difficult. This is partly due to the fact your students are adolescents. Most teenagers find work in any guise equally de-motivating. Therefore, whatever assignment you give them, the majority of students will groan and look bored. This is not the point at which to assess the success of the assignment.

---

<sup>53</sup> A roadside fruit stand acquired one of the towers and proudly mounted a tractor on top of it.

Wait until students have begun or even until they have completed a stage of the project. Then assess whether the assignment has motivated them or not. Once again, you will have to sift out the typical teenaged reluctance to show enthusiasm for anything academic. However, it should be easier to discern whether or not the assignment has caught their imagination at this point.

Another telltale sign is their body language when you introduce the next assignment. Are they sitting a little more upright than usual, secretly eager for more, or are they unresponsive and slightly comatose. Part of the difference in their reaction might be due to the time of day. However, you should get a sense as to whether their motivation was heightened by past assignments or not.

An additional factor to consider is the reality not all students will be motivated by the same activity or assignment. A lot of research has gone into learning styles. As you get to know your students better, you will become skilled at modifying assignments to reflect their individual personalities and interests. Even better, students may learn to modify the assignments to suit their learning styles independently. A blank page isn't a good approach, however. Cole recommends giving students a place to start (2006: 145). A blank page can be very intimidating.

## **16 Choosing to Write**

Kohn's third and final principle of motivation is choice. Like it or not, students have free will. Many approaches to instruction attempt to relieve students of this curse. However, choice is a relatively stubborn trait. Students will resist control, no matter how well intentioned it may be. If they are not given choice in the classroom, they will exercise their free will by absenting themselves, either physically or mentally. Even worse, those

who do give in write to satisfy their instructors and lose themselves in the process. The results are weak and disappointing.

However, if students are given some control over their own writing process, they will express their free will through the activity or assignment. The results will be powerful and creative. This does not imply teachers must turn control entirely over to the students. Instead, choices are made together. At times, the teacher may need to take more initiative. Cole finds she must begin by forcing her students to write so they learn about their own processes (2006: 145). However, once they are familiar with their own processes, she is able to give them more autonomy. Decision making responsibility is shared, not taken.

### ***16.1 Creative Processing***

A writing assignment should leave room for students to run the task through their unique creative processes. It is unreasonable to expect students who are complete opposites in their personalities and ways of thinking to process a writing task in exactly the same way. Forcing a student through a process that does not work for them is one sure way to destroy motivation. Rather, time and opportunity should be given for students to shift into writing mode and approach the assignment in a way that is comfortable and productive for them.

We must make as much room as possible for the unique creative processes writers go through to produce a piece. First, we must allow students to experiment with different individual approaches to a writing project. One way to ensure extreme variation in the quality of product students produce is to restrict them to a single planning method. Instead, they each need to discover how they get into writing mode and which approach

produces the best results for them. Then, we need to give them room to approach each assignment in this way. This is not always possible in a classroom context but students can be prepared in other ways during class and begin the piece in a preferable setting. Teachers should never assume their approach works best for everyone. There is no formula for the production of a masterpiece.

This implies students are aware of what their processes are and practiced at getting into their own, unique writing mode. Students must be taught to reflect on their own processes and identify the components that are essential. Teachers can begin with generic exercises that encourage students to self analyze their habits and tendencies. However, they should quickly be given control over this journey of self discovery. Students should then practice running through their processes in new situations so they are also aware of how to adapt and modify their methods for different tasks.

This process of self-discovery is often neglected or omitted. Teachers are unwilling to give up time that could be used to cover content. Students are not accustomed to self-analysis and the benefits are not immediately obvious. Furthermore, making students aware of their unique writing processes creates the expectation more personal autonomy will be given on future assignments. However, personal autonomy is much more challenging to manage than conformity.

Of course, there are unavoidable limitations on the length and nature of the process in a classroom environment. For example, students who ideally require several hours of reflection on a topic before they begin may not always have that time at their disposal. In the same way, the classroom itself may not be ideal for others who would prefer a different setting. By this, I am not suggesting we leave students safely in their

comfort zones. This, in itself, would be de-motivating. Rather, every assignment should be a new experience. They should be challenged by each and every task they are given.

## ***16.2 Personalized Products***

Assignments should be presented in a way that gives ownership to the students. Ownership means they retain rights to the assignment even after it is submitted. Therefore, they should view a completed assignment as a starting point or a first edition, not a final copy. Students should be encouraged to rework a piece even after it has been assessed and returned until they are personally satisfied with it. This provides them with the time and freedom to apply whatever processes they wish to the work. Allowing students to resubmit their work in a portfolio at the end of the course is a good way to encourage this.

In every assignment, it is important to allow students the freedom they need to personalize their work. Writing should be an intensely personal process and there needs to be room for the person in the product as well. If we encourage a creative process but restrict the output to a format that leaves no room for individuality, there is no outlet for self-expression and creativity. Few great writers know where a piece is going to go when they pen the first few lines. However, many educators expect their students to produce pieces that conform to inflexible and restrictive criteria. We must lower our expectations for conformity and increase expectations for creativity.

It is generally assumed that writing is a creative process while revision and editing are critical. However, creative elements are present in both revision and editing. These aspects, however, must be emphasized. In revision, the creative element is more obvious. Revision can involve the rewriting of whole sections. Editing appears to focus more on

low level mistakes in spelling, grammar, or structure. Still, there are often several ways to correct a mistake and creativity at this stage of the assignment can enhance the quality even more. Students should be encouraged to look for creative solutions to problems and mistakes in their writing, not just the most obvious.

Once again, traditional grammar exercises have discouraged creativity in this regard. They give the impression there is only one right way to correct an error in verb tense or a mistake in sentence structure. In reality, the right answer is usually the easiest or most obvious way to fix the problem. Students who come up with a more complex solution are usually left to assume they are wrong. Even worse, practice sentences are usually presented in isolation so students have no opportunity to refer to or manipulate the larger context. This focus on low level mistakes turns the revision process into an exercise in the correction of equations, not the perfection of self expression.

