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[Review of the article ‘Why students can’t write arguments’ by A. Freedman and I. Pringle]

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FREEDMAN, A. and Pringle,I. 1984. 'Why students can't write arguments.' English in Education, Vol 18, no 2, pp 73-84.

When talking about students'/pupils' essay writing ability teachers frequently complain despairingly,

> They just don't seem to be able to organize their ideas. Their essays have no form or structure!

In an attempt to understand this failing more fully, Freedman and Pringle examined two pieces of writing, one a narrative and the other an argument, submitted by 112 secondary school pupils from an upper middle-class school in Ottawa. Each piece of writing was analysed to see the extent to which it conformed to criteria for the relevant genre. A successful story had to include some setting information and at least one complete episode. Two features were seen as essential to argumentation. Firstly, the whole piece of discourse must be unified by either an implicit of (more commonly) an explicitllly stated single restricted thesis, with the whole so unified that each point and illustration either directly substantiates the thesis or is a link in the chain of reasoning which supports that thesis. Secondly, the individual points and illustrations must be integrated within a hierarchic structure so that each proposition is logically linked not only to the preceeding and suceeding propositions but

also to the central thesis and to every proposition within the whole text.

Analysis of the two sets of essays revealed major differences in ability. Over 98% of the narratives were found to incorporate the classical schema for story telling, many in a sophisticated way. With regard to the arguments, however, only 30,4% contained an explicit or implicit thesis (criterion one) and only 12,5% were judged to have an adequate logical superstructure (criterion two).

The main conclusion to be drawn from this work is not that students 'just can't organize' and 'have no sense of form or structure' in general, but that their difficulty is specifically related to the organization of argument.

There seem to be two main sets of factors contributing to making written argument a more difficult skill to acquire than written narrative. These are, firstly, that the oral skills of narration transfer more easily and directly to those required in writing narrative than do oral skills of argument transfer to writing, and secondly, that conceptualization for argument structure is developed at a later stage.

Students are exposed to material embodying narrative structure from an early age - in literature, film and drama and as part of their normal daily conversation. Not only do they hear stories which embody that structure, but they see how that kind of

structure is imposed on the formless material of life itself.

This is not the case with argumentation. Children do not read argumentation early and, while they hear and participate in oral argument, this differs from written argument far more than does oral narration from written, making the transfer from oral to written argumentation a more difficult task.The differences in oral and written argument and concomitant skills are interesting.

The rules of oral discourse allow each person only a specified length of time (or words) for each conversational turn. Consequently, when they begin to write, children tend to produce material that is equivalent to one conversational turn, even though they might know much more. This is because they are conforming to the rules for language production already learned - the rules for producing spoken discourse. One cognitive ability, then that must be acquired in learning to write is the capacity to continue to produce more text.(Note that the ability to generate extended discourse for written narratives is transferable from an abilty to generate aral narrative.

Further , in oral argument, more than one person is involved in generating material. Each new idea is produced in response to the immediately preceeding point. However, when the argumentative task is a written one, the writer must acquire new solitary abilities - those of scanning his own memory to retrieve

relevant material and then of organizing all points according to the appropriate structure.

It is this ability to discover and/or create a rigorously logical structure which will unify and order the individual points generated that is particularly difficult to acquire. This is because, fundamentally, what is required in order to structure argument appropriately is an ability to abstract and conceptualize. The steps in structuring a written argument parallel Vygotsky's cognitive steps in the process of concept formation, and it is therefore, in the authors' view, not surprising that primary and lower secondary school children find the complex task very difficult.

Analysis of the essay which did not meet the standards set for acceptable argumentation shows that they fall into two main groups according to the organizing patterns and consequent thinking strategies implied. Essays were either categorized as 'focal'- in which each point individually relates back to the central topic though the points themselves are not logically related to each other- or 'associational' - in which one statement is made regarding the topic, and each subsequent proposition relates to the one preceeding it, but is in no way tied to a central argument. i.e. the individual points are not interrelated within some hierarchic superstructure. Each of the organisational patterns corresponds with a pattern in Vygotsky's second (of three) stages in the

progress toward the stage of true concept formation.

Children's failure in argumentation may thus be attributable precisely to the fact that they have not yet acquired the ability to abstract and conceptualize.

Two main implications for teachers emerge. Firstly, they must ensure that their pupils have exposure to the argumentative genre in their reading. Secondly, remembering that they ought not expect success before cognitive maturity has been achieved, they should offer ample opportunity for argument writing , providing opportunity is understood as that and not as assignment. For,if they are encouraged to state their views on subjects they feel strongly about, their 'intention' to write may well allow them to achieve cognitively what was presumed beyond them.

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