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Michael Rice and Laurence Bam

A MODEL FOR TEACHING WRITING

The Writing Component - Professional Studies III at J.C.E.

Our readers, especially those who are active in the schools at present, might be interested to see the kind of course Professional Studies III students will be put through this year. If our readers have any comments or criticism we would like to encourage lively debate and correspondence in our columns. We hope thereby simultaneously to open up discussions at J.C.E. and keep the schools informed of what they can expect of students and newly qualified teachers who emerge from this College with a Bachelor of Primary Education degree.

The writing team decided from the outset that the course had to be practical in orientation, but that it should be underpinned by a specific theory of language functions appropriate to education. Consequently, it was decided that the best way to teach students to teach writing was to make them write; to put them through the kinds of processes they might expect pupils to go through when they encounter them in the classroom. So much for the practice. The theoretical underpinning was provided by James Britton's theory of language functions (transactional, expressive and poetic) which is implicit in the TED's Study Guide No. 31. Thus it was decided that the two fundamental texts students would be expected to be acquainted with would be Britton's article "What's the use?" in Andrew Wilkinson's Language and Education and the Study Guide No. 31 which has begun to enjoy wide acceptance in Transvaal schools.

Before continuiing with a description of the course and some of the assumptions underlying it, it might be as well to touch briefly on Britton's model of language functions. Britton sees language as having three main functions. The first of these functions is what he calls the expressive function.

Expressive language is that language which is used most spontaneously, which is free to follow the shifting focus of attention... It is heuristic in function, what Britton describes as "first draft talk."[1]

Transactional language is concerned with the giving and receiving of information in a more formal way. "The form it takes, the way it is organised, is directed primarily by the desire to achieve that end efficiently" says Britton.[2] That is, it is language to get things done.

Poetic language is language used for pleasure or entertainment; language as we generally conceive it in creative writing. It is the language of literature.

This description does not do justice to Britton's theory and readers are encouraged to read this essay themselves. However he does go on to say that such a model:

> may offer one approach to the consideration of 'language across the curriculum' an undertaking that must call into question some very general matters concerning teachers' objectives, as well as some very particular ones regarding the diverse linguistic demands made on children as they move from one lesson to another in the day's programme.[3]

It was with these thoughts in mind that his model of language functions was chosen as a starting point from which to introduce students into the complexities of teaching writing.

Throughout the course students will be encouraged to view writing in the primary school as an ongoing communicative event rather than as a product-producing activity. The "ongoing communicative event" begins when the child produces his first message in written form and ends with the mature writing penning (recording) his last word. The process is in the widest sense developmental. Written texts will be seen as steps towards more written texts; they will be composed, edited, reformulated, proofread, - presented and evaluated in the light of what has preceded and what will follow them. To these briefly stated ends students will be asked to undergo a similar process. They will be introduced to Study Guide No. 31 - "The Writing of English" and will be expected to explore and mull over a subject,

begin the first draft, make decisions concerning format, diction, syntax and the rhetoric of the meaning taking shape, reformulate, edit, proofread, present the text, evaluate it, and finally use it as a starting point for the next text. Students will be expected to take this experience into the classroom and use it in their teaching of writing to pupils.

Each student group will be seen by each member of the "Writing Team" for about five lectures. Each member of the team will concentrate on different "stimulus areas", all using the process outlined above. The first five lectures will provide students with a rationale for the shape of the course, and will emphasize the central role of expressive speech and writing in language development. This will be followed by offering the students the opportunity to discover the scope of writing across the curriculum. The experience gained from the J.C.E.'s ongoing Language and Learning Across the Curriculum programme will provide the basis for this part of the course. The concept of writing across the curriculum will then be developed focusing on what Britton has called the "transactional function". This will involve students practice in as many of the sub-categories Britton lists as is possible in five lectures. The course of lectures will be concluded by concentrating student writing on the "poetic function" in present classroom practice.

Throughout the course stress will be laid on a particular interpretation of the model proposed by Britton. The functions will not be viewed as discrete items and students will be encouraged to view both pupil development and writing functions as clinal in character, ie never static, always developing, it sometimes gets better, it sometimes gets worse, but it is always changing.

REFERENCES

[1] James Britton, "What's the Use?" in Andrew Wilkinson Language and Education (1975) p. 176

[2] ibid. p. 180

[3] ibid. p. 184