Assignments should not overwhelm students with grammar and terminology. Instead, they should encourage the students to pay more attention to the impact of the writing. If too much emphasis is placed on sentence structure, students will produce sentences that are grammatically correct and unremarkable in every other respect as well. Grammar and spelling can be corrected after the piece is written. However, power and beauty are difficult to improve in a piece written without regard for it in the first place. In the same way, students can master all of the proper terminology for the parts of a sentence and still write in a way that has no impact.

### ***16.3 Technological Alternatives***

Students should also be given the option to compose on a word processor as often as possible. It is imperative teachers do not confuse good writing with the use of pen and

paper. Today, most teachers seldom write more than one or two lines by hand at a time. Teachers use word processors for everything from planning and memos to feedback and reporting. They constantly revise their work as they write, shifting whole paragraphs and making large-scale revisions with the various tools that lie waiting at their fingertips. Spelling skills are obsolete and even grammar is corrected with the click of a mouse. Most teachers would not dream of writing more than a paragraph by hand just in case they had to make changes.

However, writing teachers rarely allow their students to make use of the computers that are, in many cases, readily available. All composition must be done on paper with pen and ink. If mistakes are made, a final draft must be produced that is error free. Whiteout on the final copy is unacceptable. In short, students are required to produce compositions in an archaic and time-consuming manner their teachers would never submit to.

There are many reasons for this reluctance to utilize word processors for word processing. Some teachers are traditionalists who feel the pen and paper are pure, uncorrupted by the vices of modern technology. Others are afraid of computers, likely from painful experiences in the past. Still others are unwilling to make the effort it takes to teach students to write in the new medium. They are tired of dealing with unsaved work, missing files, and computer glitches that make convenient excuses for students who are not on task. Easy access to the internet also poses a distraction teachers would rather avoid.

However, I witnessed outrage in a staff room when teachers were asked to write single-sentence summary statements on permanent records by hand. The same teachers

wrote several paragraphs for each student on three different term reports without complaining. If we, as teachers, are not willing to compose on paper, why do we expect our students to do so? We are personally aware of the effect writing multiple drafts by hand has on our motivation.

Still, we expect students who were born with a keyboard in their laps to passionately write draft after draft on our beloved foolscap. Is it any surprise students respond with groans every time we suggest a way to improve their first draft? They are not thinking about how great their piece will be; they are envisioning the time it will take to copy out the second draft. When we finally give them access to word processors, we expect them to have a perfect final draft to copy from. We actually discourage the use of word processors for processing.

## **SECTION SIX: Motivation and the Evaluation of Writing**

This section will examine the complex relationship between grading and student motivation to write. First, it reveals the damage grades can do to student writing. Next, it outlines healthy forms of feedback and their sources. Finally, it presents Kohn's suggestions for minimizing the impact of grades in the current system.

### **17 Downgrading Student Writing**

Even if teachers remove all artificial incentives from their instructional strategies and develop practices that enhance intrinsic motivation, most are still faced with the obligation to evaluate student performance. The way in which writing is assessed can be extremely detrimental to student interest in the subject. This chapter will examine current marking practices, the damage they do to student motivation, and the reasons they are so devastating.

#### ***17.1 Current Marking Practices***

Marking student writing is not easy. As a result, there are numerous approaches that are currently in practice. Teachers differ in what they mark, when they mark, and how they mark. These variables often leave students confused and disenchanted with academic writing altogether.

First, every teacher emphasizes a different aspect of writing. Some teachers focus on minor details like spelling and punctuation. They pay little to no attention to higher level organization. Other teachers fixate on grammar and vocabulary. Still others are more concerned with paragraph structure, storyline or essay composition. Students are usually harshly punished if they make errors in a teacher's pet area and rewarded with

high marks if they meet their often unstated expectations. Other aspects of their writing typically remain unevaluated.

Teachers also differ on when they mark student compositions. Some mark first drafts without giving students a chance to edit and revise their work. Others mark only the final copy, giving no feedback whatsoever until it is submitted. Some mark only a few assignments, referring to the remainder as practice, while others mark every line students write. In other classes, the entire mark is based on quizzes, tests, or exams.

How teachers mark writing is a mystery to many students. Some teachers mark by comparing the work of one student to the work of another. Typically, they find an ideal piece and grade all of the other papers by what they are lacking in comparison. Alternatively, they give an average mark to the first submission and grade each of the following papers on how much better or worse they are than the first. Others mark according to a set of standards that are distributed either by the province, the district, or the English department. Often, the students never see the standards. If they do, the wording is often too academic for the students to understand. Still other teachers mark according to the criteria they establish for the assignment in question. Often the criteria are developed after the work has been submitted; the teacher is trying to figure out how to assign justifiable letter grades to an assignment that was concocted in the break between classes. In a best case scenario, the criteria is actually given out with the assignment or even created in collaboration with the students.

Teachers also vary in what they write on a submission. Some leave letters and some leave numbers. Some teachers give a percentage to the second decimal point while others use the check-plus system. Still other teachers cover the margins with comments and

write a paragraph of their own at the end to summarize their many recommendations. Some mark in red, some mark in green, some mark in pencil and other use highlighters. A few high school teachers still give out stickers while others have progressed to certificates or even chocolate bars. No matter what, when, or how teachers mark, the effect on student motivation to write is devastating.

## **17.2 Damage Assessment**

The effect grades have on student motivation to write is not immediately obvious. Many students work very hard on their writing in order to earn a good grade. Others seem very motivated by the threat of failure. Many put in long hours, hunched over their compositions, striving to meet their parents' expectations for their report cards.<sup>54</sup>

However, student writing is consistently disappointing. I recently had the opportunity to mark a set of English final examinations with a group of colleagues. Each exam contained two compositions. One was marked solely on the ideas presented while the other was marked on composition. Unfortunately, I have to conclude the English language, both in thought and in word, is in even worse shape than it was in Orwell's day. Most compositions were severely lacking in both creativity and precision. Few had any semblance of beauty or power. Only one exam stood out from the others. It was written by a remarkably gifted autistic student who was presumably sheltered from the harmful effects of western education by his condition.

