

WHAT WE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS MUST KNOW BUT DON'T LIKE TO HEAR!

A Review/Essay

KURT M. JORDAN

Arthur N. Applebee, Fran Lehr, and Anne Auten. *Writing in the Secondary Schools: English and the Content Areas* (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1981), 130 pages, \$7.00.

Arthur Applebee's report perhaps should better be termed an "exposé." If anyone in the ranks of writing instructors still isn't convinced that ineffectual writing instruction is entrenched throughout the profession, this monograph should convince him that improvement throughout the curriculum is mandatory if students are to show progress in their writing competencies.

By examining all forms of writing in selected secondary schools, Applebee and his staff developed support for the assumption that each of six major subject areas offers varying opportunities for developing writing skills. Whether or not the teachers within the subject areas do work with those skills does not receive much attention. However, the author does take careful — but gentle — aim at the apparent gap between what English teachers can and should be doing to improve the quality of writing — and what sadly becomes "settled for" in too many cases.

Kurt Jordan is Chairperson of the English Department at Fort Wayne Concordia High School and an Associate Faculty member in the Department of English and Linguistics, Indiana University — Purdue University at Fort Wayne.

Aided by a grant from the National Institute of Education, Applebee was not content with previously developed definitions of the semantic structures of rhetoric, especially those by Hasan (1976) and Halliday (1977).¹ Instead he sees identification and understanding of the reading audience as very important; his audience compels a writer first to look beyond the immediate development of simple discourse to larger stretches of communication, and then to satisfy the demands which it places upon him, to recognize restrictions it places on the choices he will make as he writes. Applebee contends that these restrictions extend to mode and method of organization and involve the requirements of cohesion, structure, and sequence, as well as to the choice of material to be dealt with, either explicitly or by implication.

The study followed two strands. The first was the classroom observation of a year's writing-related assignments in two city high schools — a comprehensive community high school and a university-associated laboratory school. Here the research team sought to secure data about the place of writing within the secondary school curriculum, to learn about the attitudes and practices of teachers in six major subject areas, and to secure students' reactions to their writing activities.

The second strand related this data to more general practice, as it was understood on the basis of a national questionnaire begun as a pilot survey in October 1979 and continued through April 1980, with sixty-eight teachers in grades 9 and 11 serving as respondents. Eventually 754 teachers took part in the national study. The six major subject areas evaluated were English, foreign language, mathematics, social science, natural science, and business education.

To whom is writing directed? To answer the question, the study began first by looking at both the "actual" audience — and the "purported" audience of the writers. Finding that virtually all the writing tended to be aimed toward the classroom instructor, Applebee concluded that, perhaps unknowingly, teachers and students tend to develop some sort of rhetorical double standard as far as audience is concerned. The majority of assignments in school are directed to an "atypical" audience and do not represent actual kinds of writing required of a young person by out-of-school activities.

Sensing that this dichotomy is basic to the difficulties

encountered by many students in developing clear communication, Applebee rightly argues that language is advanced most naturally and effectively through realistic intentions to communicate: "When we create writing situations with atypical audiences, we destroy the normal intention to communicate and thus undermine in fundamental ways the whole learning process" (p. 5).

The research team next analyzed the instructional context within which the students were asked to write. They considered writing frequency, steps required in the writing process (research, review, prewriting, first drafts, revisions, editing, peer criticism, teachers' reactions, and so on), and teachers' marking characteristics. Still unresolved, evidently, is the question of how much importance to place upon the frequency of writing as a determiner of writing improvement.

Concluding the report, perhaps by way of oversimplification, Applebee places the results of the survey-study in the general context of improving writing in the secondary schools. He calls for all subject area teachers to assume more responsibility for shaping the writing skills and attitudes toward clear communication of secondary school students — and for all teachers to shift the emphasis in writing — *away from* writing to display information — and *towards* writing to fulfill other communication functions. This last appeal will likely serve as the focus for the next research report to appear from NCTE.

