

“The great invention of the world:” Review of two books about writing

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Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools

National Writing Project with Carl Nagin

San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003

The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges

College Board Entrance Examination Board, 2003

<http://www.collegeboard.com>

Almost daily we read about the importance of reading, usually accompanied by shrill demands that more phonics instruction is needed and that schools do more to improve students' reading scores on standardized tests. While no one would disagree that a democratic society requires citizens who can read and stay informed, there is no consensus on how to go about it, nor is writing typically offered as part of a comprehensive approach to developing literacy. If writing arises in the discussion, it is usually as an afterthought. These two publications demonstrate how central writing is, both to literacy and to addressing the inequities that produce gaps in student achievement.

The National Writing Project (NWP), about to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary is an exception to the discussion about reading. As a long time advocate for connecting writing to reading, it has involved K-16 teachers in ongoing professional development that privileges writing. It is, in fact, a "professional development network dedicated to improving student writing and learning by improving the teaching of writing in U.S. schools...Numerous research studies demonstrate the success of the NWP model in improving student writing achievement" (p.ix). *Because Writing Matters* documents the NWP's model of teachers-teaching-teachers as a means of continual professional development in the teaching of writing. The book includes classroom vignettes that demonstrate how writing is used to improve learning, for retention of learning, and in language acquisition in bilingual and second language classes. Equally interesting is the section on professional development that provides a rich description of the NWP's own approach that includes the pivotal idea that the best teachers of teachers are teachers. The same chapter describes some of the key activities required for long term professional development. Another aspect of the NWP's professional development model is their commitment to "address the issue of aligning the K-12 and postsecondary worlds of educators" (p.64). The worlds of elementary, secondary, and higher education collaborate to develop and demonstrate effective writing prompts and strategies.

Research that supports the importance of writing is also cited. A 2002 study by the Academy for Educational Development (AED) that looked at 35 third and fourth grade classrooms of Writing Project teachers captures how Writing Project teachers use writing in their classrooms, the frequency with which students write, and the impact writing in response to intellectually challenging assignments has on problem solving. Administrators will welcome the information

about studies that clearly demonstrate how writing improves student performance, particularly when local mandates seem to ignore the power of writing. For example, National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) assessments have "underscored the interrelationship of writing and reading comprehension and the importance of increased frequency and length of writing assignments in classrooms" (p. 44). In *Because Writing Matters*, the NWP stresses that writing can be used across the curriculum and needs to be done daily.

The National Writing Project is on solid ground when it proclaims, "Schools that harness writing as an essential tool for learning know the benefits of giving students the skills and confidence to be better writers. Writing helps students become better readers and thinkers" (p.105). This book substantiates that claim.

The College Board, concerned that the level of writing in this country may not be as high as it could be, established a commission on writing along with the addition of a writing component for the SAT. Recognizing the work of the National Writing Project has led to the creation of a National Advisory Panel to the Commission, headed by Richard Sterling, Executive Director of the National Writing Project. The College Board's report, *The Neglected "R"*, calls for dedicated attention to improving writing in the nation's schools. Among their recommendations, they call for students to spend more time on writing (at least double the present amount of time) and to create assessments that are aligned with standards and curriculum and that measure writing in a fair way. Other recommendations include increasing professional development opportunities in writing and investing in research on technology and its connection to writing. Significantly, the Board strongly recommends that "the nation's leaders place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda and that policymakers at the state and local levels provide the resources required to improve writing" (p.26). There couldn't be a stronger expression of their conclusion that writing is central to all learning. Nor is this report a one time event, only to be forgotten in a few months. There is already a new commission continuing the work of the initial National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges.

Taken together, these two publications leave no doubt that writing is an essential tool for learning, and that it is a mistake to separate it from reading. Simply looking at the practices of involved readers proves the point. They write to keep a reader's log, write to recommend books and articles, underline, write in margins, and write books and articles themselves. All school children should be exposed to the pleasure of interacting with text through writing.

Students in urban schools today are under enormous pressure to perform on standardized tests. Rural children are facing the same pressures, but the spotlight is on urban areas. If the object of schools is to prepare an educated population to function in a democracy, then writing needs to move to the forefront. But, writing is not just about political participation, it is also the power of communication. Abraham Lincoln made the case most eloquently when he said, "Writing – the art of communicating thoughts to the mind – is the great invention of the world. Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions" (p.36, National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges). His words are clear about the power of writing to connect people across cultures and time. Urban schools need

to commit the necessary time and resources to enable students to write with clarity, persuasiveness, and purpose.

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