Most student writing is characterized by a number of different flaws. First, there appears to be a general lack of concern for quality on a number of levels including punctuation, spelling, grammar, and structure. Second, it is often written in an obvious

---

<sup>54</sup> These expectations are often heavily influenced by their parents' own school experiences.

attempt to please the marker. Third, it lacks power and beauty. Fourth, there is little evidence of major revision and only minimal editing of lower level errors. Finally, it is often unclear what message the student is trying to get across.

In all of these instances, teachers fall back on grades to motivate the students. When grades fail to motivate, detentions and other punishments are brought into play. However, with dropout and failure rates at all-time highs, we are forced to admit grades do little to inspire writing.

### ***17.3 How Grades Hurt Writers***

Understanding why grades hurt writers is the first step in loosening their hold on writing instruction. In the first section, I introduced five reasons Kohn (1993) puts forward for the failure of reward systems. Grades are likely the most subversive form of rewards because they present themselves as assessment. In reality, they are a failed attempt to force writers to perform. This becomes obvious when Kohn's five reasons are applied to writing.

First, grades punish writers. Because writing can always be better, very few teachers give out perfect scores for English assignments and very few students ever see an 'A+' for English on their report card. As a result, even students that excel in the subject soon top out. No matter how hard they try, they can never improve their mark once they reach the mental maximum teachers set subconsciously in their minds. Because higher percentages or letter grades are apparently still available, students feel punished for their assumed shortcomings.

On the other hand, average students that make a strong effort on the first assignment are often discouraged by the resulting letter grade. In an attempt to motivate

them, they are given even lower marks on subsequent papers. Often students don't know why they receive the grades they do on their compositions. Even if there are numerous comments, most don't understand how the comments translate into a single letter. Students that typically end up at the lower end of the spectrum are already used to the punishment.

Second, grades destroy relationships between students and the people who can help them with their writing. In a creative community, students can all learn from each other. Everyone is able to offer valuable insight because everyone has a different perspective. When grades are given, however, students only view students with high marks as capable of offering assistance. They obviously have the system figured out so they are the ones to go to for help. Students with low grades are of no value. Even worse, students who would have helped each other in a cooperative setting are now in competition with one another. Everyone's writing suffers as a result.

The relationship between students and their teacher is also destroyed. The teacher is now the giver and the students are receivers. The teacher holds all of the power and the students are powerless. Some students are afraid to come to the teacher with their struggles in case this display of inadequacy will affect their grades. Still others become dependent on the teacher for advice. They no longer trust their own assessment of the quality of their work. Invariably, the teacher's approval never satisfies them for long and their criticism leaves them bitter and discouraged.

Third, grades discourage students from taking risks with their writing and from exploring new approaches. They are afraid to try something new in case it does not please the teacher. Often, they have been punished with poor grades for past attempts at

originality. When the teacher writes an example on the board, the students all write on the same topic. Without risk, there is no creativity and therefore no beauty and no power. Without exploration, there is no discovery and students will never advance beyond what they are taught to do in class. Marks aren't given for writing that isn't assigned.

Fourth, grades ignore the reasons students struggle with writing. A letter grade doesn't care if a student is having a bad day. A letter grade doesn't know how many drafts a student wrote before they submitted the final copy. A letter grade doesn't recognize the fact a student has produced a powerful short story in an attempt to write an essay. A letter grade can't tell the student misunderstood the assignment just slightly. A letter grade can't be told a student writes powerful poetry all the time at home but can't get into flow in the middle of an exam. Students need teachers, not assessors. They need to be taught how to write, not told how they measure up to the standards. They need to be understood, not graded.

Fifth, grades kill a student's intrinsic motivation to write. Many adolescents are initially eager to write because they find it enjoyable and fulfilling. However, grades reduce pages of carefully crafted prose or poetry to the value of a single letter. All of the creativity and personality that went into the work is suddenly nothing more than a score. The lasting satisfaction of self-expression is replaced by the momentary flush of success that comes from pleasing the teacher. The next piece is written to move even closer to the top of the scale and the pleasure of the task itself is forgotten. Soon grades no longer satisfy and all motivation to master the art of writing is lost.

## 18 Feedback: Engaging Without Grading

Fortunately, there is an alternative to grading. However, it is a double-edged sword. It can draw a creative community closer together over time or tear it apart in an instant. More importantly, it can kill a writer's motivation or restore it to full strength with a single word, a solitary nod, or even silence. It is essential both teachers and students master the art of feedback.

Cole has established herself as an authority on feedback. As a professional writer, she received her share of constructive and destructive criticism. She also had ample opportunity to observe the effects of her own feedback on others while leading fiction-writing workshops. *Toxic Feedback* (2006) draws on her own experiences and that of other well-known authors. Its pages contain valuable advice for teachers of writing, especially those wishing to establish a creative community in their classrooms.

One of Cole's first points is that feedback is necessary (2006: 3). This point seems almost too obvious to state. However, many adolescent writers go through their entire high school career without receiving anything more than scores, percentages or letter grades on their work. I am guilty of leaving students in this position myself. Marks are not feedback. They are summative evaluations. Feedback provides opportunity for improvement; marks simply reward or punish a final product.

Feedback is necessary because, although writing should be a form of self-expression, it is more than self-reflection. Our students write with the hope that others will read what they have written and like it. If they receive no feedback until their piece is complete, the response is sure to be either negative or a hollow positive. Even worse, they

will approach the final presentation of their work with fear because it is the first time it has been exposed to another human being.