Applebee, a noted research scientist from Stanford University, no doubt has helped to fuel the fire for writing reform. Recent conferences aimed at "teaching the talented" and seminars focusing on "writing across the curriculum" attest to such responses. This NIE and NCTE sponsored study also updates our knowledge of current practices in writing, since the last major study of English curricula was published in the late 1960's (Squire and Applebee, 1968).²

While for the most part the 1980 study remains descriptive rather than interpretive of current practices, we in the writing profession cannot find in it much comfort, much assurance that the teaching of writing is alive and well. On top of what we already realize about students' writing skills from SAT writing results and from the National Assessment of Writing reports, now comes another troubling document supporting national concern about the state of the art of writing — and the way it is or is not being taught. And

emphasis here is plainly not on what is wrong with the students, but rather on what is wrong with schools and teachers.

Among the features of secondary-school composition instruction which Applebee found "common" appear these:

1. Standard programs in schools across the US tend to expect little in-depth writing from students in grades 9 and 11.
2. The most common writing assignments are brief, frequent filling-in-the-blank exercises, note taking, or copying directions or other material from books or chalkboards.
3. On the rare occasions when something "longer" is expected, students are told to keep it brief (a page or less), and are commonly expected to complete the writing within the class period.
4. The bulk of student writing is informative, with little time given to expository variety or persuasive modes of discourse.
5. The teacher inevitably serves as the reading audience.
6. Topic restriction often is more appropriate for book-length treatises than for the short papers expected.
7. Teacher responses are directed most often at matters of grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and format.
8. Teachers provide little help with the writing task once it has been assigned.
9. Students seldom read each other's writing.
10. If they are requested, revisions are usually limited to brief corrections and additions.
11. Little oral communication seems to occur with students about the writing activity before, during, or after the exercise.

In short, teachers continue to be overwhelmingly concerned with product rather than process.

As a teacher of writing on the secondary and the college level, I read with dismay Applebee's report and the examples of student writing which he includes. His findings perhaps touch too closely, for some of the practices he describes creep into the petty pace of my own day-to-day teaching — as I imagine they do into the teaching of many of my colleagues. Applebee and his staff must be applauded for revealing to us what we need to know, the more so because we don't like to hear it.

Yet, I do have several reservations about the study. I was disappointed to learn that only two schools were selected for

visitation and observation. Knowing the variation that can occur within a high school curriculum during the span of four years, I question whether an accurate and comprehensive view of writing experiences can be gained from such a limited base of examination. I like to think that a significant number of schools and teachers have tried to remediate teaching practices as a result of the criticism which erupted in the '70s. And after reading many of the responses to the questionnaire used, I found myself recalling the countless questionnaires I have hurriedly answered, if only to clear my desk before another set of compositions arrived. Are teacher-submitted responses to impersonal surveys the best way to ascertain the scope and content of writing across the curriculum? Instead, I would like to have found more extensive teacher-to-researcher involvement, in-school observations of a wider sector of the educational community, and reports from students and teachers from a wider geographic and cultural spectrum.

But where do we go now? If teachers and parents and students are ever to benefit from this kind of study, NCTE and its research and development programs will need to explore and recommend new educational avenues which can lead to the improvement of teaching of writing, not only in the English classroom but throughout the whole system, on all levels.

And administrators will need to provide the right kind of help in exploring those avenues to the teachers who carry immediate responsibility for molding the attitudes and skills of young people. I hope that Applebee's report will be the catalyst that gets this movement started. In the meantime, for those interested in starting on their own to incorporate writing instruction into the content areas, the report contains a bibliography that will be useful to teachers of all subject areas. As the author notes, the activities suggested should not only improve students' writing skills but also enhance their command of subject matter. Having these resource materials easily accessible to teachers in all schools could be a good first step in initiating writing improvement.

REFERENCES

¹Halliday, M.A.K., and Rugaiya Hasan. (1976) *Cohesion in English*. London: Longmans Group, Ltd.

²Squire, James R., and Roger K. Applebee. (1968). *High School English Instruction Today*. New York: Appleton-Century-Croft.

