

Writing Across the Curriculum: The British Approach

Richard W. Bailey

Educational programs in Great Britain differ in significant ways from those in the United States. British schools are not yet organized on the basis of educational democracy, and differing curricula still shape programs for "early school-leavers" and potential university students. Centralized decision-making coupled with uniform national examinations limits the scope for educational innovation by teachers and local schools, and only recently have efforts been made to recognize the special traditions and cultures of minority groups. (See the works by Edwards and the Scottish Central Committee on English listed in this issue of *forum* on p. 70). When reform does take place, however, it involves virtually all teachers in working together on a national agenda. Thus, despite important differences between American and British schools, teachers in America will find much from Britain to interest them--particularly now that a major effort is underway there to improve the teaching of writing at all educational levels.

In response to indications that reading skills were declining among British school children, Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, established a Committee of Inquiry in 1972 to explore possible reforms in the teaching of English. The Committee conceived its mandate broadly and set out to investigate the entire range of "language in education." Following extensive surveys of existing practices, the "Bullock Report"--named for the Chair of the Committee, Sir Alan Bullock--was submitted to the government at the end of 1974 and published in 1975 under the title A Language for Life. The report contains more than three hundred recommendations, each carefully argued,

for action organized around varying constituencies in education--young children, secondary students, adult illiterates, and teachers themselves. The recommendations have attracted wide attention from the general public and especially from teachers--the group most responsible, as the report says, for the "quality of learning."

Among the many provocative recommendations in the "Bullock Report," two are central to the interests of American high school teachers:

138 *In the secondary school, all subject teachers need to be aware of:*

(i) *the linguistic processes by which their pupils acquire information and understanding, and the implications for the teacher's own use of language:*

(ii) *the reading demands of their own subjects, and ways in which the pupils can be helped to meet them.*

139 *To bring about this understanding every secondary school should develop a policy for language across the curriculum. The responsibility for this policy should be embodied in the organisational structure of the school (Bullock, p. 529).*

Since these recommendations were promulgated, the British educational community
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which students must respond personally to an historical concept, character, or situation. He may ask, "If you were a citizen in 1800 and this were election day, who would receive your Presidential vote?" His students also read Civil Disobediance and write an essay on the dilemma of following conscience or authority.

Steve VerSluis and Dave Reeves, another social studies teacher, require student journals as an important part of the work in their courses. The students transform daily notes, by filtering the notes through their own perceptions, into thoughtful, well-written, and well-organized essays. On Dave Reeves' desk one can find books on grammar and style in addition to historical reference books.

The ultimate proof of the serious approach these teachers take to composition is that like English teachers, they lug briefcases full of student writing out of school each night. Steve VerSluis sums it up when he says; "Writing is learning. In writing an idea, a person begins to understand it more fully." Dave Reeves follows through with his idea by offering two versions of his tests. On the multiple choice and short answer test the maximum grade is a B; if a student chooses the essay test, he may earn an A.

Though our plan to involve more teachers from other departments in our effort to spread **Writing Across the Curriculum** has developed slowly, students now realize that good writing skills mean better grades in all classes. They are aware of the attitude toward composition standards that is growing within the staff. Instructors often use composition not only to evaluate students' knowledge, but also to stimulate students' involvement and critical thinking about the subject matter. Indeed, at faculty meetings these days, when they hear a howl of protest about fragments, members of our department no longer look for cover; instead, we just figure we'll soon add another to our family of new writing teachers.

Max Slisher teaches English at **Jenison High School**, Jenison, Michigan.

Stock(cont. from p. 70)
Winston, 1975.

Establishes the personal nature of reading and connects to Britton's theory of expressive discourse. Also provides good summary of learning theory.

Stubbs, Michael, Language and Literacy: The Sociolinguistics of Reading and Writing, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

fforum, pp. 82.

"The Teaching of Writing in Great Britain," English Journal, 67.8 (November 1978), pp. 49-67.

fforum, pp. 93.

Weiss, Robert, "The New Writing Program at West Chester: Overview and Design," M.O. Moving Out (February 1979), pp. 1-3.

fforum, pp. 88.