If our students are exposed to healthy feedback throughout the writing process, the response of their final audience will not be a surprise. In fact, if they take full advantage of every opportunity for feedback, they are guaranteed a positive response from their audience. Their feedback providers are, in a sense, representatives of their audience. They give approval in advance.

Feedback can also help students overcome writer's block or other frustrations they encounter along the way (Cole 2006: 30). It is so important that Cole recommends setting up "feedback hotlines" with friends who are willing to talk through tough spots with a writer (2006: 39). She emphasizes these contacts are not to be used as an excuse to socialize. This is difficult to enforce in an adolescent classroom. It is probably best to begin with constructive interactions in class that are carefully monitored by the teacher. Next, the teacher can set up phone networks that connect students who do not usually interact socially. Careful instruction and a spirit of cooperation are necessary for peer feedback to succeed outside of a group setting.

### ***18.1 Receiving Feedback***

Cole also emphasizes the role of emotion in feedback (2006: 11). Both the writer and the provider must be aware emotion plays a significant part, both in how the feedback is given and in how it is received. They must analyze their own emotions and the emotions of the other. If the writer is feeling particularly fragile when he receives the feedback, he should recognize the negative aspects are more likely to affect him

personally. If the provider is having a bad day, she should use extra caution to ensure her frustration doesn't poison her comments.

As well, the writer should recognize the provider is human too. Her opinion is subjective. Therefore, the writer should feel free to discard feedback he feels is more reflective of the provider's mood than it is of her professional judgment. For this reason, it is also advisable to elicit feedback from more than one source to establish consensus on the real issues.

As teachers, no matter how fair and objective our feedback is, there is one variable we cannot control. We have no power over how our students will receive and interpret our feedback, due both to their emotional state at the time and to past experiences. As a result, some of our students may be traumatized by our most encouraging comments. To prevent the deep psychological impact feedback can have on our students, we need to train them to receive it properly. As the old adage states, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. A couple of examples come to mind.

The first is that of Houdini. Known for his great escapes and daring escapades, Houdini was more Boy Scout than magician. He always prepared for his feats months in advance physically, mentally, and technologically. Ironically, he died from an unexpected sucker punch to the abdomen. He often called men to the stage who were much larger and stronger than he was and invited them to punch him as hard as possible in the gut. These assaults would have no visible effect on him as he bowed to the audience and continued with the show. However, after Houdini became well known for these feats, a young man approached him before one of his shows and punched him in the abdomen

without warning. Houdini had no time to prepare himself for the blow by tightening his muscles and died from internal injuries a short time later.

I will draw a parallel example from the field of counseling. While counselors do a lot of listening, they also give advice from time to time. A healthy counselor-client relationship encourages clients not to receive advice passively. Instead, they need to recognize counselors are also human and that they must evaluate advice for themselves and make an independent decision on whether or not to follow it. They should be encouraged to reject anything that seems off base or inaccurate. Giving clients the responsibility to discern if the advice is right for them prevents the development of dependency and teaches them to weigh any advice they may receive in the future.

In the same way, we must prepare our students to receive our feedback properly. From time to time, we will pass on toxic comments unintentionally or otherwise. However, these will not devastate our students if they handle our comments safely. They must be taught feedback has no authority in their lives unless they give it authority. If it does not make sense to them, they are free to reject it or to seek second opinions. We must teach them to prepare mentally to receive feedback so it does not damage the very core of who they are as a person. Similar to the way in which a martial arts teacher first instructs his pupils in how to fall, we must teach our students how to receive feedback safely.

As well, teachers should recognize feedback can have a long-term impact on students. A student may lack motivation because of something said by a teacher, parent, or peer many years ago. Many students feel they are not good writers because they cannot spell or they struggle with the cursive script. They must be taught that these weaknesses

are not limitations when it comes to writing ability (Cole 2006: 52). Anyone can become a writer if they have enough motivation. Proper instruction on feedback can help students deal with past wounds. They can be taught to turn the hurt into motivation in some cases (Cole 2006: 60).

The objective of feedback is to improve writing and writing skills. Eventually, an honest assessment of student work must be presented. While students need to be trained to reject biased or exceptionally harsh feedback, they must also learn to accept feedback that is a true reflection of their work, even if it is negative (Cole 2006: 88). At some point, they need to recognize their work needs improvement or they will have no motivation to improve it. Feedback of this nature should be given gently and the student should learn to receive it as an assessment of their work, not themselves as individuals.

Cole also emphasizes writers do not give up creative control of their stories when they submit them for feedback (2006: 21). The story still belongs to the writer. A sense of ownership is very important to establish in students. Because they are writing an assignment *for* their teacher, their instinct is to give the teacher absolute control over their work. They must be encouraged to defend their sense of ownership against their desire for good grades and approval. Healthy evaluation practices and proper use of praise can help with this as well.

## **18.2 Giving Feedback**

Teachers must also guard against supplanting their student's vision with their own (Cole 2006: 45). Because of the position of power teachers hold over their students, it is very easy for them to suggest changes in a way that leaves the student feeling like they have no choice. This often occurs when the teacher is so inspired by the student's idea

that they run off with it in a different direction than the student intended. Once again, teachers must be aware of the power they wield and students must retain the right to refuse to be led astray from the goal they see in their own minds.

In the same way, feedback providers are responsible for their feedback. Students should not be afraid to hold their teachers accountable for their comments. If teachers cannot give good explanations for their comments, they should retract them with apologies. Students deserve a straight answer.

I know there is always one student who questions every assessment and evaluation until she is blue in the face and you are red in the face. That is insecurity on her part, not accountability on your part. She is not listening to your explanations. She just wants affirmation. You need to go back to the lesson on receiving feedback properly.

However, for every student that pesters you about your feedback, there are twenty more who allow misunderstandings to fester beneath the surface. A quick conversation with you could have cleared the air but they hide their hurt feelings and allow the misunderstanding to kill their motivation. These students should be encouraged to voice their reactions. One-on-one feedback conferences are a good way to make time for this process.

The timing of feedback is also extremely important. Cole suggests writers have two parts to their personalities: creator and editor. When writers are in their creative mode, they need encouragement and direction, not criticism. When they switch to editor mode, they are ready for more criticism (2006: 65-66). If teachers critique spelling and grammar while a student is writing their first draft, it will force them prematurely into editor mode and they will lose their creative motivation.

Many adolescent students have been conditioned by their elementary teachers to correct spelling, grammar, and structural details as they write. As a result, they are more concerned that their writing is correct than that it is good. As teachers, we must stop interfering with the creative process and teach students to lock out the editor when the creator is working. Once the creator is finished, it is time to clean up the workshop.

Teachers must also remember students can only absorb a small amount of feedback at a time. If the piece is in the beginning stages, the feedback should only focus on one or two issues that need development. If it is nearing completion, the teacher can address a few smaller details at once (Cole 2006: 66). The personality and capacity of each student is also a factor. “As a feedback provider, one of your most important jobs is to size the portion of your constructive criticism according to each writer’s ability to digest it. Some writers can choke on a crumb; others are able to handle more feedback at one sitting” (Cole 2006: 68).

Once again, students must be taught to base their feedback on evidence. This does not come naturally. Gradually, the teacher can hand over the responsibility of holding feedback providers accountable for their comments to the student writers themselves. This will prepare them to stand up for themselves when there is no advocate present.

In a group feedback setting, the teacher should encourage responsible feedback by questioning providers carefully as to the basis of their criticism. If a student makes an especially harsh comment, they should be required to provide sufficient evidence from the text to support their statement. In the same way, if another student is overflowing with praise, they should also be asked to justify their positive comments with examples. Cole talks about being specific with feedback (2006: 82). The positive is more believable

if it is specific and the negative is easier to accept if it is directed at the work, not the writer. Generalized praise seems insincere just as generalized criticism includes the writer as well.

Teachers also need to eliminate their own biases from their feedback (Cole 2006: 98). They should teach their students to do likewise. This begins with becoming aware of one's biases. The teacher can lead the class through activities that reveal bias and students can practice identifying bias in their responses.

However, in a classroom setting, teachers must ensure the content and the responses to it are appropriate. This must be distinguished from bias. Students need to be aware the classroom is a place for creativity within the bounds of society's expectations. The teacher is a representative of society at large and is expected to keep classroom discussions within those bounds. In doing so, they are not limiting the creativity of students. Students are free to write whatever their parents will permit outside of the classroom. However, it is not appropriate to present certain pieces in a classroom setting.

A short response time is also important when it comes to teacher feedback on assignments. If students put a lot of effort into an assignment, they are usually very eager for feedback. This can result in constant pestering. If there is a delay in returning the assignment, eagerness can turn into frustration and frustration into a lack of motivation. The teacher should ensure assignments are returned as soon as possible but teach students to move on to other work while they wait, without losing motivation (Cole 2006: 54).

### ***18.3 The Writer-Editor Relationship***

Cole's discussion on the writer-editor relationship is also relevant to the interaction between student and teacher (2006: 35-37). I have altered her points slightly to suit the

student-teacher relationship. They are a surprisingly close fit. It would be beneficial if students were taught to view the teacher as an editor more often.

First, teacher and student are both striving for the same goal. The teacher is not against the student's success. They are working together to ensure the best possible final publication.

Second, the teacher is there to guide the work, not fix it. It is the student's responsibility to make improvements. Students learn by doing. If the teacher makes all of the corrections, the student will make the same mistakes on their next piece.

Third, students should be encouraged to give feedback time to settle. Rather than responding immediately out of emotion, or habit in some cases, they should wait until they have processed the feedback fully. In the same way, students should understand if the teacher does not react immediately to a student's response. Quick comebacks can lead to arguments. Instead, both student and teacher should ensure they understand the other's position fully before they respond. Sincere questions that clarify the feedback should dominate this stage of the discussion.

Fourth, students need to develop a realistic understanding of their teacher's limitations. They must understand their teacher does not have the time to read over every word of every draft they turn in. In the same way, the teacher must recognize the student has a life outside of school in addition to numerous assignments from their other courses. They do not have time to complete complex revisions overnight.

Fifth, students must be willing to take advice from their teachers. They should, at least, experiment with the suggestions. On the other hand, teachers should not force students to change their material against their will, especially if it is an aspect of the story

that is extremely important to them. Also, they should not punish them during the evaluation stage for refusing to follow specific suggestions if they have made an effort to revise their work in other ways.

Sixth, both teacher and student should come to the table with ideas rather than objections. Instead of rejecting the teacher's suggestions outright, the student should offer related alternatives. In the same way, the teacher should suggest new directions the piece could take along with the critique.

Seventh, the student should respect any word or page limits the teacher lays out. The limits are in place to ensure the teacher is able to spend an equal amount of time on all of the submissions. Pieces that exceed the criteria may not receive the same level of attention due to their excessive length. At the same time, teachers should be understanding of students who occasionally request additional space if they have demonstrated quality within the limits they were given initially.

Eighth, students and teachers should treat one another with respect. They should arrive on time for classes and advising sessions. Students should respect the training and experience of their teachers while teachers should treat their students as equals who have their own thoughts and ideas.

Ninth, students should prepare their questions and responses in advance so they can present them quickly and clearly to their teachers. They should not pester their teachers constantly for feedback on minor details. Instead, they should try to work through issues on their own first, bringing only the most persistent difficulties to their teachers for assistance.

Tenth, students should be prepared to argue their point clearly if there is a disagreement. They should not submit outwardly to the teacher's authority if they believe they have a valid objection. If they give in without making their case clear, they give up the opportunity for a more in-depth discussion on the topic.

These ten points can be adapted to other situations as well. They are equally important in a group setting or in a peer-editing situation. Once again, these principles must be taught to students. They are not natural responses to criticism.