Vygotsky, Lev, Mind in Society, eds. **Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman**, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978.

fforum, pp. 56.

_____, Thought and Language, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1962.

fforum, pp. 66.

Bailey (cont. from p. 80)

has made considerable progress toward implementing them.

To allow informed decisions as teachers develop a "policy for language," the Schools Council has supported studies of reading and writing. James Britton's Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), now generally known in America thanks to its distribution by NCTE, explores the functions of language as children develop in and out of school. (Britton was a member of the Bullock Committee.) Nancy Martin, Britton's colleague, subsequently completed a study of the effect of **Writing Across the Curriculum**, cautioning that a simplistic "language policy" would have little effect without a thorough evaluation of the role of language in learning. She identified the primary goal of schools as extending the

use of "language more widely rather than more 'correctly'" (Martin, p. 166). A further study, of children aged 7 to 9, agrees with all the work that has followed from the Bullock Committee's recommendations: "A concern for purpose and audience, for patterns of development in language mastery, for the effects of context on writing, for the treatment of writing and action to ease the learner's difficulties, is the foundation on which a policy for writing may be elaborated with some confidence" (Harpin, p. 156).

Various professional publications have summarized the new trends in British education for an American audience (for instance, Gerrard and a series of articles in English Journal). Among the best and most provocative of the British studies is one still little known here, and its conclusion parallels the views of faculty at **The University of Michigan** and at many other American schools: "To plan ways in which we can effectively improve our pupils' learning is inevitably to consider how we use language, the language environment of our school, the language expectations we have of our pupils, and the tuition and encouragement we give in language" (Marland, p. 264). In promoting **Writing Across the Curriculum**, American teachers need imaginative and persuasive principles and techniques; the British approach has much to instruct us in our task.

Richard W. Bailey teaches language and literature courses at **The University of Michigan** where he also serves as Director of Research for the **ECB**. Professor Bailey, who frequently writes about language variety and stylistics, is coordinating the "**Literacy in the 1980's**" conference to be held in Ann Arbor in June, 1981.

Jernigan (cont. from p. 74)

understandably eager to demonstrate their prowess in their own fields, to teach the writing component, what will in fact happen to the onerous, unappealing task of teaching writing? I fear that, in spite of orientation programs offered them in the teaching of writing, the graduate assistants will neglect writing in favor of their subject matter. If instead these same courses are relegated to non-tenured

junior staff members, who know the facts of academic life and are eager to earn tenure, won't the same thing happen to the tedious job of teaching writing? We must wait for the Class of '83 to graduate to discover how successful the program is.

Ah, but if in actuality we could incorporate the teaching of writing in courses beyond introductory composition within the student's own field, if we could indeed convince the entire academic community that good writing is everyone's responsibility, then I too would lift my voice in strident yea-saying. For under such a system my colleague from another department would be less self-righteous, realizing that the teaching of writing is his job too.

Jay Jernigan was the first Director of Introductory Composition at **Eastern Michigan University**, Ypsilanti, Michigan, where he teaches courses in literature and writing today.

Britton (cont. from p. 56)

a radiant water galaxy. It's a world of its own in a special way. Under its foam crested surface, there exists a universe of plant and animal life. With the tiniest microscopic beings to the most humungus creature that ever lived, the sea is alive!" (Our Friends in the Waters, a Book on Marine Mammals Written by the Kids in Room 14, Old Mill School, Mill Valley, California, 1979).

I shall call this kind of learning **Learning I** in order to distinguish it from my third category of purpose, **Learning II**. In **Learning I**, we are in fact organising the objective aspects of our experience; in **Learning II** we are organising the subjective aspects of our experience, and though it is a familiar enough process, we do not usually recognize it as learning. The principle of organization of **Learning I** is, in essence, logical: that of **Learning II** is artistic. In the terms devised by the **London Writing Research Project**, **Learning I** employs language in the role of participant--a spectrum from Expressive to Transactional; that of **Learning II** is language in the role of spectator--a spectrum from Expressive to Poetic