#### ***18.4 Guidelines for a Good Group Discussion***

It is very important teachers become skilled at leading productive group feedback sessions. Group sessions help to enhance a sense of community in the classroom and provide opportunity for other students to respond to the work their peers are doing. However, group discussions need a strong leader to ensure everyone is heard and to bring the discussion back online (Cole 2006: 124). The teacher should model this role but hand it over to students as the year progresses. Cole provides a number of tips on leading feedback sessions from her ten years of experience as a writer's workshop leader (2006: 118-121).

As the leader, Cole approaches each piece and each writer with care. She takes every submission seriously and meets the story at whatever stage of development it happens to be in at the time. She is ready to show enthusiasm for the piece and always starts with praise, reading favorite sections aloud to the group. Throughout her critique, she refers to the piece directly rather than her opinions about it. This prevents writers from feeling she is criticizing them directly and enhances objectivity. She always shows

appreciation for the writers' efforts and their willingness to share their work with the group. This sets the tone for comments from other group members.

During the critique, Cole talks about what she noticed in the piece. This helps her to emphasize what is there as opposed to what is missing. She ensures her overall assessment of the piece falls somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes of good and bad, not at either extreme. In questioning the writer about the piece, she attempts to elicit more than yes and no responses. Finally, she always gives suggestions in "what if" form to ensure they are interpreted as possibilities rather than orders. Adolescents love the "what if" game and the group would quickly adapt to this format.

For variation, Cole suggests several optional formats. First, each writer can be invited to do a mini-reading of a short selection from the piece. Alternatively, all the submissions can be made orally without the distribution of written copies to group members. Timed critiques in which each group member is permitted to give a brief response to a piece prior to a period of open discussion are very successful. Critiques can also be guided by topical questions that focus participants on certain aspects or qualities. Certain formats may work better with one group than with another. The teacher can experiment to determine which format is most suited to the situation. The more open formats should be modeled carefully and implemented when trust has developed between the students.

## **19 Damage Control: When Grading Writers is Mandatory**

Despite Kohn's vehement stance against grading, he recognizes most educational institutions will continue to inflict grades on their students for the foreseeable future. Consequently, he urges concerned parents and educators to take action on two fronts.

First, parents and educators must continue in their struggle to change the present system. However, they must minimize the harm the system is doing in the meantime. Kohn asks parents to ignore grades and scores entirely and focus in on the interest their children show in each subject. He then presents three areas in which teachers can lessen the negative impact of mandatory formal assessments on student motivation (Kohn 1993: 208-209). His recommendations are especially relevant in the writing classroom.

### ***19.1 What to Grade: Reducing Range***

Even though educators in many institutions are forced to grade their students, most still have some autonomy over what they grade. Even the public school guidelines in British Columbia state that grades are ultimately based on the teacher's professional judgment,<sup>55</sup> not on the sum total of grades issued for individual assignments. This gives teachers considerable freedom to implement Kohn's recommendations.

Kohn advises teachers not to issue grades for any of their assignments. In this way, the only letter grade students receive will be the one on their report card. This may or may not be possible depending on district policies or the perspective of school administration. If this approach is not permitted, Kohn urges teachers to limit the number of graded assignments as much as possible.

Kohn acknowledges students might be uncomfortable with the absence of grades initially. "Some students will experience, especially at first, a sense of existential vertigo: a steady supply of grades has defined them, and now their bearings are gone" (Kohn 1993: 208). He suggests weaning them off the grading system by offering "to discuss

---

<sup>55</sup> The Integrated Resource Package for high school English instruction in British Columbia clearly states that grades "are dependent on the professional judgment and experience of teachers, guided by provincial policy" ([http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/ela\\_8\\_12\\_2007.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/ela_8_12_2007.pdf)).

privately with any such student the grade he or she would probably receive if report cards were handed out that day” (Kohn 1993: 208). This is a wise recommendation as it will ease the suspense while providing an opportunity for discussion.

From my experience, I would suspect few students would even take the time to meet with teachers privately. I have seen entire classes mobbing the bulletin board when new grades are posted. However, this is during class time. If students are offered an opportunity to come in on their own time, they usually have better things to do. Ample feedback from teachers and peers will also help to lessen the demand for grades.

I would guess most of the initial resistance would come from parents, especially those of high achievers. Parents of students who typically get low grades on their reports seldom show up for interviews. Parents of high achievers, however, may demand to see grade books, especially if their children do not get the letter grades they are accustomed to on their report cards. Their concerns may be alleviated if they know their child had input in the process of determining the final grade. In my experience, most parents that come to student interviews want to talk about their children, not grades. Samples of their child’s powerful and beautiful writing will also help to distract them from a preoccupation with a single letter.

Kohn also discourages the practice of grading for effort as a way to avoid grading the assignment itself. He argues this simply exasperates the problem. “The fatal paradox, though, is that while coercion can sometimes elicit resentful obedience, it can never create desire” (Kohn 1993: 209). Rewarding the appearance of motivation kills any real interest students may have had in writing and forces them to feign enthusiasm to obtain a favorable grade.

## ***19.2 When to Grade: Delaying Degradation***

If students must be graded, they should not be graded while they are in the process of learning. Kohn urges educators to wait until students are ready to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. Evaluation during the learning process creates undue stress because students know they are not prepared to prove their skills. If they receive a poor grade early on in the process, they may give up out of discouragement. On the other hand, if the grade is high, they may feel they know all there is to know about the topic and lose interest in the process of discovery. Both results have an equally negative effect on motivation.

We must also make the purpose of the assignment clear to the students. If the assignment is intended to develop skills, students should be encouraged to practice and experiment without worrying about the end result. On the other hand, if the assignment is intended for a summative evaluation or the presentation of a finished piece, students should be made aware of this expectation at the beginning. Knowing these expectations ahead of time allows students the freedom to practice their skills. If the expectation of production is always present, students will focus on the product rather than the development of their abilities.

Ideally, Kohn recommends issuing only one grade at the conclusion of the course. If multiple grades must be given, they should be issued at the very end of a unit, after students have had time to develop their knowledge and abilities. This is less than ideal because their grade on one unit might cause them to lose confidence in their ability to succeed in the next unit. However, it is certainly preferable to interrupting the process of discovery.

### **19.3 How to Grade: Taking Out the Teeth**

If individual assignments must be graded, the way in which they are graded can also help to reduce the harmful effects of formal evaluations. First, Kohn recommends the limiting the number of graduations. Rather than marking each assignment with a percentage or an 'A' to 'F' scale, Kohn suggests a three point check system moving from a check-minus, to a check, and then to a check plus. This gives the student a clear indication of whether they are improving or not without assigning an actual value to their work.

For those who dare, Kohn has an even more controversial suggestion that neutralizes the harmful effect of grades even further while still providing the establishment with a mark. He advocates reducing the possible grades to an 'A' and an 'I' for incomplete. This is especially relevant to motivating quality in writing. Any piece that is not of a high enough quality to warrant an 'A' needs more work. The students learn they are expected to give their very best.

More importantly, this simple scale alters the educator's perspective. Suddenly, the teacher is no longer occupied by unpleasant task of deciding between a 'C' or a 'C-minus.' If the composition doesn't merit an 'A,' the teachers task is to teach not evaluate. Teachers are no longer left with the option of writing as student off as a 'B,' a 'C,' or a failure. Instead, they are forced to do what they should be doing in the first place. In some institutions, grading on a full scale is unavoidable. However, Kohn harshly criticizes the practice of grading on a curve. This practice condemns a certain percentage of students to failure in order to ensure an even distribution of marks. In this system, no matter how much a student improves in relation to their past performance or in relation to the criteria for the assignment, they will be graded based on the performance of their

peers. Therefore, if a lower student improves significantly but the other students also improve, their grades will remain the same as if they had not progressed at all. This creates competition amongst the students. Even worse, it relieves the teacher of the obligation to teach. No matter how successful or unsuccessful the lesson is, the class average will remain the same. Kohn suggests it is actually the teacher who is failing in this scenario.

In place of the curve, Kohn advocates collaborative grading. Students should be taught to assess their own writing and establish their own criteria for success. According to Kohn, collaborative grading “makes grading feel less punitive, gives students more control over their own education, and provides an important learning experience in itself” (Kohn 1993: 209). To determine a grade for themselves, students must understand the nature of good writing and clarify their own learning objectives. This process alone will result in progress. Furthermore, the letter grade they determine for themselves will represent specific accomplishments, not the abstract approval of an authority figure.

## **CONCLUSION: Motivating Masters**

In a very literal sense, the conclusion of this thesis is only the first step on a long journey. Kohn's perspective on education challenged many of my preconceptions about the way in which I should motivate my students to write. Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow provided an intriguing alternative to traditional methods of reward and punishment. Orwell gave credence to my belief that there is more to good writing than vocabulary, grammar, and structure. Cole, Wilbers, and the proponents of New Literacy Studies offered starting points and advice for the journey.

However, there are no teacher manuals or textbooks that can create an environment where power and beauty thrive. I cannot download a lesson plan that will automatically instill a passion for written expression in each of my students. The contextual nature of this new approach to writing demands a more personal pedagogy. Knowledge of grammar, structure and instructional strategies is not enough. I need to know my students well enough to meet them where they are rather than expecting them to conform to a set of preconditions.

Teaching writing from this new perspective involves a complete role reversal. I must study my students and learn all I can about them. They determine the direction the course will take and the content that will be presented. I must constantly evaluate the success of my own efforts in engaging their interest. They learn to evaluate their own work according to their own standards. Instead of rewarding consistency and punishing the slightest deviation from the norm, I must encourage risk and experimentation. Together we must create a place where spectacular failures are valued above conformity. Instead of measuring my students against a set of universal standards, I must guard them

against the harmful effects of objective evaluation. Rather than sharing the knowledge I have gained from my own experience, my objective is to help my students experience the agony and ecstasy of self-expression as they develop a deeper knowledge of self.

I am aware that this will not be an easy journey. It is much easier to control and conform than it is to mentor and release. My classroom may be loud and cluttered rather than silent and tidy. I may not be in a position to post error-free essays on the bulletin boards for parent night or impress the administration with high scores on the provincials. However, if my students leave my care with a passion for writing and a deep appreciation for beauty and power, I will count it all worth while.

## References

- Ames, Patricia. 2005. Multigrade Schooling and Literacy Linking Literacy Learning in Home, Community, and Primary School in the Peruvian Amazon. In Street, Brian V. ed. 2005. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 64-83.
- BC Literacy Directory* [online]. Literacy BC. [British Columbia, Canada]. [cited 7 April 2009].
- Bennett, Jo Anne and John W. Berry. 1991. Cree literacy in the syllabic script. In D. Olson and N. Torrance. eds. *Literacy and Orality*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 90-104.
- Burke, Penny Jane and Monika Hermerschmidt. 2005. Deconstructing Academic Practices Through Self-reflexive Pedagogies. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 346-365.
- Chance, Paul. [online] 1993. Sticking up for rewards. Response to an article by Alfie Kohn. In Phi Delta Kappan. HighBeam Research. [cited 28 August 2009]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-13925728.html>>
- Chittenden, Maurice. 1997. *Sunday Times* (London, England), December 21, 1997. In Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. [online] 2006. Answers.com. Biographies, Answers Corporation. [cited 1 September 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.answers.com/topic/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi>, accessed September 02, 2009.
- Christian, Scott. 1997. *Exchanging Lives: Middle School Writers Online*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Cole, Joni B. 2006. *Toxic feedback: Helping writers survive and thrive*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.
- Cowan, Peter. 2005. Putting it Out There: Revealing Latino Visual Discourse in the Hispanic Academic Summer Program for Middle School Students. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 145-169.
- Cox, Sue and Anna Robinson-Pant. 2005. Communicative Practices and Participation in School Councils in Primary Schools in the United Kingdom. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 43-63.

- . 1975. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- . 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- . 1997. *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. 1981. *The Meaning of Things: Domestic symbols and the self*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Rick E. Robinson. 1990. *The art of seeing: An interpretation of the aesthetic encounter*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and The Getty Educational Institute for the Arts.
- Cucchiara, Maryann. 2005. Project Freire Saturday Literacy Academies: Recreating Freire for High School Students in Brooklyn. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 213-232.
- Davis, Kathryn A., Sarah Bazzi, and Hye-sun Cho. 2005. Where I'm from: Transforming Education for Language Minorities in a Public High School in Hawai'i. In Street, Brian V. ed. 2005. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 188-212.
- DeBruin-Parecki, Andrea and Barbara Krol-Sinclair. 2003. eds. *Family Literacy: From Theory to Practice*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- de Charms, R. 1968. *Personal causation: The internal affective determinants of behaviour*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ehrenworth, Mary. 2003. *Looking to write: Students writing through the visual arts*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freedom Writers, The with Erin Gruwell. 1999. *The freedom writers diary: How a teacher and 150 teens used writing to change themselves and the world around them*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Harter, S. and J. P. Connell. 1984. A comparison of children's achievement and related self-perceptions of competence, control, and motivational orientation. In J. G. Nicholls. ed. *Advances in Motivation and Achievement: The development of achievement and motivation*. Vol. 3. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press. 219-250.

- Heffernan, Lee. 2004. *Critical literacy and writer's workshop: Bringing purpose and passion to student writing*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Kohn, Alfie. 1993. *Punished by Rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's praise and other bribes*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- . 1999. Afterward. In Alfie Kohn. 1993. *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's praise and other bribes*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- . 1999b. *The schools our children deserve: Moving beyond traditional classrooms and "tougher standards"*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . 2004. What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated? In *What Does It Mean to Be Well Educated? and more essays on standards, grading, and other follies*. Boston: Beacon Press. Originally published in *Principal Leadership*, March 2003, pp.24-28.
- Larson, Joanne. 2005. Breaching the Classroom Walls: Literacy Learning across Time and Space in an Elementary School in the United States. In Street, Brian V. ed. 2005. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 84-101.
- Leung, Constant and Kimberly Safford. 2005. Nontraditional Students in Higher Education: English as an Additional Language and Literacies. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 303-324.
- Literacy* [online]. Province of British Columbia [Canada]. [cited 7 April 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/>>
- Low, Bronwen E. 2005. Sayin' it in a Different Way: Adolescent Literacies Through the Lens of Cultural Studies. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 105-123.
- Massimini, F. & M. Carli. 1988. The systematic assessment of flow in daily experience. In *Optimal experience: Psychological studies of flow in consciousness*, edited by M. Csikszentmihalyi and I. S. Csikszentmihalyi. New York: Cambridge University Press. 266-87.
- Marr, Arthur J. [online] 2009. Is flow science? Dr. Mezmer's World of Bad Psychology. [cited 1 September 2009]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://flowstate.homestead.com/csikscience.html>>

- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. [online] 2006. Answers.com. Biographies, Answers Corporation. [cited 1 September 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.answers.com/topic/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi>, accessed September 02, 2009.
- Newman, S. B. 1999. Books make a difference: A study of access to literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 34-3. 286-311.
- Oldham, Joanna. 2005. Literacy and Media in Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 170-187.
- Olson, David R. 1991. *From utterance to text: The bias of language in speech and writing*. In Lingualinks Library 4.0 [computer program on disk]. Literacy Bookshelf. [Dallas, Texas]: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 28 June 1999. [cited 25 August 2008].
- Olson, D. and N. Torrance. 1991. eds. *Literacy and Orality*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Orwell, George. 1946. Politics and the English Language. *A Collection of Essays*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company. 349-360.
- Pintrich, Paul R. and Dale H. Schunk. 2002. *Motivation in Education: Theory Research, and Applications*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Rochester, J. Martin. [online] 1998. What's it all about, Alfie? A parent/educator's response to Alfie Kohn. In Phi Delta Kappan. Oct. 1998. FindArticles.com. 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning. [cited 31 August 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_6952/is\\_n2\\_v80/ai\\_n28723316/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_6952/is_n2_v80/ai_n28723316/)>
- Rogers, Alan with Md. Aftab Uddin. 2005. Adults Learning Literacy: Adult Learning Theory and the Provision of Literacy Classes in the Context of Developing Societies In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 235-260.
- Rose, Robert V. [online]. 1998. Alfie Kohn: 95% right, but wrong! In Phi Delta Kappan. Oct. 1998. FindArticles.com. 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning. [cited 31 August 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_6952/is\\_n2\\_v80/ai\\_n28723316/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_6952/is_n2_v80/ai_n28723316/)>
- Simon, Rob. 2005. Bridging Life and Learning through Inquiry and Improvisation Literacy Practices at a Model High School. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 124-144.

- Stein, Pippa and Tshidi Mamabolo. 2005. Pedagogy is Not Enough: Early Literacy Practices in a South African School. In Street, Brian V. ed. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing. 25-42.
- Street, Brian V. ed. 2005. *Literacies across educational contexts: mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing.
- UNESCO. 2004 [online]. *The plurality of literacy and its implications for policies and programs*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Education Sector. [cited 7 August 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf>>
- . 2009 [online]. *A renewed vision of literacy*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. [cited 7 August 2009] Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/mission/>>
- Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scrihner, and Ellen Souberman. eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wilbers, Stephen. 2000. *Keys to great writing*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books.
- Williams, Joseph M. 2000. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 6th ed. New York: Longman Publishers.